

# Women and the Subversion of the Community

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These observations are an attempt to define and analyze the “Woman Question”, and to locate this question in the entire “female role” as it has been created by the capitalist division of labour.

We place foremost in these pages the housewife as the central figure in this female role. We assume that all women are housewives and even those who work outside the home continue to be housewives. That is, on a world level, it is precisely what is particular to domestic work, not only measured as number of hours and nature of work, but as quality of life and quality of relationships which it generates, that determines a woman’s place wherever she is and to whichever class she belongs. We concentrate here on the position of the working-class woman, but this is not to imply that only working-class women are exploited. Rather it is to confirm that the role of the working-class housewife, which we believe has been indispensable to capitalist production is *the* determinant for the position of all other women. Every analysis of women as a caste, then, must proceed from the analysis of the position of working-class housewives.

In order to see the housewife as central, it was first of all necessary to analyze briefly how capitalism has created the modern family and the housewife’s role in it, by destroying the types of family group or community which previously existed. This process is by no means complete. While we are speaking of the Western world and Italy in particular, we wish to make clear that to the extent that the capitalist mode of production also brings the Third World under its command, the same process of destruction must be and is taking place there. Nor should we take for granted that the family as we know it today in the most technically advanced Western countries is the final form the family can assume under capitalism. But the analysis of new tendencies can only be the product of an analysis of how capitalism created this family and what woman’s role is today, each as a moment in a process.

We propose to complete these observations on the female role by analyzing as well the position of the woman who works outside the home, but this is for a later date. We wish merely to indicated here the link between two apparently separate experiences: that of housewife and that of working woman.

The day-to-day struggles that women have developed since the Second World War run directly against the organization of the factory and of the home. The “unreliability” of women in the home and out of it has grown rapidly since then, and runs directly against the factory as regimentation organized in time and space, and against the social factory as organization of the reproduction of labor power. This trend to more absenteeism, to less respect for timetables, to higher job mobility, is shared by young men and women workers. But where the man for crucial periods of his youth will be the sole support of a new family, women who on the whole are not restrained in this way and who must always consider the job at home, are bound to be even more disengaged from work discipline, forcing disruption of the productive flow and therefore higher costs to capital. (This is one excuse for the discriminatory wages which many times over make up for capital’s loss.) It is this same trend of disengagement that groups of housewives express when they leave their children with their husbands at work.\* This trend is and will increasingly be one of the decisive forms of the crisis in the systems of the factory and of the social factory.

[\* This happened as part of the massive demonstration of women celebrating International Women’s Day in the US, August 1970.]

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In recent years, especially in the advanced capitalist countries, there have developed a number of women’s movements of different orientations and range, from those which believe the fundamental conflict in society is between men and women to those focusing on the position of women as a specific manifestation of class exploitation.

If at first sight the position and attitudes of the former are perplexing, especially to women who have had previous experience of militant participation in political struggles, it is, we think, worth pointing out that women for whom sexual exploitation is the basic social contradiction provide an extremely important index of the degree of our own frustration, experienced by millions of women both inside and outside the movement. There are those who define

their own lesbianism in these terms (we refer to views expressed by a section of the movement in the US in particular): “Our associations with women began when, because we were together, we could acknowledge that we could no longer tolerate relationships with men, that we could not prevent these from becoming power relationships in which we were inevitably subjected. Our attentions and energies were diverted, our power was diffused and its objectives delimited.” From this rejection has developed a movement of gay women which asserts the possibilities of a relationship free of a sexual power struggle, free of the biological social unit, and asserts at the same time our need to open ourselves to a wider social and therefore sexual potential.

Now in order to understand the frustrations of women expressing themselves in ever-increasing forms, we must be clear what in the nature of the family under capitalism precipitates a crisis on this scale. The oppression of women, after all, did not begin with capitalism. What began with capitalism was the more intense exploitation of women as women and the possibility at last of their liberation.

### *The origins of the capitalist family*

In pre-capitalist patriarchal society *the home and the family* were central to agricultural and artisan production. With the advent of capitalism the socialization of production was organized with *the factory* as its centre. Those who worked in the new productive centre, the factory, received a wage. Those who were excluded did not. Women, children and the aged lost the relative power that derived from the family’s dependence on their labour, *which was seen to be social and necessary*. Capital, destroying the family and the community and production as one whole, on the one hand has concentrated basic social production in the factory and the office, and on the other has in essence detached the man from the family and turned him into a *wage labourer*. It has put on the man’s shoulders the burden of financial responsibility for women, children, the old and the ill, in a word, all those who do not receive wages. From that moment began the expulsion from the home of all those who did not *procreate and service those who worked for wages*. The first to be excluded from the home, after men, were children; they sent children to school. The family ceased to be not only the productive, but also the educational centre.\*

[\*This is to assume a whole new meaning for “education”, and the work now being done on the history of compulsory education - forced learning - proves this. In England teachers were conceived of as “moral police” who could (1) condition children against “crime” - curb working-class reappropriation in the community; (2) destroy “the mob”, working-class organization based on a family which was still either a productive unit or at least a viable organizational unit; (3) make habitual regular attendance and good timekeeping so necessary to children’s later employment; and (4) stratify the class by grading and selection. As with the family itself, the transition to this new form of social control was not smooth and direct, and was the result of contradictory forces both within the class and within capital, as with every phase of the history of capitalism.]

To the extent that men had been the despotic heads of the patriarchal family, based on a strict division of labour, the experience of women, children and men was a contradictory experience which we inherit. But in pre-capitalist society the work of each member of the community of serfs was seen to be directed to a purpose: either to the prosperity of the feudal lord or to our survival. To this extent the whole community of serfs was compelled to be co-operative in a unity of unfreedom that involved to the same degree women, children and men, which capitalism had to break.\* In this sense the *unfree individual*, the *democracy of unfreedom*\*\* entered into a crisis. The passage from serfdom to free labour power separated the male from the female proletariat and both of them from their children. The unfree patriarch was transformed into the “free” wage earner, and upon the contradictory experience of the sexes and the generations was built a more profound estrangement and therefore a more subversive relation.

[\* Wage labour is based on the subordination of all relationships to the wage relation. The worker must enter as an “individual” into a contract with capital stripped of the protection of kinships.

\*\*Karl Marx, “Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of the State”, *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, ed. and trans. Lloyd D. Easton and Kurt H. Guddat, N.Y., 1967, p. 176.]

We must stress that this separation of children from adults is essential to an understanding of the full significance of the separation of women from men, to grasp fully how the organization of the struggle on the part of the women’s movement, even when it takes the form of a violent rejection of any possibility of relations with men, can only aim to overcome the separation which is based on the “freedom” of wage labour.

## *The class struggle in education*

The analysis of the school which has emerged during recent years particularly with the advent of the students' movement has clearly identified the school as a centre of ideological discipline and of the shaping of the labour force and its masters. What has perhaps never emerged, or at least not in its profundity, is precisely what precedes all this; and that is the usual desperation of children on their first day of nursery school, when they see themselves dumped into a class and their parents suddenly desert them. *But it is precisely at this point that the whole story of school begins.\**

[\*We are not dealing here with the narrowness of the nuclear family that prevents children from having an easy transition to forming relations with other people; nor with what follows from this, the argument of psychologists that proper conditioning would have avoided such a crisis. We are dealing with the entire organization of the society, of which family, school and factory are each one ghettoized compartment. So every kind of passage from one to another of these compartments is a painful passage. The pain cannot be eliminated by tinkering with the relations between one ghetto and another but only by the destruction of every ghetto.]

Seen in this way, the elementary school children are not those appendages who, merely by the demands "free lunches, free fares, free books", learnt from the older ones, can in some way be united with the students of the higher schools.\* In elementary school children, in those who are the sons and daughters of workers, there is always an awareness that school is in some way setting them against their parents *and their peers*, and consequently there is an instinctive resistance to studying and to being "educated". This is the resistance for which Black children are confined to educationally subnormal schools in Britain.\*\* The European working-class child, like the Block working-class child, sees in the teacher somebody who is teaching him or her something against her mother and father, not as a defense of the child but as an attack on the class. Capitalism is the first productive system where the children of the exploited are disciplined and educated in institutions organized and controlled by the ruling class.\*\*\*

[\* "Free fares, free lunches, free books" was one of the slogans of a section of the Italian students' movement which aimed to connect the struggle of younger students with workers and university students.

\*\*In Britain and the US the psychologists Eysenck and Jensen, who are convinced "scientifically" that Blacks have a lower "intelligence" than whites, and the progressive educators like Ivan Illich seem diametrically opposed. What they aim to achieve links them. They are divided by method. In any case the psychologists are not more racist than the rest, only more direct. "Intelligence" is the ability to assume your enemy's case as wisdom and to shape your own logic on the basis of this. Where the whole society operates institutionally on the assumption of white racial superiority, these psychologists propose more conscious and thorough "conditioning" so that children who do not learn to read do not learn instead to make molotov cocktails. A sensible view with which Illich, who is concerned with the "underachievement" of children (that is, rejection by them of "intelligence"), can agree.

\*\*\* In spite of the fact that capital manages the schools, control is never given once and for all. The working class continually and increasingly challenges the content and refuses the costs of capitalist schooling. The response of the capitalist system is to re-establish its own control, and this control tends to be more and more regimented on factory-like lines.

The new policies on education which are being hammered out even as we write, however, are more complex than this. We can only indicate here the impetus for these new policies:

(a) Working-class youth rejects that education prepares them for anything but a factory, even if they will wear white collars there and use typewriters and drawing-boards instead of riveting machines.

(b) Middle-class youth rejects the role of mediator between the classes and the repressed personality this mediating role demands.

(c) A new labour power more wage and status differentiated is called for. The present egalitarian trend must be reversed.

(d) A new type of labour process may be created which will attempt to interest the worker in "participating" instead of refusing the monotony and fragmentation of the present assembly-line.

If the traditional "road to success" and even "success" itself are rejected by the young, new goals will have to be found to which they can aspire, that is, for which they will go to school and go to work. New "experiments" in "free" education, where the children are encouraged to participate in planning their own education and there is greater democracy between teacher and taught are springing up daily. It is an illusion to believe that this is a defeat for capital any more than regimentation will be a victory. For in the creation of a labour power more creatively manipulated, capital will not in the process lose 0.1 per cent of profit. "As a matter of fact," they are in effect saying, "you can be far more efficient for us if you take your own road, so long as it is through our territory." In some parts of the factory and in the social factory, capital's slogan will increasingly be: "Liberty and fraternity to guarantee and even extend equality."]

The final proof that this alien indoctrination which begins in nursery school is based on the splitting of the family is that those working-class children who arrive (those few who do arrive) at university are so brainwashed that they are unable any longer to talk to their community.

Working-class children then are the first who instinctively rebel against schools and the education provided in schools. But their parents carry them to schools and confine them to schools because they are concerned that their children should "have an education", that is, be equipped to escape the assembly line or the kitchen to which they, the parents, are confined. If a working-class child shows particular aptitudes, the whole family immediately

concentrates on this child, gives him the best conditions, often sacrificing the others, hoping and gambling that he will carry them all out of the working class. This in effect becomes the way capital moves through the aspirations of the parents to enlist their help in disciplining fresh labour power.

In Italy parents less and less succeed in sending their children to school. Children's resistance to school is always increasing even when this resistance is not yet organized.

At the same time that the resistance of children grows to being educated in schools, so does *their refusal to accept the definition* that capital has given of their *age*. Children want everything they see; they do not yet understand that in order to have things one must pay for them, and in order to pay for them one must have a wage, and therefore one must also be an adult. No wonder it is not easy to explain to children why they cannot have what television has told them they cannot live without.

But something is happening among the new generation of children and youth which is making it steadily more difficult to explain to them the arbitrary point at which they reach adulthood. Rather the younger generation is demonstrating their age to us: in the sixties six-year-olds have already come up against police dogs in the South of the United States. Today we find the same phenomenon in Southern Italy and Northern Ireland, where children have been as active in the revolt as adults. When children (and women) are recognized as integral to history, no doubt other examples will come to light of very young people's participation (and of women's) in revolutionary struggles. What is new is the autonomy of their participation in *spite of and because of* their exclusion from direct production. In the factories youths refuse the leadership of older workers, and in the revolts in the cities they are the diamond point. In the metropolis generations of the nuclear family have produced youth and student movements that have initiated the process of shaking the framework of constituted power; in the Third World the unemployed youth is often in the streets before the working class organized in trade unions.

It is worth recording what *The Times* of London (1 June 1971) reported concerning a head-teachers' meeting called because one of them was admonished for hitting a pupil: "Disruptive and irresponsible elements lurk around every corner with the seemingly planned intention of eroding all forces of authority." This "is a plot to destroy the values on which our civilization is built and of which our schools are some of the finest bastions".

### ***The exploitation of the wageless***

We wanted to make these few comments on the attitude of revolt that is steadily spreading among children and youth, especially from the working class and particularly Black people, because we believe this to be intimately connected with the explosion of the women's movement and something which the women's movement itself must take into account. We are dealing here with the revolt of those who have been excluded, who have been separated by the system of production, and who express in action their need to destroy the forces that stand in the way of their social existence, but who this time are coming together as individuals.

Women and children have been excluded. The revolt of the one against exploitation through exclusion is an index of the revolt of the other.

To the extent to which capital has recruited the man and turned him into a wage labourer, it has created a fracture between him and all the other proletarians without a wage who, not participating directly in social production, were thus presumed incapable of being the subjects of social revolt.

Since Marx, it has been clear that capital rules and develops through the wage, that is, that the foundation of capitalist society was the wage labourer and his or her direct exploitation. What has been neither clear nor assumed by the organizations of the working-class movement is that precisely through the wage has the exploitation of the non-wage labourer been organized. This exploitation has been even more effective because the lack of a wage hid it. That is, the wage commanded a larger amount of labour than appeared in factory bargaining. *Where women are concerned, their labour appears to be a personal service outside of capital.* The woman seemed only to be suffering from male chauvinism, being pushed around because capitalism meant general "injustice" and "bad and unreasonable behaviour", the few (men) who noticed convinced us that this was "oppression" but not exploitation. But "oppression" hid another and more pervasive aspect of capitalist society. Capital excluded children from the home and sent them to school not only because they are in the way of others' more "productive" labour or only to

indoctrinate them. The rule of capital through the wage compels every able-bodied person to function, under the law of division of labour, and to function in ways that are if not immediately, then ultimately profitable to the expansion and extension of the rule of capital. That, fundamentally, is the meaning of school. *Where children are concerned, their labour appears to be learning for their own benefit.*

Proletarian children have been forced to undergo the same education in the schools: this is capitalist leveling against the infinite possibilities of learning. Woman on the other hand has been isolated in the home, forced to carry out work that is considered unskilled, the work of giving birth to, raising, disciplining, and servicing the worker for production. Her role in the cycle of social production remained invisible because only the product of her labour, *the labourer*, was visible there. She herself was thereby trapped within pre-capitalist working conditions and never paid a wage.

And when we say “pre-capitalist working conditions” we do not refer only to women who have to use brooms to sweep. Even the best equipped American kitchens do not reflect the present level of technological development; at most they reflect the technology of the nineteenth century. If you are not paid by the hour, within certain limits, nobody cares how long it takes you to do your work.

This is not only a *quantitative* but a *qualitative* difference from other work, and it stems precisely from the kind of commodity that this work is destined to produce. Within the capitalist system generally, the productivity of labour doesn't increase unless there is a confrontation between capital and class: technological innovations and co-operation are at the same time moments of attack for the working class and moments of capitalistic response. But if this is true for the production of commodities generally, this has not been true for the production of that special kind of commodity, labour power. If technological innovation can lower the limit of necessary work, and if the working-class struggle in industry can use that innovation for gaining free hours, the same cannot be said of housework; to the extent that she must *in isolation* procreate, raise and be responsible for children, a high mechanization of domestic chores doesn't free any time for the woman. She is always on duty, for the machine doesn't exist that makes and minds children.\* A higher productivity of domestic work through mechanization, then, can be related only to specific services, for example, cooking, washing, cleaning. Her workday is unending not because she has not machines, but because she is isolated.\*\*

[\*We are not at all ignoring the attempts at this moment to make test-tube babies. But today such mechanisms belong completely to capitalist science and control. The use would be completely against us and against the class. It is not in our interest to abdicate procreation, to consign it to the hands of the enemy. It is in our interest to conquer the freedom to procreate for which we will pay neither the price of the wage nor the price of social exclusion.

\*\* To the extent that not technological innovation but only “human care” can raise children, the effective liberation from *domestic work time*, the *qualitative change of domestic work*, can derive only from a movement of women, from a struggle of women: the more the movement grows, the less men-and first of all political militants can count on female baby minding. And at the same time the new social ambience that the movement constructs offers to children social space, with both men and women, that has nothing to do with the day care centers organized by the state. These are already victories of struggle. Precisely because they are the *results* of a movement that is by its nature a struggle, they do not aim to *substitute* any kind of co-operation for the struggle itself.]

### ***Confirming the myth of female incapacity***

With the advent of the capitalist mode of production, then, women were relegated to a condition of isolation, enclosed within the family cell, dependent in every aspect on men. The new autonomy of the free wage slave was denied her, and she remained in a pre-capitalist stage of personal dependence, but this time more brutalized because in contrast to the large-scale highly socialized production which now prevails. Woman's apparent incapacity to do certain things, to understand certain things, originated in her history, which is a history very similar in certain respects to that of “backward” children in special ESN classes. To the extent that women were cut off from direct socialized production and isolated in the home, all possibilities of social life outside the neighborhood were denied them, and hence they were deprived of social knowledge and social education. When women are deprived of wide experience of organizing and planning collectively industrial and other mass struggles, they are denied a basic source of education, the experience of social revolt. And this experience is primarily the experience of learning your own capacities, that is, your power, and the capacities, the power, of your class. Thus the isolation from which women have suffered has confirmed to society and to themselves the myth of female incapacity.

It is this myth which has hidden, firstly, that to the degree that the working class has been able to organize mass struggles in the community, rent strikes, struggles against inflation generally, the basis has always been the

unceasing informal organization of women there; secondly, that in struggles in the cycle of direct production women's support and organization, formal and informal, has been decisive. At critical moments this unceasing network of women surfaces and develops through the talents, energies and strength of the "incapable female." But the myth does not die. Where women could together with men claim the victory – to survive (during unemployment) or to survive and win (during strikes) – the spoils of the victor belonged to the class "in general". Women rarely if ever got anything specifically for themselves; rarely if ever did the struggle have as an objective in any way altering the power structure of the home and its relation to the factory. Strike or unemployment, a woman's work is never done.

### ***The capitalist function of the uterus***

Never as with the advent of capitalism has the destruction of woman as a person meant also the immediate diminution of her *physical integrity*. Feminine and masculine sexuality had already before capitalism undergone a series of regimes and forms of conditioning. But they had also undergone efficient methods of birth control, which have unaccountably disappeared. Capital established the family as the nuclear family and subordinated within it the woman to the man, as the person who, not directly participating in social production, does not present herself independently on the labour market. As it cuts off all her possibilities of creativity and of the development of her working activity, so it cuts off the expression of her sexual, psychological and emotional autonomy.

We repeat: never had such a stunting of the physical integrity of woman taken place, affecting everything from the brain to the uterus. Participating with others in the production of a train, a car or an aeroplane is not the same thing as using in isolation the same broom in the same few square feet of kitchen for centuries.

This is not a call for equality of men and women in the construction of airplanes, but it is merely to assume that the difference between the two histories not only determines the differences in the actual forms of struggle but brings also finally to light what has been invisible for so long: the different forms women's struggles have assumed in the past. In the same way as women are robbed of the possibility of developing their creative capacity, they are robbed of their sexual life which has been transformed into a function for reproducing labour power: the same observations which we made on the technological level of domestic services apply to birth control (and, by the way, to the whole field of gynaecology), research into which until recently has been continually neglected, while women have been forced to have children and were forbidden the right to have abortions when, as was to be expected, the most primitive techniques of birth control failed.

From this complete diminution of woman, capital constructed the female role, and has made the man in the family the instrument of this reduction. The man as wage worker and head of the family was the specific instrument of this specific exploitation which is the exploitation of women.

### ***The homosexuality of the division of labour***

In this sense we can explain to what extent the degraded relationships between men and women are determined by the fracturing that society has imposed between man and woman, subordinating woman as object, the "complement" to man. And in this sense we can see the validity of the explosion of tendencies within the women's movement in which women want to conduct the struggle against men as such\* and no longer wish to use their strength to sustain even sexual relationships with them, since each of these relationships is always frustrating. A power relation precludes any possibility of affection and intimacy. Yet between men and women power as its right *commands* sexual affection and intimacy. In this sense, the gay movement is the most massive attempt to disengage sexuality and power.

[\* It is impossible to say for how long these tendencies will continue to drive the movement forward and when they will turn into their opposite.]

But homosexuality generally is at the same time rooted in the framework of capitalist society itself: women at home and men in factories and offices, separated one from the other for the whole day; or a typical factory of 1,000 women with 10 foremen; or a typing pool (of women, of course) which works for 50 professional men. All these situations are already a homosexual framework of living.

Capital, while it elevates heterosexuality to a religion, at the same time in practice makes it impossible for men and women to be in touch with each other, physically or emotionally-it undermines heterosexuality except as a sexual, economic and social discipline.

We believe that this is a reality from which we must begin. The explosion of the gay tendencies have been and are important for the movement precisely because they pose the urgency to claim for itself the specificity of women's struggle and above all to clarify in all their depths all facets and connections of the exploitation of women.

### ***Surplus value and the social factory***

At this point then we would like to begin to clear the ground of a certain point of view which orthodox Marxism, especially in the ideology and practice of so-called Marxist parties, has always taken for granted. And this is: when women remain outside social production, that is, outside the socially organized productive cycle, they are also outside social productivity. The role of women, in other words, has always been seen as that of a psychologically subordinated person who, except where she is marginally employed outside the home, is outside production; essentially a supplier of a series of use values in the home. This basically was the viewpoint of Marx who, observing what happened to women working in the factories, concluded that it would have been better for them to be at home, where resided a morally higher form of life. But the true nature of the role of housewife never emerges clearly in Marx. Yet observers have noted that Lancashire women, cotton workers for over a century, are more sexually free and helped by men in domestic chores. On the other hand, in the Yorkshire coal-mining districts where a low percentage of women worked outside the home, women are more dominated by the figure of the husband. Even those who have been able to define the exploitation of women in socialized production could not then go on to understand the exploited position of women in the home; men are too compromised in their relationship with women. For that reason only women can define themselves and move on the woman question.

We have to make clear that, within the wage, domestic work produces not merely use values, but is essential to the production of surplus value.\* This is true of the entire female role as a personality which is subordinated at all levels, physical, psychological and occupational, which has had and continues to have a precise and vital place in the capitalist division of labour, in *the pursuit of productivity at the social level*. Let us examine more specifically the role of women as a source of social productivity, that is, of surplus value making. Firstly within the family.

[\*Some first readers in English have found that this definition of women's work should be precise. What we meant precisely is that housework as work is *productive* in the Marxian sense, that is, is producing surplus value.

We speak immediately after about the productivity of the entire female role. To make clearer the productivity of the woman both as related to her work and as related to her entire role must wait for a later text on which we are now at work. In this the woman's place is explained in a more articulated way from the point of view of the entire capitalistic circuit.]

#### ***A. The productivity of wage slavery based on unwaged slavery***

It is often asserted that, within the definition of wage labour, women in domestic labour are not productive. In fact precisely the opposite is true if one thinks of the enormous quantity of social services which capitalist organization transforms into privatized activity, putting them on the backs of housewives. Domestic labour is not essentially "feminine work"; a woman doesn't fulfill herself more or get less exhausted than a man from washing and cleaning. These are social services inasmuch as they serve the reproduction of labour power. And capital, precisely by instituting its family structure, has "liberated" the man from these functions so that he is completely "free" for *direct* exploitation; so that he is free to "earn" enough for a woman to reproduce him as labour power.\* It has made men wage slaves, then, to the degree that it has succeeded in allocating these services to women in the family, and by the same process controlled the flow of women onto the labour market. In Italy women are still necessary in the home and capital still needs this form of the family. At the present level of development in Europe generally, in Italy in particular, capital still prefers to import its labour power-in the form of millions of men from underdeveloped areas-while at the same time consigning women to the home.\*\*

[\* Labour power "is a strange commodity for this is not a thing. The ability to labour resides only in a human being whose life is consumed in the process of producing . . . To describe its basic production and reproduction is to describe women's work." (From Selma James' introduction)

\*\* This, however, is being countered by an opposite tendency, to bring women into industry in certain particular sectors. Differing needs of capital within the same geographical sector have produced differing and even opposing propaganda and policies. Where in the past family stability has been based on a relatively standardized mythology (policy and propaganda being uniform and officially

uncontested), today various sectors of capital contradict each other and undermine the very definition of family as a stable, unchanging, “natural” unit. The classic example of this is the variety of views and financial policies on birth control. The British government has recently doubled its allocation of funds for this purpose. We must examine to what extent this policy is connected with a racist immigration policy, that is, manipulation of the sources of mature labour power; and with the increasing erosion of the work ethic which results in movements of the unemployed and unsupported mothers, that is, controlling births which pollute the purity of capital with revolutionary children.]

And women are of service not only because they carry out domestic labour *without a wage and without going on strike*, but also because they always receive back into the home all those who are periodically expelled from their jobs by economic crisis. The family, this maternal cradle always ready to help and protect in time of need, has been in fact the best guarantee that the unemployed do not immediately become a horde of disruptive outsiders.

The organized parties of the working-class movement have been careful not to raise the question of domestic work. Aside from the fact that they have always treated women as a lower form of life, even in factories, to raise this question would be to challenge the whole basis of the trade unions as organizations that deal (a) only with the factory; (b) only with a measured and “paid” work day; (c) only with that side of wages which is given to us and not with the side of wages which is taken back, that is, inflation. Women have always been forced by the working-class parties to put off their liberation to some hypothetical future, making it dependent on the gains that men, limited in the scope of their struggles by these parties, win for “themselves”.

In reality, every phase of working-class struggle has fixed the subordination and exploitation of women at a higher level. The proposal of pensions for housewives\* (and this makes us wonder why not a wage) serves only to show the complete willingness of these parties further to institutionalize women as housewives and men (and women) as wage slaves.

[\*Which is the policy, among others, of the Communist Party in Italy who for some years proposed a bill to the Italian parliament which would have given a pension to women at home, both housewives and single women, when they reached 55 years of age. This bill was never passed.]

Now it is clear that not one of us believes that emancipation, liberation, can be achieved through work. Work is still work, whether inside or outside the home. The independence of the wage earner means only being a “free individual” for capital, no less for women than for men. Those who advocate that the liberation of the working-class woman lies in her getting a job outside the home are part of the problem, not the solution. Slavery to an assembly line is not a liberation from slavery to a kitchen sink. To deny this is also to deny the slavery of the assembly line itself, proving again that if you don’t know how women are exploited, you can never really know how men are. But this question is so crucial that we deal with it separately. What we wish to make clear here is that by the non-payment of a wage when we are producing in a world capitalistically organized, the figure of the boss is concealed behind that of the husband. He appears to be the sole recipient of domestic services, and this gives an ambiguous and slavish character to housework. The husband and children, through their loving involvement, their loving blackmail, become the first foremen, the immediate controllers of this labour.

The husband tends to read the paper and wait for his dinner to be cooked and served, even when his wife goes out to work as he does and comes home with him. Clearly, the specific form of exploitation represented by domestic work demands a corresponding, specific form of struggle, namely the women’s struggle, *within the family*.

If we fail to grasp completely that precisely this family is the very pillar of the capitalist organization of work, if we make the mistake of regarding it only as a superstructure, dependent for change only on the stages of the struggle in the factories, then we will be moving in a limping revolution that will always perpetuate and aggravate *a basic contradiction in the class struggle, and a contradiction which is functional to capitalist development*. We would, in other words, be perpetuating the error of considering ourselves as producers of use values only, of considering housewives external to the working class. As long as housewives are considered external to the class, the class struggle at every moment and any point is impeded, frustrated, and unable to find full scope for its action. To elaborate this further is not our task here. To expose and condemn domestic work as a masked form of productive labour, however, raises a series of questions concerning both the aims and the forms of struggle of women.

## *Socializing the struggle of the isolated labourer*

In fact, the demand that would follow, namely “pay us wages for housework”, would run the risk of looking, in the light of the present relationship of forces in Italy, as though we wanted further to entrench the condition of institutionalized slavery which is produced with the condition of housework-therefore such a demand could scarcely operate in practice as a mobilizing goal.\*

[\*Today the demand of wages for housework is put forward increasingly and with less opposition in the women’s movement in Italy and elsewhere. Since this document was first drafted (June ‘71), the debate has become more profound and many uncertainties that were due to the relative newness of the discussion have been dispelled. But above all, the weight of the needs of proletarian women has not only radicalized the demands of the movement. It has also given us greater strength and confidence to advance them. A year ago, at the beginning of the movement in Italy, there were those who still thought that the state could easily suffocate the female rebellion against housework by “paying” it with a monthly allowance of £7-£8 as they had already done especially with those “wretched of the earth” who were dependent on pensions.]

The question is, therefore, to develop forms of struggle which do not leave the housewife peacefully at home, at most ready to take part in occasional demonstrations through the streets, waiting for a wage that would never pay for anything; rather we must discover forms of struggle which immediately break the whole structure of domestic work, rejecting it absolutely, rejecting our role as housewives and the home as the ghetto of our existence, since the problem is not only to stop doing this work, but to smash the entire role of housewife. *The starting point is not how to do housework more efficiently, but how to find a place as protagonist in the struggle: that is, not a higher productivity of domestic labour but a higher subversiveness in the struggle.*

To immediately overthrow the relation between time-given-to-housework and time-not-given-to-housework: it is not necessary to spend time each day ironing sheets and curtains, cleaning the floor until it sparkles or to dust every day. And yet many women still do that. Obviously it is not because they are stupid: once again we are reminded of the parallel we made earlier with the ESN school. In reality, it is only in this work that they can realize an identity precisely because, as we said before, capital has cut them off from the process of socially organized production.

But it does not automatically follow that to be cut off from socialized production is to be cut off from socialized struggle: struggle, however, demands time away from housework, and at the same time it offers an alternative identity to the woman who before found it only at the level of the domestic ghetto. In the sociality of struggle women discover and exercise a power that effectively gives them a new identity. *The new identity is and can only be a new degree of social power.*

The possibility of social struggle arises out of the *socially productive character* of women’s work in the home. It is not only or mainly the social services provided in the home that make women’s role socially productive, even though in fact at this moment these services are identified with women’s role. But capital can technologically improve the conditions of this work. What capital does not want to do for the time being, in Italy at least, is to destroy the position of the housewife as the pivot of the nuclear family. For this reason there is no point in our waiting for the automation of domestic work, because this will never happen: the maintenance of the nuclear family is incompatible with ‘the automation of these services. To really automate them, capital would have to destroy the family as we know it; that is, it would be driven to *socialize* in order to *automate* fully.

But we know all too well what their socialization means: it is always at the very least the opposite of the Paris Commune!

The new leap that capitalist reorganization could make and that we can already smell in the U. S. and in the more advanced capitalist countries generally is to destroy the pre-capitalist isolation of production in the home by constructing a family which more nearly reflects capitalist equality and its domination through co-operative labour; to transcend “the incompleteness of capitalist development” in the home, with the pre-capitalist, unfree woman as its pivot, and make the family more nearly reflect in its form its capitalist productive function, the reproduction of labour power.

To return then to what we said above: women, housewives, identifying themselves with the home, tend to a compulsive perfection in their work. We all know the saying too well; you can always find work to do in a house.

They don't see beyond their own four walls. The housewife's situation as a pre-capitalist mode of labour and consequently this "femininity" imposed upon her, makes her see the world, the others and the entire organization of work as a something which is obscure, essentially unknown and unknowable; not lived; perceived only as a shadow behind the shoulders of the husband who goes out each day and meets this something.

So when we say that women must overthrow the relation of domestic-work-time to non-domestic-time and must begin to move out of the home, we mean their point of departure must be precisely this willingness to destroy the role of housewife, in order to begin to come together with other women, not only as neighbours and friends but as workmates and anti-workmates; thus breaking the tradition of privatized female, with all its rivalry, and reconstructing a real solidarity among women: not solidarity for defense but solidarity for attack, for the organization of the struggle.

A common solidarity against a common form of labour. In the same way, women must stop meeting their husbands and children only as wife and mother, that is, at mealtimes after they have come home from the outside world.

Every place of struggle outside the home, precisely because *every sphere of capitalist organization presupposes the home*, offers a chance for attack by women; factory meetings, neighbourhood meetings, student assemblies, each of them are legitimate places for women's struggle, where women can encounter and confront men-women versus men, if you like, but as individuals, rather than mother-father, son-daughter, with all the possibilities this offers to explode outside of the house the contradictions, the frustrations, that capital has wanted to implode within the family

### ***A new compass for class struggle***

If women demand in workers' assemblies that the night-shift be abolished because at night, besides sleeping, one wants to make love-and it's not the same as making love during the day if the women work during the day-that would be advancing their own independent interests as women against the social organization of work, refusing to be unsatisfied mothers for their husbands and children.

But in this new intervention and confrontation women are also expressing that their interests as women are not, as they have been told, separate and alien from the interests of the class. For too long political parties, especially of the left, and trade unions have determined and confined the areas of working class struggle. To make love and to refuse night work to make love, is *the interest of the class*. To explore why it is women and not men who raise the question is to shed new light on the whole history of the class.

To meet your sons and daughters at a student assembly is to discover them as individuals who speak among other individuals; it is to present yourself to them as an individual. Many women have had abortions and very many have given birth. We can't see why they should not express their point of view as women first, whether or not they are students, in an assembly of medical students: (We do not give the medical faculty as an example by accident. In the lecture hall and in the clinic, we can see once more the exploitation of the working class not only when third class patients exclusively are made the guinea pigs for research. Women especially are the prime objects of experimentation and also of the sexual contempt, sadism, and professional arrogance of doctors.)

To sum up: the most important thing becomes precisely this explosion of the women's movement as an expression of the specificity of female interests hitherto castrated from all its connections by the capitalist organization of the family. This has to be waged in every quarter of this society, each of which is founded precisely on the suppression of such interests, since the entire class exploitation has been built upon the specific mediation of women's exploitation.

And so as a women's movement we must pinpoint every single area in which this exploitation is located, that is, we must regain the whole specificity of the female interest in the course of waging the struggle.

Every opportunity is a good one: housewives of families threatened with eviction can object that their housework has more than covered the rent of the months they didn't pay. On the out-skirts of Milan, many families have already taken up this form of struggle.

Electric appliances in the home are lovely things to have, but for the workers who make them, to make many is to spend time and to exhaust yourself. That every wage has to buy all of them is tough, and presumes that every wife must run all these appliances alone; and this only means that she is frozen in the home, but now on a more mechanized level. Lucky worker, lucky wife!

The question is not to have communal canteens. We must remember that capital makes Fiat for the workers first, then their canteen.

For this reason to demand a communal canteen in the neighborhood without integrating this demand into a practice of struggle against the organization of labor, against labor time, risks giving the impetus for a new leap that, on the community level, would regiment none other than women in some alluring work so that we will then have the possibility at lunchtime of eating shit collectively in the canteen.

We want them to know that this is not the canteen we want, nor do we want play centers or nurseries of the same order.\* We want canteens too, and nurseries and washing machines and dishwashers, but we also want choices: to eat in privacy with few people when we want, to have time to be with children, to be with old people, with the sick, when and where we choose. To "have time" means to work less. To have time to be with children, the old and the sick does not mean running to pay a quick visit to the garages where you park children or old people or invalids. It means that we, the first to be excluded, are taking the initiative in this struggle so that all those other excluded people, the children, the old and the ill, can re-appropriate the social wealth; to be re-integrated with us and all of us with men, not as dependents but autonomously, as we women want for ourselves; since their exclusion, like ours, from the directly productive social process, from social existence, has been created by capitalist organization.

[\* There has been some confusion over what we have said about canteens. A similar confusion expressed itself in the discussions in other countries as well as Italy about wages for housework. As we explained earlier, housework is as institutionalized as factory work and our ultimate goal is to destroy both institutions. But aside from which demand we are speaking about, there is a misunderstanding of what a demand is. It is a goal which is not only a thing but, like capital at any moment, essentially a stage of antagonism of a social relation. Whether the canteen or the wages we win will be a victory or a defeat depends on the force of our struggle. On that force depends whether the goal is an occasion for capital to more rationally command our labor or an occasion for us to weaken their hold on that command. What form the goal takes when we achieve it, whether it is wages or canteens or free birth control, emerges and is in fact created in the struggle, and registers the degree of power that we reached in that struggle.]

### ***The refusal of work***

Hence we must refuse housework as women's work, as work imposed upon us, which we never invented, which has never been paid for, in which they have forced us to cope with absurd hours, 12 and 13 a day, in order to force us to stay at home.

We must get out of the house; we must reject the home, because we want to unite with other women, to struggle against all situations which presume that women will stay at home, to link ourselves to the struggles of all those who are in ghettos, whether that ghetto is a nursery, a school, a hospital, an old-age home, or a slum. To abandon the home is already a form of struggle, since the social services we perform there would then cease to be carried out in those conditions, and so all those who work out of the home would then demand that the burden carried by us until now be thrown squarely where it belongs-on to the shoulders of capital. This alteration in the terms of struggle will be all the more violent the more the refusal of domestic labour on the part of women will be violent, determined and on a mass scale.

The working-class family is the more difficult point to break because it is the support of the worker, but as worker, and for that reason the support of capital. On this family depends the support of the class, the survival of the class-but *at the woman's expense against the class itself*. The woman is the slave of a wage slave, and her slavery ensures the slavery of her man. Like the trade union, the family protects the worker, but also ensures that he *and she will* never be anything but workers. And that is why the struggle of the woman of the working class against the family is crucial.

To meet other women who work inside and outside their homes allows us to possess other chances of struggle. To the extent that our struggle is a struggle against work, it is inscribed in the struggle which the working class wages against capitalist work. But to the extent that the exploitation of women through domestic work has had its own

specific history, tied to the survival of the nuclear family, the specific course of this struggle which must pass through the destruction of the nuclear family as established by the capitalist social order, adds a new dimension to the class struggle.

### ***B. The productivity of passivity***

However, the woman's role in the family is not only that of hidden supplier of social services who does not receive a wage. As we said at the beginning, to imprison women in purely complementary functions and subordinate them to men within the nuclear family has as its premise the stunting of their physical integrity. In Italy, with the successful help of the Catholic Church which has always defined her as an inferior being, a woman is compelled before marriage into sexual abstinence and after marriage into a repressed sexuality destined only to bear children, obliging her to bear children. It has created a female image of "heroic mother and happy wife" whose sexual identity is pure sublimation, whose function is essentially that of receptacle for other people's emotional expression, who is the cushion of the familial antagonism. What has been defined, then, as female frigidity has to be redefined as an imposed passive receptivity in the sexual function as well.

Now this passivity of the woman in the family is itself "productive". First it makes her the outlet for all the oppressions that men suffer in the world outside the home and at the same time the object on whom the man can exercise a hunger for power that the domination of the capitalist organization of work implants. In this sense, the woman becomes productive for capitalist organization; she acts as a safety valve for the social tensions caused by it. Secondly, the woman becomes productive inasmuch as the complete denial of her personal autonomy forces her to sublimate her frustration in a series of continuous needs that are always centered in the home, a kind of consumption which is the exact parallel of her compulsive perfectionism in her housework. Clearly, it is not our job to tell women what they should have in their homes. Nobody can define the needs of others. Our interest is to organize the struggle through which this sublimation will be unnecessary.

### ***Dead labour and the agony of sexuality***

We use the word "sublimation" advisedly. The frustrations of monotonous and trivial chores and of sexual passivity are only separable in words. Sexual creativity and creativity in labour are both areas where human need demands we give free scope to our "interplaying natural and acquired activities".\* For women (and therefore men) natural and acquired powers are repressed simultaneously. The passive sexual receptivity of women creates the compulsively tidy housewife and can make a monotonous assembly line therapeutic. The trivia of most of housework and the discipline' which is required to perform the same work over every day, every week, every year, double on holidays, destroys the possibilities of uninhibited sexuality. Our childhood is a preparation for martyrdom: we are taught to derive happiness from clean sex on whiter than white sheets; to sacrifice sexuality and other creative activity at one and the same time.

[\*Karl Marx, *Das Kapital, Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, Band 1, Berlin, Dietz Verlag, 1962, p. 512. "Large-scale industry makes it a question of life and death to replace that monstrosity which is a miserable available working population, kept in reserve for the changing needs of exploitation by capital, to replace this with the absolute availability of the individual for changing requisites of work; to replace the partial individual, a mere bearer of a social detail function, with the fully developed individual for whom varied social functions are modes of interplaying natural and acquired activities."]

So far the women's movement, most notably by destroying the myth of the vaginal orgasm, has exposed the physical mechanism which allowed women's sexual potential to be strictly defined and limited by men. Now we can begin to reintegrate sexuality with other aspects of creativity, to see how sexuality will always be constrained unless the work we do does not mutilate us and our individual capacities, and unless the persons with whom we have sexual relations are not our masters and are not also mutilated by *their* work. To explode the vaginal myth is to demand female autonomy as opposed to subordination and sublimation. But it is not only the clitoris versus the vagina. It is both versus the uterus. Either the vagina is primarily the passage to the reproduction of labour power sold as a commodity, the capitalist function of the uterus, or it is part of our natural powers, our social equipment. Sexuality after all is the most social of expressions, the deepest human communication. It is in that sense the dissolution of autonomy. The working class organizes as a class to transcend itself as a class; within that class we organize autonomously to create the basis to transcend autonomy.

### ***The "political" attack against women***

But while we are finding our way of being and of organizing ourselves in struggle, we discover we are confronted by those who are only too eager to attack women, even as we form a movement. In defending herself against obliteration, through work and through consumption, they say, the woman is responsible for the lack of unity of the class. Let us make a partial list of the sins of which she stands accused. They say:

1. She wants more of her husband's wage to buy for example clothes for herself and her children, not based on what he thinks she needs but on what she thinks she and her children should have. He works hard for the money. She only demands another kind of distribution of their lack of wealth, rather than assisting his struggle for more wealth, more wages.
2. She is in rivalry with other women to be more attractive than they, to have more things than they do, and to have a cleaner and tidier house than her neighbors'. She doesn't ally with them as she should on a class basis.
3. She buries herself in her home and refuses to understand the struggle of her husband on the production line. She may even complain when he goes out on strike rather than backing him up. She votes Conservative.

These are some of the reasons given by those who consider her reactionary or at best backward, even by men who take leading roles in factory struggles and who seem most able to understand the nature of the social boss because of their militant action. It comes easy to them to condemn women for what they consider to be backwardness because that is the prevailing ideology of the society. They do not add that they have benefited from women's subordinate position by being waited on hand and foot from the moment of their birth. Some do not even know that they have been waited on, so natural is it to them for mothers and sisters and daughters to serve "their" men. It is very difficult for us, on the other hand, to separate inbred male supremacy from men's attack, which appears to be strictly "political", launched only for the benefit of the class.

Let us look at the matter more closely.

#### ***1. Women as consumers***

Women do not make the home the center of consumption. The process of consumption is integral to the production of labor power, and if women refused to do the shopping (that is, to spend), this would be strike action. Having said that, however, we must add that those social relationships which women are denied because they are cut off from socially organized labor, they often try to compensate for by buying things. Whether it is adjudged trivial depends on the viewpoint and sex of the judge. Intellectuals buy books, but no one calls this consumption trivial. Independent of the validity of the contents, the book in this society still represents, through a tradition older than capitalism, a male value.

We have already said that women buy things for their home because that home is the only proof that they exist. But the idea that frugal consumption is in any way a liberation is as old as capitalism, and comes from the capitalists who always blame the worker's situation on the worker. For years Harlem was told by head-shaking liberals that if Black men would only stop driving Cadillacs (until the finance company took them back), the problem of color would be solved. Until the violence of the struggle-the only fitting reply-provided a measure of social power, that Cadillac was one of the few ways to display the potential for power. This and not "practical economics" caused the liberals pain.

In any case, nothing any of us buys would we need if we were free. Not the food they poison for us, nor the clothes that identify us by class, sex and generation, nor the houses in which they imprison us.

In any case, too, our problem is that we never have enough, not that we have too much. And that pressure which women place on men is *a defense of the wage, not an attack*. Precisely because women are the slaves of wage slaves, men divide the wage between themselves and the general family expense. If women did not make demands, the general family standard of living could drop to absorb the inflation-the woman of course is the first to do without. Thus unless the woman makes demands, the family is functional to capital in an additional sense to the ones we have listed: it can absorb the fall in the price of labor power.\* This, therefore, is the most ongoing material way

in which women can defend the living standards of the class. And when they go out to political meetings, they will need even more money!

[\*]But the other, more fundamental, objection, which we shall develop in the ensuing chapters, flows from our disputing the assumption that the general level of real wages is directly determined by the character of the wage bargain . . . We shall endeavor to show that primarily it is *certain other forces* which determine the general level of real wages . . . We shall argue that there has been a *fundamental misunderstanding of how in this respect the economy in which we live actually works.*" (Emphasis added.) *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*, John Maynard Keynes, N.Y., Harcourt, Brace and World, 1964, p.13. "Certain other forces", in our view, are first of all women.]

## 2. Women as rivals

As for women's "rivalry", Frantz Fanon has clarified for the Third World what only racism prevents from being generally applied to the class. The colonized, he says, when they do not organize against their oppressors, attack each other. The woman's pressure for greater consumption may at times express itself in the form of rivalry, but nevertheless as we have said protects the living standards of the class. Which is unlike women's sexual rivalry; that rivalry is rooted in their economic and social dependence on men. To the degree that they live for men, dress for men, work for men, they are manipulated by men through this rivalry.\*

[\*It has been noticed that many of the Bolsheviks after 1917 found female partners among the dispossessed aristocracy. When power continues to reside in men both at the level of the State and in individual relations, women continue to be "the spoil and handmaid of communal lust" (Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1959, p.94). The breed of "the new tsars" goes back a long way.

Already in 1921 from "Decisions of the Third Congress of the Communist International", one can read in Part I of "Work Among Women": "The Third Congress of the Comintern confirms the basic proposition of revolutionary Marxism, that is, that there is no 'specific woman question' and no 'specific women's movement', and that every sort of alliance of working women with bourgeois feminism, as well as any support by the women workers of the treacherous tactics of the social compromisers and opportunists, leads to the undermining of the forces of the proletariat . . . In order to put an end to women's slavery it is necessary to inaugurate the new Communist organization of society."

The theory being male, the practice was to "neutralize". Let us quote from one of the founding fathers. At the first National Conference of Communist Women of the Communist Party of Italy on March 26, 1922, "Comrade Gramsci pointed out that special action must be organized among housewives, who constitute the large majority of the proletarian women. He said that they should be related in some way to our movement by our setting up special organizations. Housewives, as far as the quality of their work is concerned, can be considered similar to the artisans and therefore they will hardly be communists; however, because they are the workers' mates, and because they share in some way the workers' life, they are attracted toward communism. Our propaganda can therefore have an influence over [sic] these housewives; it can be instrumental, if not to officer them into our organization, to neutralize them; so that they do not stand in the way of the possible struggles by the workers." (From *Compagna*, the Italian Communist Party organ for work among women, Year I, No.3 (April 2, 1922) , p.2.)]

As for rivalry about their homes, women are trained from birth to be obsessive and possessive about clean and tidy homes. But men cannot have it both ways; they cannot continue to enjoy the privilege of having a private servant and then complain about the effects of privatization. If they continue to complain, we must conclude that their attack on us for rivalry is really an apology for our servitude. If Fanon was not right, that the strife among the colonized is an expression of their low level of organization, then the antagonism is a sign of natural incapacity. When we call a home a ghetto, we could call it a colony governed by indirect rule and be as accurate. The resolution of the antagonism of the colonized to each other lies in autonomous struggle. Women have overcome greater obstacles than rivalry to unite in supporting men in struggles. Where women have been less successful is in transforming and deepening moments of struggle by making of them opportunities to raise their own demands. Autonomous struggle turns the question on its head: not "will women unite to support men", but "will men unite to support women".

## 3. Women as divisive

What has prevented previous political intervention by women? Why can they be used in certain circumstances against strikes? Why, in other words, is the class not united? From the beginning of this document we have made central the exclusion of women from socialized production. That is an objective character of capitalist organization: co-operative labor in the factory and office, isolated labor in the home. This is mirrored subjectively by the way workers in industry organize separately from the community. What is the community to do? What are women to do? Support, be appendages to men in the home *and* in the struggle, even form a women's auxiliary to unions. This division and this *kind of division* is the history of the class. At every stage of the struggle the most peripheral to the productive cycle are used against those at the center, so long as the latter ignore the former. This is the history of trade unions, for example, in the United States, when Black workers were used as strikebreakers never, by the way,

as often as white workers were led to believe Blacks like women are immediately identifiable and reports of strikebreaking reinforce prejudices which arise from objective divisions: the white on the assembly line, the Black sweeping round his feet; or the man on the assembly line, the woman sweeping round his feet when he gets home.

Men when they reject work consider themselves militant, and when we reject our work, these same men consider us nagging wives. When some of us vote Conservative because we have been excluded from political struggle, they think we are backward, while they have voted for parties which didn't even consider that we existed as anything but ballast, and in the process sold them (and us all) down the river.

### **C. The Productivity of Discipline**

The third aspect of women's role in the family is that, because of the special brand of stunting of the personality already discussed, the woman becomes a repressive figure, disciplinarian of all the members of the family, ideologically and psychologically. She may live under the tyranny of her husband, of her home, the tyranny of striving to be "heroic mother and happy wife" when her whole existence repudiates this ideal. Those who are tyrannized and lack power are with the new generation for the first years of their lives producing docile workers and little tyrants, in the same way the teacher does at school. (In this the woman is joined by her husband: not by chance do parent teacher associations exist.) Women, responsible for the reproduction of labor power, on the one hand discipline the children who will be workers tomorrow and on the other hand discipline the husband to work today, for only his wage can pay for labor power to be reproduced.

Here we have only attempted to consider female domestic productivity without going into detail about the psychological implications. At least we have located and essentially outlined this female domestic productivity as it passes through the complexities of the role that the woman plays (in addition, that is, to the actual domestic work the burden of which she assumes without pay). We pose, then, as foremost the need to break this role that wants women divided from each other, from men and from children, each locked in her family as the chrysalis in the cocoon that imprisons itself by its own work, to die and leave silk for capital. To reject all this, as we have already said, means for housewives to recognize themselves also as a section of the class, the most degraded because they are not paid a wage.

The housewife's position in the overall struggle of women is crucial, since it undermines the very pillar supporting the capitalist organization of work, namely the family.

So every goal that tends to affirm the individuality of women against this figure complementary to everything and everybody, that is, the housewife, is worth posing as a goal subversive to the continuation, the productivity of this role.

In this same sense all the demands that can serve to restore to the woman the integrity of her basic physical functions, starting with the sexual one which was the first to be robbed along with productive creativity, have to be posed with the greatest urgency.

It is not by chance that research in birth control has developed so slowly, that abortion is forbidden almost the world over or conceded finally only for "therapeutic" reasons.

To move first on these demands is not facile reformism. Capitalist management of these matters poses over and over discrimination of class and discrimination of women specifically.

Why were proletarian women, Third World women, used as guinea pigs in this research? Why does the question of birth control continue to be posed as women's problem? To begin to struggle to overthrow the capitalist management over these matters is to move on a class basis, and on a specifically female basis. To link these struggles with the struggle against motherhood conceived as the responsibility of women exclusively, against domestic work conceived as women's work, ultimately against the models that capitalism offers us as examples of women's emancipation which are nothing more than ugly copies of the male role, is to struggle against the division and organization of labor.

## ***Women and the struggle not to work***

Let us sum up. The role of housewife, behind whose isolation is hidden social labour, must be destroyed. But our alternatives are strictly defined. Up to now, the myth of female incapacity, rooted in this isolated woman dependent on someone else's wage and therefore shaped by someone else's consciousness, has been broken by only one action: the woman getting her own wage, breaking the back of personal economic dependence, making her own independent experience with the world outside the home, performing social labour in a socialized structure, whether the factory or the office, and initiating there her own forms of social rebellion along with the traditional forms of the class. *The advent of the women's movement is a rejection of this alternative.*

Capital itself is seizing upon the same impetus which created a movement-the rejection by millions of women of women's traditional place-to recompose the work force with increasing numbers of women. The movement can only develop in opposition to this. It poses by its very existence and must pose with increasing articulation in action that women refuse the myth of liberation through work.

For we have worked enough. We have chopped billions of tons of cotton, washed billions of dishes, scrubbed billions of floors, typed billions of words, wired billions of radio sets, washed billions of nappies, by hand and in machines. Every time they have "let us in" to some traditionally male enclave, it was to find for us a new level of exploitation. Here again we must make a parallel, different as they are, between underdevelopment in the Third World and underdevelopment in the metropolis-to be more precise, in the kitchens of the metropolis. Capitalist planning proposes to the Third World that it "develop"; that in addition to its present agonies, it too suffer the agony of an industrial counter-revolution. Women in the metropolis have been offered the same "aid". But those of us who have gone out of our homes to work because we had to or for extras or for economic independence have warned the rest: inflation has riveted us to this bloody typing-pool or to this assembly-line, and in that there is no salvation. We must refuse the development they are offering us. But the struggle of the working woman is not to return to the isolation of the home, appealing as this sometimes may be on Monday morning; any more than the housewife's struggle is to exchange being imprisoned in a house for being clinched to desks or machines, appealing as this sometimes may be compared to the loneliness of the twelfth-storey flat.

Women must completely discover their own possibilities-which are neither mending socks nor becoming captains of ocean-going ships. Better still, we *may* wish to do these things, but these now cannot be located anywhere but in the history of capital.

The challenge to the women's movement is to find modes of struggle which, while they liberate women from the home, at the same time avoid on the one hand a double slavery and on the other prevent another degree of capitalistic control and regimentation. *This ultimately is the dividing line between reformism and revolutionary politics within the women's movement.*

It seems that there have been few women of genius. There could not be since, cut off from the social process, we cannot see on what matters they could exercise their genius. Now there is a matter, the struggle itself.

Freud said also that every woman from birth suffers from penis envy. He forgot to add that this feeling of envy begins from the moment when she perceives that in some way to have a penis means to have power. Even less did he realize that the traditional power of the penis commenced upon a whole new history at the very moment when the separation of man from woman became a capitalistic division.

And this is where our struggle begins.

Mariarosa Dalla Costa  
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