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REVISITING THE DOMESTIC LABOR DEBATE:
TOWARD A CRITIQUE OF WORKERIST FEMINISM

by

ALICE FENG

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts, The City University of New York

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ABSTRACT

REVISITING THE DOMESTIC LABOR DEBATE: TOWARD A CRITIQUE OF WORKERIST FEMINISM

by
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The extremely high presence of housewives in Italy during the “miracle years,” of 1950-1963, seemingly suggested that an unprecedented number of women were unemployed after their expulsion from large-scale industry. This phenomenon inspired debate among feminists on questions such as the contribution of housewives to the reproduction of labor-power, the character of reproductive labor and the relation between the participation of women in waged labor and unwaged domestic labor. In revisiting this phenomenon, this thesis argues that, contrary to the appearance of women being unemployed, a significant number of women, along with children, were irregularly engaged in undeclared forms of labor in semi-illegal workshops and tenements while carrying out domestic chores for the maintenance of their families. Capital, therefore, set in place an invisible labor force that it super-exploited, while it infringed upon the ability of women to reproduce their labor-power. Production, therefore, ultimately determined the participation of women in reproductive labor and the way women reproduced their labor-power. Within the latter, the wage, which represents a portion of the value that the laborer produced, determined what use-values could be produced in order to maintain the laborer.

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Introduction

According to the workerist feminist trend, the oppression of women in the capitalist mode of production has its material basis in the institution of the family, through which the housewife produces an indispensable commodity: labor power. The two fundamental works that argued this position were Mariarosa Dalla Costa's *Women and the Subversion of the Community* and Leopoldina Fortunati's *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital*. Both of these works contributed to the debate on domestic labor—which had as its object of analysis the housewife and her role in the reproduction of capitalist social relations—by identifying the housewife as the reproducer of labor power and by arguing that reproductive labor is capitalist in character. Despite these important contributions, the analyses offered by Dalla Costa and Fortunati remained problematic for two reasons. The first reason is that they reversed the decisive term in the relation between production and reproduction by attributing the locus of women's oppression to the family. While it is undeniable that the predominant share of domestic duties falls on the shoulders of the woman at home, her specific role in production ultimately determines how her life is organized in order to meet her family's needs. The second reason is that their overall argument that reproductive labor produces surplus value conflates production and reproduction, thus conflicting with their intention of identifying the specificity of woman's oppression within the capitalist mode of production.

This thesis is divided into two parts. In the first part, I provide a historical account of the rapid industrialization of Italy in the 1950s and its relation to politics. This transformation changed the character and organization of production and gave rise to the possibility of new political trends, such as that of *operaismo* (workerism) and workerist feminism. In order to understand the context for Dalla Costa and Fortunati's key arguments, I recount the formation of

workerism, a political attempt to address the new reality faced by workers. Beginning with the journals *Quaderni Rossi* and *Classe Operaia* and proceeding later to the materialization of the organizations *Potere Operaio* (Workers' Power / PO) and *Lotta Continua* (Continuous Struggle / LC), I map the political and theoretical lineage of Dalla Costa and Fortunati's works. In the second section, I focus on Dalla Costa and Fortunati's justifications for asserting that reproduction determines women's engagement in waged labor and that housewives create surplus value. Using historical accounts of women involved in large-scale industry and modern domestic industry, I show how women are exploited in production as cheap labor power and how this phenomenon contradicts Fortunati's argument that women are primarily exploited in their capacity to produce and reproduce labor power. Lastly, I demonstrate how the integration of women into production has impacted the family and the wage, exposing Fortunati's false premise of unequal exchange.

The workers' side of Italy's economic boom

Workerism was a trend of Marxist thought that developed out of the intense expansion of large-scale industry in the 1950s in Italy. Affecting the northern triangle of Genoa, Turin and Milan in particular, this rapid development paved the way for new labor processes and new ideas, including feminism (Wright 6). Young and childless women, some migrating from rural areas, were integrated as industrial workers. The majority of women were concentrated in clothing manufacture, the textile industry and the food industry (Wilson 118; Betti 185). Work from home was also common during the boom years of 1958 to 1963 (Betti 190). The increased presence of women in the labor force in general provided the basis for posing the demand of equality and other gender-specific questions, such as workplace discrimination, childcare

services and the structural role of women in the family (Bracke 2013, 631). These changes necessitated a new politics.

As a result of these changes at the economic level, which ultimately determined what political actions were possible, workers organized in new ways. For example, women new to the textile industry organized checkerboard strikes. Groups of workers walked out for short consecutive periods rather than all walking out simultaneously (Wright 34). Directly confronted with capital's new regime, the self-activity of the workers indicated that they possessed superior knowledge in comparison with the *Partito Comunista Italiano* (the Italian Communist Party / PCI) nor the *Partito Socialista Italiano* (the Italian Socialist Party / PSI). The workers' activity and their aversion to the structural division of labor revealed the centrality of organizing in the factories. To the dismay of the workers in Italy at this time, however, the interests of the dominant political parties went against their own.

Neither the PCI nor the PSI was truly capable of organizing workers in large-scale industry, because their thinking failed to advance with the changing objective circumstances. This was illustrated by the fact that, in the late 1950s, when women within the *Unione Donne Italiane* (Union of Italian Women / UDI), the largest women's organization linked to the PCI, raised problems such as discrimination in the job market and women's position in the family, their concerns were ignored and left unaddressed by the leadership of PCI (Bracke 2013, 630). Instead, the priority of the PCI was the capturing of seats in parliament. Using a nationalistic rhetoric, it called on workers to build a "strong democracy" by increasing productivity, thus justifying the intensification of exploitation (Wright 9). The PSI, on the other hand, allied with the PCI in the 1950s. They later switched to a coalition government with the Christian Democrats, which laid the groundwork for a welfare state (DiScala 112). Under these

circumstances, both of these ossified organizations effectively prevented the working class from acting as a social force outside of their structural determination, despite their claims to

“represent” the working class:

... first of all, every political force, rather than chasing prefabricated models, must become aware of its own reality, the always complex and *specific* field within which it moves. It is social democracy in all its forms which, to cover up its opportunism and justify it ideologically, systematically mixes up the cards on the table and reduces every position consistent with the revolutionary left to that of an intellectualist voluntarism. The historical essence of the social-democratic experience consists moreover in this: in the assigning, with the pretext of the struggle against maximalism, to the proletariat the task of supporting the bourgeoisie or even of replacing it in the construction of bourgeois democracy: and by that very fact it denies the tasks and the revolutionary autonomy of the proletariat, and finishes by assigning to it the position of a subaltern force. (Panzieri, *Seven Theses*)

Troubled by this rift between class organization and the revolutionary autonomy of the proletariat, Raniero Panzieri, an early *operaista* thinker, observed the following:

If the crisis of the organisations – parties and union – lies in the growing difference between them and the real movement of the class, between the objective conditions of struggle and the ideology and policy of the parties, then the problem can be confronted only by starting from the conditions, structures and movement of the rank-and-file. Here analysis becomes complete only through participation in struggles. (quoted in Wright 21)

Hence, if the PCI and the PSI were *external* to the real movement because of the gap between the objective conditions of the struggle and the political orientation of the parties—because they served to deny and hamper the revolutionary autonomy of the proletariat—then communists must become *internal* to the real movement by participating in struggles with the objective of strengthening the initiative of the proletariat. Only in this way could true Marxists provide genuine support for the struggles of the working class. More importantly, only in this way would the two elements of class leadership and mass initiative be united as a dialectical couple. To begin resolving the schism, Panzieri and other dissenting cadre, including Luciano Della Mea, Mario Tronti, Vittorio Rieser and Romano Alquati—from the PCI, the PSI and other

backgrounds—created the journals to devise concepts that would elucidate the new reality that workers were confronting (Wright 20). The two most significant journals of this time period were *Quaderni Rossi* (The Red Notebooks, 1961-4) and *Classe Operaia* (Working Class, 1964-1967), which were respectively directed by Panzieri and Tronti.

Grasping the laws of reality: the work of early *operaismo* intellectuals

In *Quaderni Rossi* and *Classe Operaia*, Panzieri and Tronti conceived of the rift between class organization and mass initiative as one that was resolvable if the revisionist and social-democratic organizations changed their orientation. They failed to grasp that the PCI and the PSI were materially opposed to the workers' interests. Despite this, Panzieri and Tronti's resistance to "collaborationism" and "parliamentary paternalism" became a vital reference for workerism—a new Marxism that would subjectively line up with the workers' struggle, if only momentarily—and later for *Lotta Femminista* (Feminist Struggle / LF) (Panzieri, *Seven Theses*). These journals would initiate the process for comprehending the new transformations in production and the workers' responses to such changes. Three concepts in particular were vital to *operaismo* and were just as foundational to LF: 'the social factory,' 'the revolutionary autonomy of the working class' and 'the strategy of refusal.'

A notable theoretical concept attributed to Mario Tronti is 'the social factory.' Although autonomists often cite this concept along with his famous essay 'La fabbrica e la società' ('Factory and Society'), the concept of 'the social factory' does not actually appear in it. Nevertheless, 'the social factory' as a concept is used to refer to the mystification of social relations that extend from the Fordist and Taylorist factory (Wright 38). This occurs as a result of real subsumption, when capital dominates the labor process and continually revolutionizes it to

extract surplus value (Tronti, “Factory and Society”).¹ Real subsumption occurs through the transition from the production of absolute surplus value—the production of surplus value by *the lengthening of the working day*—to the production of relative surplus value—the production of surplus value by lengthening *that portion of the working day* when one labors for the capitalist. The latter corresponds to a shortening of that portion of the working day designated to necessary labor, when the laborer reproduces the value of the means of subsistence (Marx 345). In other words, by lengthening surplus labor-time, capital extracts more surplus value by cheapening commodities and, by extension, the value of labor power also declines (Marx 351). How real subsumption impacts the reproduction of labor power remains to be elucidated and became the subject of Fortunati’s *The Arcane of Reproduction*.

Nevertheless, as a result of this transition from the production of absolute surplus value to the production of relative surplus value, life outside the factory becomes “more mediated, organic and mystified, more evident and hidden at the same time.” That is, social relations, which are dominated by capital (mediated and organic), are complexly linked to production and the “ideological development of [this] bourgeois metamorphoses” adopts this mystified form: “When the factory seizes the whole of society—all of social production is turned into industrial production—the specific traits of the factory are lost within the generic traits of society. When the whole of society is reduced to the factory, the factory—as such—appears to disappear” (Tronti, “Factory and Society”). Once real subsumption is complete, and capital dominates every

¹ The full quote is reproduced here: “Before anything else, it is necessary to consider this as the point of arrival of a long historical process that parts from the production of absolute relative [sic] surplus value and reaches, by necessity, to the production of relative surplus value; from the forced prolonging of the working day to the increase, which appears spontaneously, of the productive force of labour; to the pure and simple extending of the process of production in its entirety to its internal transformation, which leads it to continually revolutionize the process of labour, in an ever more organic function and dependence of the valorization process. The relation, which before could be easily established, between the sphere of production and the other social spheres is now transformed into a relation that is much more complex between the internal transformations of the sphere of production and the internal transformations of the other spheres. It is transformed, beyond this, into a relation that is much more mediated,

aspect of society, social relations are stripped of their old forms and are constantly replaced with new concealed forms determined by production:

The social relation is transformed into a moment of the relation of production, the whole of society is ever greater degree a more organic relation. At the highest level of capitalist development, the social relation is transformed into a moment of the relation of production, the whole of society is turned into an articulation of production, that is, the whole of society lives as a function of the factory and the factory extends its exclusive domination to the whole of society. (Tronti, “Seven Theses”)

Only through the process of “the *autonomous* organisation of the working class”—that is, the process of building “workers’ power”²—would the social relation be demystified, according to Tronti.

Panzieri elaborated the concept of ‘autonomy’ in the context of critiquing a rigid notion of the party unable to advance together with the working class as a political entity:

The importance now of the autonomy of the Socialist Party in Italy is precisely in this: certainly not in how much it advances or forecasts the scission of the class movement, not in opposing one ‘leader’ to another ‘leader,’ but in the guarantee of the autonomy of the entire workers’ movement from any external, bureaucratic, and paternalistic direction. (Panzieri, “Seven Theses”)

Here, it is crucial to make the distinction between *autonomy* and *autonomism*. Autonomy, as theorized by Panzieri, referred to the force of the proletariat and its capacity to forge the unity of the masses through its own class organization: the party. The revolutionary autonomy of the proletariat is neither reducible to a “paternalistic leader, from above” nor a bureaucratic organization. As such, autonomy understood in the workerist sense has as its object “how to connect and harmonize demands and partial, immediate struggles, with general ends” in order to achieve “workers’ control” (Panzieri, “Seven Theses”). To this end, organizing in the factories was politically central to the workerists because the industrial proletariat and the industrial bourgeoisie constituted the most antagonistic poles within the capitalist mode of production

² For full quote, see Wright, pp. 29.

(Tronti, "Our Operaismo"; Panzieri, "Seven Theses"). To begin in the factories was, therefore, advantageous not only because the socialization of labor produced the capacity to organize because it concentrated a large number of laborers under a single workplace, it also created a common experience of exploitation among the laborers. The common experience of the laborers became the basis upon which the workerists would organize in order to demystify the relations of exploitation. Their orientation towards organizing in the factories ("the economy remains the sphere in which real relations are produced and is the real source of power") must be seen as a corrective to the revisionist and social-democratic organizations' position that politics only occur through the Parliament (Panzieri, "Seven Theses").

In contrast, while autonomy within autonomism—which emerged in the 1970s—also referred to the self-organization of the working class, it did not signify a centralization of the variety of struggles within the working class:

What gives meaning to the concept of "autonomist Marxism" as a particular tradition is the fact that we can identify, within the larger Marxist tradition, a variety of movements, politics and thinkers who have emphasized the autonomous power of workers--autonomous from capital, from their official organizations (e.g. the trade unions, the political parties) and, indeed, the power of particular groups of workers to act autonomously from other groups (e.g. women from men). By "autonomy" I mean the ability of workers to define their own interests and to struggle for them--to go beyond mere reaction to exploitation, or to self-defined "leadership" and to take the offensive in ways that shape the class struggle and define the future. (Clever 1993)

Instead, the multitude of rebellions—however small or large they were—of various social groups across the working class were seen as having the ability to define their own interests and to organize for them, without any sort of mediation. Moreover, the category of the proletariat within autonomism was broadened to include more those who are industrial laborers in the factories; it included the unemployed, students and housewives (Dalla Costa 1973, 24). The proletariat could, therefore, be found in both the spheres of production and reproduction as a

result of the real subsumption of all labor. Since the proletariat is dispersed throughout society, the creation of liberated autonomous spaces, separate from and opposed to capital in this sense, would lay the groundwork for a new anti-capitalist reality, a communism in embryo:

The power of refusal is the power to carve out times and spaces relatively free of the capitalist imposition of work. (I say "relatively free" because such times and spaces are always limited and scarred by capitalist power.) The power of self-valorization is the power to fill those spaces with alternative activities and new forms of sociality--to elaborate the communist future in the present. (Clever 1993)

These autonomous spaces, which were “relatively free of the capitalist imposition of work,” embodied the strategic objective of the refusal of work: to reject all forms of work because work is inherently exploitation under any class society.

At stake in the distinction between autonomy and autonomism are three questions. The first question is the definition of the proletariat. There is debate between *operaistas* and autonomists on whether the proletariat encompasses only industrial workers or it includes those outside industrial production as well as those in school and those who are unemployed. The latter is the position of autonomists, while the former is the position of *operaistas*. However, even between Panzieri and Tronti, there was no unified position on how to identify the proletariat. Panzieri argued that the composition of the proletariat is determined by the development of industry at a determinate stage of development of capitalism, while for Tronti the proletariat is simply understood as manual laborers working in Italy’s largest firms (Wright 41). It is perhaps Tronti’s predetermined view of the proletariat that would haunt the practice of workerist organizations, mainly PO, because it led to a narrow orientation towards large factories, where women had a significantly smaller presence.³ The second question is where to place one’s efforts

³ Between 1959 and 1972, female employment decreased in absolute numbers. In 1959, the share of women on the labor market dropped to 33.3%, 25.1 in 1969, and 17.7% in 1973. See Bracke 2013, pp. 631, for an insightful discussion on why female unemployment was extremely high in Italy. Young male migrants from the South

in organizing. For *operaistas*, the factory front is the decisive front because the antagonism between the industrial proletariat and the capitalist class remain an important reference point for other struggles within the working class, while for autonomists there is no decisive front since the proletariat is scattered all throughout production and reproduction. The third question is how the proletariat and its allies would constitute their political power: does it occur through centralized, open and antagonistic political struggles where the class enemy is constituted, as *operaistas* conceptualized it? Or does it occur through dispersed and divided pluralist struggles where the constitution of the class enemy is fragmented, which is how autonomists conceived it? This distinction will be revisited again when we arrive at the formation of LF, which adopted autonomism as a result of the Left's failure to extend the struggle outside of the factories.

Another concept that LF borrows from *operaismo* is “the strategy of refusal.” This could be abstractly conceived as “the form of organisation of the working class ‘No,’ or what is the same: the refusal to collaborate actively in capitalist development, the refusal to put forward positively programme of demands” (Tronti, “The Strategy of Refusal”). However, the strategy of refusal, as theorized by Tronti, must be understood in two senses. In one sense, it refers to the resistance of the working class in its initial confrontation with the individual capitalist, where the working class is a ‘class for itself.’ In another sense, it refers to a higher level of resistance, where the working class becomes ‘a class against capital’ and is marked by its demand for all power to the workers. According to Tronti, “This demand is the highest form of the refusal. It presupposes already a de facto reversal of the balance of domination between the two classes” (Tronti, “The Strategy of Refusal”). Thus, when it is understood in the first sense, the working class is struggling for its own limited class interests, and when it is understood in the second

replaced women who had previously worked in factories. See Sassoon, pp. 108, for a discussion on how the influx of these laborers maintained and reinforced the gender division of labor.

sense, the working class is the proletariat, a political subject, struggling for revolution. The party—the class organization that links the demand for political power to the concrete demands that arise out of a specific class situation—mediates the passage from the first to the second sense of the strategy of refusal, where an opening is created for overthrowing and destroying capitalism (Tronti, “The Strategy of Refusal”).⁴

***Operaismo* and the woman question**

Marked by their autonomy from revisionist organizations, workerist organizations tested concepts formulated by the intellectuals of *Quaderni Rossi* and *Classe Operaia* in social practice. There were three main organizations that fused with workers involved with the wave of wildcat strikes in the industrial center of Northern Italy in 1969, famously known as the Hot Autumn: *Potere Operaio* (Worker’s Power / PO) founded in Tuscany in 1966 by communists associated with *Quaderni Rossi* and *Classe Operaia*, *Avanguardia Operaia* (Workers’ Vanguard / AO) founded in 1968 in Milan with roots in Trotskyism, and *Lotta Continua* (Continuous Struggle / LC) founded in 1969 out of a split with PO and by student movement activists in Turin (Lumley xii).

Out of the three above organizations, PO and LC are the most significant for the purposes of this paper. LC, a split from PO, was the largest of the three, with a member base that was

⁴ The full quote on the strategy of refusal is quoted here: “So, can we say that we are still living through the long historical period in which Marx saw the workers as ‘a class against capital’, but not yet as a ‘class for itself’? Or shouldn’t we perhaps say the opposite, even if it means confounding a bit of the terms of Hegel’s dialectic? Namely, that the workers become, from the first, ‘a class for itself’ – that is, - from the first moments of direct confrontation with the individual employer – and that they are recognised as such by the first capitalists. And only afterwards, after a long-terrible, historical travail which is, perhaps, not yet completed do the workers arrive at a point of being actively, subjectively, ‘a class against capital’. A prerequisite of this process of transition is political organisation, the party, with its demand for total power. In the intervening period there is the refusal – collective, mass, expressed in passive forms – of the workers to expose themselves as ‘a class against capital’ without that organisation of their own, without that total demand for power.” See Tronti, Mario, “The Strategy of Refusal” in *Workers and Capital*.

majority women. At its height in 1975, 15,000 people identified as members. What set LC apart from other workerist organizations was that while it maintained the workerist perspective that struggles in the factories were of central importance in providing a reference point of the political antagonism between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, it affirmed that basing one's social practice in the factories alone was not sufficient for building political power (Wright 132). As such, LC argued that it was necessary to organize outside of the workplace, in proletarian neighborhoods (Bracke 2014, 52) (Big Flame 2). It held that the strength of the proletariat needed to be grasped as a dialectical relation between the factory front and all other fronts, with the factory front being the key link:

It is the crisis (in production as in politics) imposed by the working class on capital that is the most formidable agent of unification, of homogenization within the proletariat, between different social layers and zones. In the phase of crisis, this problem appears in a manner that is at once more general and more particular. On the mass terrain, this offers the possibility of unifying, on the basis of contents expressed by the vanguard of the mass of the proletariat—careful! on this basis, and not by a verbal leap, from “the factory” to the “society”—, those proletarian sectors that are less autonomous, more divided, less exposed to the total and reciprocal hostility of the workers towards production, which constitutes a great part of the traditional mass base of revisionist (Lotta Continua, “Qui sommes-nous?”)

In other words, in moments of crisis, when capital is weak, there is an opening to unite and generalize the struggles of the industrial proletariat in the factories and the masses outside of the factories. However, a difference between the masses and the industrial proletariat is that the former are more divided and dispersed since they are not in direct confrontation with the industrial capitalist. Proceeding from this contradiction in an attempt to generalize the struggles internal and external to the factories, LC launched the program Take Over the City in 1970 (Lotta Continua, “Qui sommes-nous?”). Take Over the City posed the question of political power on various fronts—housing, food, schools, nurseries and transportation. Posed antagonistically against the bourgeois state, Take Over the City succeeded in momentarily

uniting the proletariat against its class enemy. Proletarian women were often, if not always, at the forefront these struggles within the various fronts outside the factories. However, without a summation of this experience, the basis for the unity of the proletariat made possible by proletarian women in this particular experience went unestablished. More importantly, the distinction between the antagonism between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, on the one hand, and the contradiction within the proletariat between men and women, remained to be clarified and was left open to individual interpretation. Internal consolidation on the matter through a summation of experience within the organization was the precondition for political unity on the woman question, the question of how the liberation of women would be achieved. Near its dissolution, when there were lively internal debates on the demand for wages for housework, it was clear that there was a lack of political unity in LC on the woman question.

In comparison with LC, PO was more theoretically rooted in *operaismo*. Based in Turin and the industrial areas of the Veneto, PO's work was concentrated on the factory front, which overwhelmingly consisted of male workers (Cunningham 1). PO's main demands were the refusal of accelerated piecework production and called for salaries for all, without distinction of skills. Their demands should be comprehended in negative and positive ways. To the extent that these demands were an attempt to support workers to transform their struggles into one against capital in the political sense, these demands were positive. Moreover, their social practice enriched Tronti's concepts of the strategy of refusal and autonomy, thus giving rise to a theoretical elaboration on the political significance of the wage. For PO, the wage was politically central because it was a concrete way in which the strategy of refusal was implemented:

As the wage boosts won by the workers in 1968 and 1969 easily exceeded the productivity ceiling, the working-class struggle for more wages ceased to function as an incentive to capitalist development and became a threat to capitalist production. Wages could no longer be made to work as 'internal demand,' purchasing power, Keynesian

push for development, but, on the contrary, represented a renewed attack on the stability of the capitalist system. (*Potere Operaio* 16)

In the proletariat's continued demand for more money and less work, it is no longer simply an internal threat to the factory, but a threat to the capitalist system. Acting in this capacity, the proletariat refused to limit its struggle for higher wages, which would ultimately contribute to reproducing labor power as a commodity for capitalist consumption. Instead, the proletariat is consciously disrupting production, constituting its political power as it throws capitalism into disarray. The political significance of the wage would become pivotal to LF in their campaign Wages for Housework, as indicated by the slogan itself.

At the same time, however, PO's demands should be understood in a negative way. Although the problems of work speed and salaries were directly relevant for women, who now had significantly less of a presence in the factories but dominated piece-work jobs, these demands were never framed in a targeted way towards women (Bracke 2014, 52). As such, PO neglected to organize one-half of the class. PO's narrow focus stemmed from a rigid understanding of the concept of 'class.' This had direct implications on how they determined who comprised the vanguard of the class struggle. Since social class was identical to political class for them, PO effectively assumed that those who would lead the political struggle would be those on the factory front (Wright 136). Hence, PO effectively substituted the demands of the "class" for that of women, collapsing the two distinct categories of class and women into the former. What this translated to in practice was that the woman question was left to a post-revolutionary future. Furthermore, only one half of the industrial proletariat would be mobilized while the other half would be left to fend for themselves.

Worse yet, when FIAT Mirafiori hired women, PO saw women as scabs and argued that women were equal under capitalism:

Ten thousand underpaid workers make it possible for the owner to realise an enormous profit and in this way to break up the struggle for the abolition of categories... Women are being hired by FIAT Mirafiori somehow like Blacks were hired by the Detroit auto industry in the 1930s. It is about time to stop shedding tears about women's 'equality', [which] like every lecture about civil rights is fucked up. Capital has already 'equalised' women at Mirafiori, assigning them to the assembly lines. (quoted in Wright 133-4).

As a result of this male chauvinism and narrow class reductionism, Dalla Costa, Fortunati and other women resigned from PO in 1971. On this matter, Fortunati, whose time in PO was much shorter than that of Dalla Costa's, said the following:

Potere Operaio's discourse was very advanced in considering the new factories, the new workers' role in the contemporary capitalist system, but it was very poor in considering housework, affects, emotions, sexuality, education, family, interpersonal relationships, sociability, and so on. (Fortunati 2013)

Dalla Costa decided to leave PO for two reasons. The first was because "the relation between man and woman was, particularly in the environment of intellectual comrades, not sufficiently dignifying for me." The second was because there was a need for an "autonomous process of construction of [self-identity]" in order to begin analyzing the origin of women's exploitation and oppression (Dalla Costa 2006). These reasons suggest that PO discouraged both the participation of women as communist militants and any initiatives that entailed the self-organization of women. This chauvinistic orientation was not limited to PO; it was prevalent throughout the organized parties of the left:

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 come hypothetical future, making it dependent on the gains that men, limited in the scope of their struggles by these parties, win for "themselves." (Dalla Costa 1973, 32)

Left groups, therefore, as a whole never clarified or encouraged debate on the woman question, a broad question that involves the liberation of all exploited women and how it will be achieved. Neither did they attempt to address the relation of the woman question to the class struggle. Instead, the woman question was collapsed into the class question. Matters that fell outside of the class question, such as abortion, were interpreted as detracting from the struggles of the working class. Delving into such questions was consequently interpreted as “interclassism” and as divisive (Bracke 2014, 73). Dalla Costa and Fortunati’s analyses were colored by such interactions with both the extra-parliamentary left and revisionist organizations. As such, they were critical of Marxism.

Lotta Femminista and Wages for Housework

Dalla Costa and Fortunati’s criticism of the New Left laid the foundation for the constitution of a new feminist organization in 1972 in Padua and Ferrara: *Lotta Femminista* (Bracke 2014, 70). Following her split from PO in 1971, Dalla Costa authored the seminal text *Women and the Subversion of the Community*⁵ and formed LF together with others in opposition to both the revisionist left and feminist trends that supported an emancipationist position on women’s liberation (Cunningham 4). Calling for a strengthening of social services, these trends argued that women would be emancipated through work outside the home, despite capital’s constant recomposition of the female labor force (Dalla Costa 1973, 47). Rather than following

⁵ See Dalla Costa, Mariarosa, “Statement on ‘Women and the Subversion of the Community’” for details on the controversy surrounding the authorship of the pamphlet *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, which includes the essays “Women and the Subversion of the Community” by Mariarosa Dalla Costa and “A Woman’s Place” by Selma James. At stake in this controversy is the beginning of the Wages for Housework campaign. The collaboration between Dalla Costa and James seem to stem back to Ferruccio Gambino, who was associated with Classe Operaia and a member of PO. He joined Facing Reality, of which James was a member, when he visited Detroit in 1967. See Pizzolato, Nicola, *Challenging Global Capitalism: Labor Migration, Radical Struggle, and Urban Change in Detroit and Turin*, pp. 178, for an interesting historical account of the exchanges between militants in Turin organizing in FIAT factories and Black workers in Detroit organizing in Ford plants.

these dominant trends, LF, much like *operaismo* groups, refused to cooperate with such institutions whose aim was to negotiate for a softer capitalism. Instead, they sought to develop autonomous struggles, where oppressed groups would carve out liberatory spaces against capital and where the subjective forces of that space would define the terms of the struggle. For LF, this was the same as housewives “find[ing] a place as protagonists in the struggle” in order to “discover forms of struggle which [would] immediately break the whole structure of domestic work” (Dalla Costa 1973, 34). To find “modes of struggles” that would avoid “a double slavery” and “prevent another degree of capitalistic control and regimentation” was, in LF’s view, the dividing line between reformist and revolutionary politics (Dalla Costa 1973, 48). Thus, in rejecting the emancipationist myth, LF rejected *la doppia fatica*—the double burden—of slavery to the factory and slavery to the home: “Slavery to an assembly line is not liberation from slavery to a kitchen sink” (Dalla Costa 1973, 33).

Organized in Emilia-Romagna (Bologna, Modena, Ferrera), Trento, Milan and the Sicilian city of Gela, LF engaged in struggles on many fronts (Bracke 2014, 70). It made notable interventions in struggles against medicine, one of which was the forming of a self-managed women’s counseling center in Padua in 1971—the first in Italy (Dalla Costa 2006). However, its most widely known campaign was *Wages for Housework* (WfH), which aimed to “attack *the capitalist stratification of labor* starting from *its deepest division*, that between the male work of production of commodities and the female work of production and reproduction of labor power.” WfH demanded “a new type of development centered on different conditions for the care of human beings, beginning with *women’s economic autonomy* and a more equitable sharing of care work with men.” Furthermore, it also demanded “a general, *drastic reduction* of work time

outside the home, so that women and men, both could share the burden but also the pleasure of reproduction” (Dalla Costa 2012, 198-9).

The highly debated slogan “wages for housework” emerged after LF of Padua joined with other groups from the same area to found the Triveneto Committees on salaries for housewives (Bono and Kemp 260). This occurred during a time when female employment in Italy was changing once again (Dalla Costa 2012). Prior to WfH, in the 1950s, thousands of women became wage laborers. In the following period, between 1959 and 1972, however, precisely during Italy’s ‘economic miracle,’ there was a massive decline in female employment (Bracke 2013, 631). More than a million women lost or quit their jobs (Betti 184). It was mostly self-employed women who lost their jobs: sharecroppers, tenant farmers, members of small-holder families. Expelled from these agricultural jobs, women were not likely to obtain jobs in industry or services, since employment in industry was decreasing and the service sector had minimal growth (Betti 184). Because of this, working from home became common during the beginning of the economic boom, especially in Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna, in industries such as textiles and clothing (Betti 190). Following the period after 1971—when LF was founded—there was a rise in women’s employment, but women were further entrenched in industries that involved work from home. Women tended to occupy jobs in casual labor, which were sporadic and could not guarantee a wage that fulfilled a worker’s basic needs. These jobs were usually located in small family firms and sweatshops (Sassoon 108). It was not a coincidence that LF, and the women’s movement in Italy more broadly, materialized during this period, when changes in Italian society were acutely felt. Neither was it happenstance that the slogan ‘wages for housework’ emerged in this conjuncture.

Initially, Dalla Costa was herself critical of the slogan and seemed to be against it, because it could be misunderstood as a reformist goal that would further exploit women in their role as housewives:

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 house—therefore such a demand could scarcely operate in practice as a mobilizing goal. (Dalla Costa 1973, 34)

However, Dalla Costa later changed her position on the basis that the women’s movement in Italy, and internationally, had enthusiastically taken up the demand for wages for housework. This is indicated by an undated footnote in *Women and the Subversion of the Community*: “Since this document was first drafted (June ’71), the debate has become profound and many uncertainties that were due to the relative newness of the discussion have been dispelled” (Dalla Costa 1973, 52-3). Nevertheless, not everyone in the women’s movement supported WfH.

Movimento Femminista Romano [Feminist Movement Romano / MFR], for example, argued against WfH. In their view, the demand was reformist and “restricting because it does not question the real power-relations of men and women, and the whole ideological basis on which this power rests, but simply makes of it a question of economic and unpaid work” (Movimento Femminista Romano 263).⁶ This seems to be a mischaracterization of WfH, which argues that

⁶ See *Movimento Femminista Romano*, Statement at a Meeting with Lotta Femminista” in *Italian Feminist Thought: A Reader*, Ed. Paolo Bono and Sandra Kemp, pp. 262-264, for a criticism of Wages for Housework:

“In our opinion the demand for salaried housewives conceals elements which are not only reformist, but also dangerous, because:

1 it confines women to their traditional role.

2 it endorses their social function as private, though it grants it some social, economic and symbolic value.

3 it stands in antithesis to the demand for social services and to the involvement of men in them.

4 it defines work an activity which cannot be considered as such, because it does not have time limits or precise methods.

5 it presents itself as an obstacle to the inclusion of women in the world of active production, because it will facilitate redundancies and self-exclusions.

the material foundation of women's oppression in society generally stems from women's exploitation in the home, a position that MFR implicitly rejected:

And it is clear in any case that the demand for a wage for housework is only a basis, a perspective, from which to start, whose merit is essentially to link immediately female oppression, subordination and isolation to their material foundation: female exploitation. At this moment this is perhaps the major function of the demand of wages for housework. (Dalla Costa 1973, 53)

However, identifying the economic level as primary does not mean that ideology plays no role.

This much is clear when Dalla Costa elaborates on women's role in the family as the disciplinarian:

[The housewife] 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.... 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. (Dalla Costa 1973 45-6)

In short, according to Dalla Costa, the family is an institution of the ideological state apparatus, which ultimately serves capital through the husband as mediator:

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 serves, and this gives an ambiguous and slavlike character to housework. The husband and children, through their loving involvement, their loving blackmail, become the first foremen, the immediate controllers of this labor. (Dalla Costa 1973 33)

As such, to pose the questions of ideology and economics as mutually exclusive is a false premise. Furthermore, to assert that the contradiction between women and men is primarily an ideological one is to suggest that this contradiction could be transformed simply through re-education, a change in social relations within the existing capitalist order. LF proposed instead

6 it recognizes the scientific organization of work based on the division of labour (manual/intellectual, master/servant), and the specific division based on sexual difference, which as Engels says, is the foundation of all other divisions."

that the contradiction between men and women was primarily economic and therefore a transformation needed to occur fundamentally at the economic level through a refusal of the division of labor. Concretely, this meant to refuse the role of the housewife by not performing tasks associated with the role. Doing this, according to Dalla Costa, would undermine the family which capital uses to oppress the working class. In line with this, to demand wages for housework is to shift the burden of this work onto the shoulders of capital, rather than the housewife, thus cohering housewives as a political subject (Dalla Costa 1973, 46). While this program elucidated the pivotal role that housewives played within the division of labor, it remains unclear how the role of the housewife would be abolished in relation with all other roles, including the position of the proletarian woman who works outside the home under capitalism. More importantly, what women were supposed to do with pressing needs such as childcare was just as elusive.

It was exactly this point that Alisa Del Re, also a former member of PO, raised against the demand for wages for housework. Del Re criticized the demand on the basis that it was unable to meet the concrete needs of proletarian women who had to work both at home and outside the home:

...the issue of wages was perhaps more “revolutionary” but from the political practice that Rosa [Dalla Costa] endorsed it was difficult to understand who was demanding these wages and when... maybe my issue was much more reformist even though it is true that we annoyed a few people when we occupied local government meetings, demanding the construction of nursery schools and proposing concrete forms of ‘liberation from housework.’ (Culbertson, “The Terrain of Reproduction”)

From Del Re’s perspective, the slogan was abstract, meaning that it was discursively revolutionary, but and lacked a component that addressed immediate needs. Both components are necessary since the former determines what the aims of the latter. Without a revolutionary perspective, an actualized demand would simply fill in the void for what the state is supposed to

provide. Without a component that addressed immediate needs, a demand would be a subjectivist fantasy.

Members of *Lotta Continua* were also split over this question during their January 1975 Congress. There were essentially three positions. The first position argued that the organization should open up the debate on wages for housework so that members could “begin talking about how women confront the crisis and what the new aspects of women’s struggle are” (Big Flame 25). The second asserted that wages for housework was anti-working class on the basis that “it would mean that women wouldn’t have to confront the problem of restructuring. Women must fight for more social services so that they can go out to work and unite with men” (Big Flame 27). The third position supported wages for housework, asserting that it was the “workers’ programme”:

The bosses wouldn’t be so eager to send women home from the factories if women had wages for housework. Wages for housework is for full-time proletarian housewives (not for middle class women) and for those who are being pushed out of the labour market. Inside *Lotta Continua* women should be privileged [sic] because they have families and housework and unless they are helped they will not mature politically. (Big Flame 27)

Perhaps examining the theoretical underpinnings of the Wages for Housework campaign would elucidate the specific role that women play in production and reproduction. The next section of the paper does this by exploring the two key arguments of workerist feminism: (1) reproduction determines women’s participation in waged labor and (2) unwaged domestic labor produces surplus value.

The intensification of labor in modern industry

Dalla Costa and Fortunati argue that one condition distinguishing women from men under capitalism is that reproduction (=reproduction of labor power in the family) determines

women's participation in production:

“... 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.” (Dalla Costa 1973, 19)

“Not only when, but for how long, women will stay in the non-housework market is determined by the entire process of female production (which always remains primarily housework).” (Fortunati 1995, 66)

Fortunati attempts to demonstrate this by referring to the unstable presence of women in waged labor: “The oscillations in the rate of female employment show clearly how female labor power takes up non-housework temporarily, and functions as an additional supply of waged-labor” (Fortunati 1995, 65). Examining the rate of female employment, however, is merely the descriptive tracking of a phenomenon; it cannot substitute for an analysis. Yet, this is precisely how Fortunati utilizes these observations. According to Fortunati, women spend most of their lives as housewives. Only before marriage do they engage in some form of waged labor, but usually as a “supplement [to] the income of the original family, or for her own maintenance, or it can be an attempt to flee for as long as possible from her ‘fate’ as houseworker” (Fortunati 1995, 65-6). From this, Fortunati deduces that the duration and precise moments in which a woman is engaged in waged work is determined by the needs of her family. Furthermore, she assumes that the fate of a woman under modern industry is to be a housewife as a result of capital's tendency to prolong the working day:

The production of relative surplus value means that *capital concentrates its interest upon exploiting women primarily in their capacity to produce and reproduce labor power*, instead of a double exploitation. Consequently it also signifies the *passage from a houseworking day posited as an extension of the factory working day, to a house working day characterized by the fact that it has no limit other than the duration of the day itself. Thus a new working figure is born, the housewife, or rather the female houseworker*. The workers involved in large-scale industry are women and young adults, and all the workers are accumulated in one place, the factory; the workers involved in the production of

relative surplus value are the male waged worker in the factory and the female non-waged houseworker, outside the factory in the house. (Fortunati 1995, 165)

What actually occurred in Italy during the “miracle years,” between 1950 and 1963, and their aftermath demonstrates otherwise. On the one hand, the real subsumption of labor under capital ruptured the old family structure by introducing women into production. On the other hand, it also strengthened and reinforced the role of women in the family through waged labor, producing what is commonly referred to as the double burden. This complicates Fortunati’s abstract arguments on the role of women and their relation to production and reproduction in the capitalist mode of production.

Contrary to Dalla Costa and Fortunati’s reasoning, women in Italy became housewives in large numbers because capital expelled them from the labor market once they married, not because they had to leave the labor market to tend to their families. Capital expelled women laborers from the laborer market through the “spinsterhood clauses,” which required a woman to resign from her job if she married. Employers imposed these clauses on women before they were hired. They forced women to agree to this condition in order to be employed (Betti 189). These clauses were overturned in 1963 and replaced with a new law, which reinstated a worker if her employer fired her for matrimonial causes and paid the worker for wages that she did not receive between dismissal and reappointment. However, this new law was ineffectual because capital had already displaced the female laborers. Furthermore, the number of jobs available to women was severely limited (Betti 190). Capital fostered competition among women laborers by limiting the number of jobs available. This forced women laborers to be compliant in order to keep their jobs. In other words, through these expulsions, capital not only reproduced the gender division of labor—because women who remained were mainly concentrated in the textile and

food industries—but also a surplus pool of cheap labor—because women who were pushed out of those industries were relegated to devastating labor-intensive jobs (Betti 185).

The experience of a woman in the clothing industry demonstrates how capital reproduces this competition through the exploitation of female laborers:

In the rags department – where I work – there were 5 workers, 2 women and 3 men. We were 5 but we had to do 10 people’s jobs. About two months ago 2 workers quit (they simply couldn’t stand the situation anymore) and now we are only two women and an 18-year old boy, doing the same job. We have to choose the rags, prepare the packages, load cargoes and doing every kind of work including the heaviest. *When we complain to the company management because we can’t stand the situation [...] they remind us that if we don’t want to work any more there are many people ready to take our place.* (Betti 191) [emphasis mine]

In order to gain an adequate understanding of the means by which the exploitation of these women laborers occurred, it is necessary to first define how commodity production functions and then to examine what is accomplished when the intensity of labor, as mentioned by the woman laborer above, is increased. In contrast with other modes of production, production under capitalism is commodity production. Goods are produced for sale. Since there exists a great division of labor, individuals relate to each other through exchange. Exchange, therefore, establishes a quantitative relation between different commodities: x units of commodity A for y units of commodity B. For quantitative comparisons to be made between commodities, commodities must contain a common substance: value. This does not come from the physical properties of the commodity, which pertains to its use-value, something that all commodities must possess because they must satisfy some want or need.

Instead, value originates from the fact that commodities are products of labor; labor is the substance of value. In other words, the value of a commodity is human labor in the abstract, or what is the same: “mere homogenous congelations of indifferenced labor” (Marx 52). The magnitude of the value of the commodity depends therefore on the quantity of social necessary

labor embodied in it, that is, the *labor-time* required to produce it “under the normal conditions of production, and with the average degree of skill and intensity prevalent at the time” (Marx 46). Hence, productivity is the object of concern for the capitalist, especially if he invests in machinery:

As a capitalist, he is only capital personified. His soul is the soul of capital. But capital has one single life impulse, the tendency to create value and surplus value, to make its constant factor, the means of production, absorb the greatest possible amount of surplus-labour. Capital is dead labour, that vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more the more labour it sucks. The time during which the labourer works, is the time during which the capitalist consumes the labour he has purchased of him. If the labourer consumes his disposable time for himself, he robs the capitalist. The capitalist then takes his stand on the law of the exchange of commodities. He, like all other buyers, seeks to get the greatest benefit out of the use-value of his commodity. (Marx 257)

The tendency to increase productivity is readily seen in the history of capitalism, where in the early phases, the working day was merely prolonged to produce *absolute surplus value*. This, however, actually resulted in a lower intensity of labor and therefore lower productivity in the long-term. Productivity increases, however, when the intensification of labor becomes the main form of exploitation under modern industry, as demonstrated in the account provided by the woman laborer above. Driven by its aim to extort more surplus value, capital crippled the labor power of the working class through the excessive lengthening of the working day during the early phases of capitalism. This constrained the working class from reproducing its labor power. In response to this incessant tendency of capital, the working class struggled to shorten the hours of labor and establish a normal working day. As soon as this was achieved, the capitalist class sought the production of *relative surplus value* by means of the further improvement of machinery, which required laborers to increase their productivity (Marx 447).

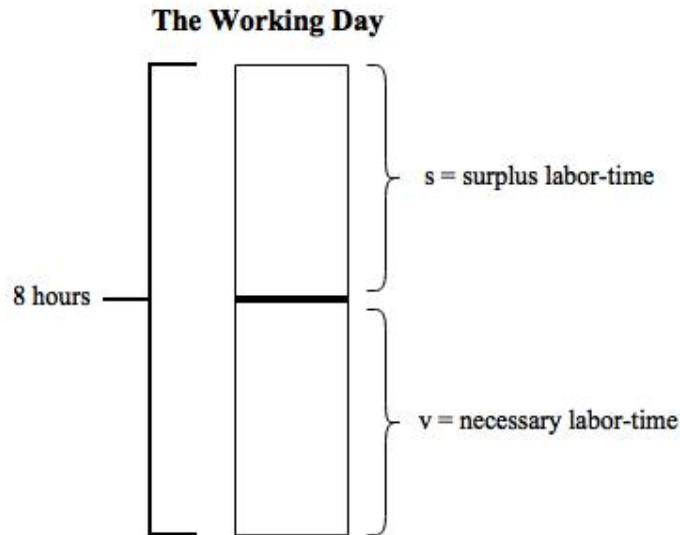
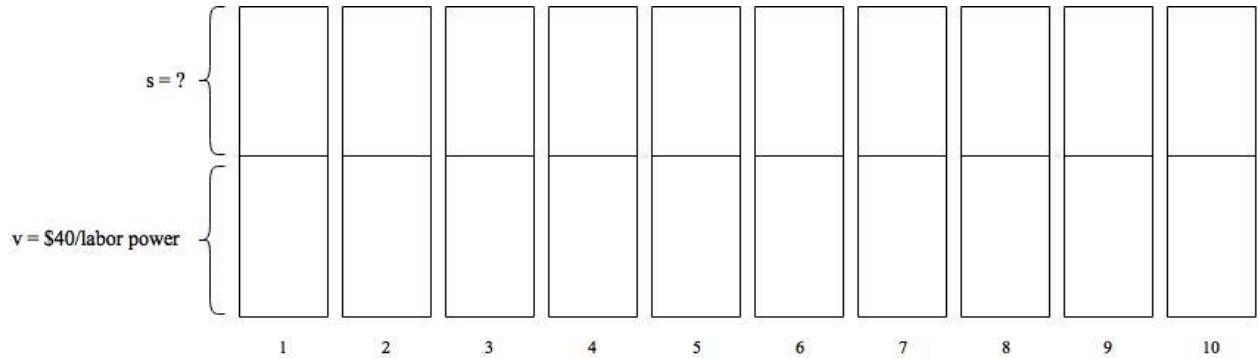


Figure 1. The working day

The working day is divided into necessary labor-time and surplus labor-time. The relation between the two components varies in ratio depending on the state of the economic class struggle. Necessary labor-time corresponds to the part of the working day when a laborer reproduces the value of the means of subsistence, which takes the form of a wage. The rest of the working day is surplus labor-time. During this latter part of the working day, the laborer works over and above the time needed to reproduce their wage. Unlike necessary labor-time, the value that is produced here does not return to the laborer in the form of a wage; the capitalist pockets this sum. In essence, the capitalist pays the laborer a wage for the time equivalent to the value of her means of subsistence, not for the value that she produces during the entirety of the working day.

Returning to the example of the Italian woman laborer in the rags department, let us assume that the working day is eight hours long. The working day is divided equally in half between surplus labor-time and necessary labor-time. In other words, it takes four hours for the laborer to reproduce her wage. With the other four hours, she produces surplus value for the

capitalist. It follows that the total amount of living labor produced is (L) = surplus value (s) + variable capital (v). If the capitalist had hired the ten laborers necessary for the job, he would



Working day = 8 hours
Given v = \$40/labor power

$$L = v + s$$

$$v = \$40 \times 10 \text{ laborers}$$

$$v = \mathbf{\$400}$$

$$L = \$400 + 400$$

$$L = \mathbf{\$800}$$

$$s = \$40 \times 10$$

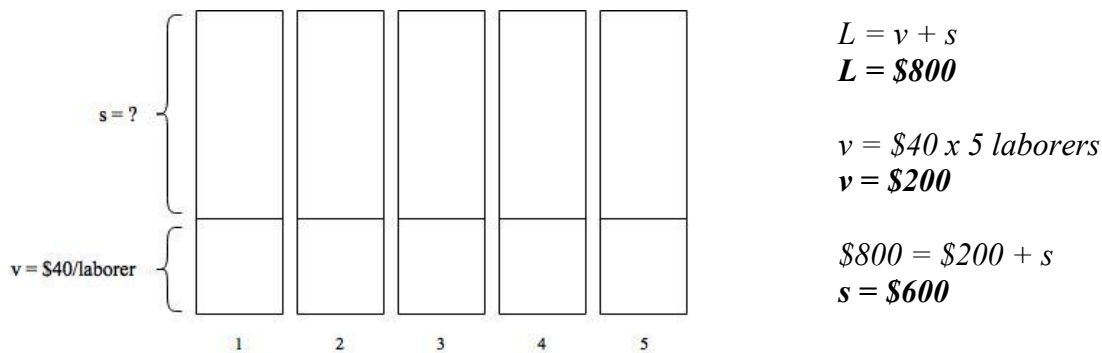
$$s = \mathbf{\$400}$$

Figure 2. Exploitation of ten laborers

have had to expend more in wages. Given that the working day is eight hours, with a variable capital of \$40 per laborer, the capitalist would have to spend \$400 in total for the ten laborers. Since the working day is divided equally in half, the amount of surplus value produced is also \$400. It is clear then that the laborer works one half of the day for herself and the other half for the capitalist. In total, the amount of capital generated is \$800. The rate of surplus value, or the degree of exploitation of labor power by capital (s/v), is 100%.⁷

⁷ See Marx, *Capital Volume I*: “Although the rate of surplus value is an exact expression for the degree of exploitation of labour-power, it is, in no sense, an expression for the absolute amount of exploitation. For example, if the necessary labour=5 hours and the surplus labour=5 hours, the degree of exploitation is 100%. The amount of exploitation is here measured by 5 hours. If, on the other hand, the necessary labour=6 hours and the surplus-

However, in the actual situation of the woman laborer, the capitalist employed five laborers instead of ten. The capitalist stands to gain from this in three ways. First, he spends only \$200 in wages, which is half as much of what he would have spent on ten laborers. Second, he can accomplish with five laborers what he would have accomplished with ten by intensifying the pace of work. By doing this, the capitalist extracts more surplus value from the laborers. Rather than only extracting \$400 in surplus value, he now extracts \$600. The rate of exploitation is 150% instead of 100%. Third, the capitalist makes the laborers expendable. Because capital constantly displaces laborers from the labor market, there are always more unemployed people in contrast to the number of jobs available. The capitalist never has to worry about a shortage of laborers. The laborers, on the other hand, are caught in a predicament. They are forced to decide



$$L = v + s$$

$$L = \$800$$

$$v = \$40 \times 5 \text{ laborers}$$

$$v = \$200$$

$$\$800 = \$200 + s$$

$$s = \$600$$

Figure 3. Exploitation of five laborers

if they should keep their jobs, which they need in order to maintain themselves and their families, and accept the intensity of work, or resign and wager their chances on the labor market.

Capitalists benefit from this dilemma and can prey on married women laborers who have

labour=6 hours, the degree of exploitation remains, as before, 100%, while the actually amount of exploitation has increased 20%, namely from five hours to six,” pp. 241-2.

families that are dependent on them for support.⁸ The family as such binds the female laborer. It traps her into a highly exploitative job in order to provide for her family because she is less likely to take a risk on the labor market.

Nevertheless, continuing with the example of the woman laborer in the rags department: two laborers resign and three laborers must now shoulder the work of ten. The intensity of labor

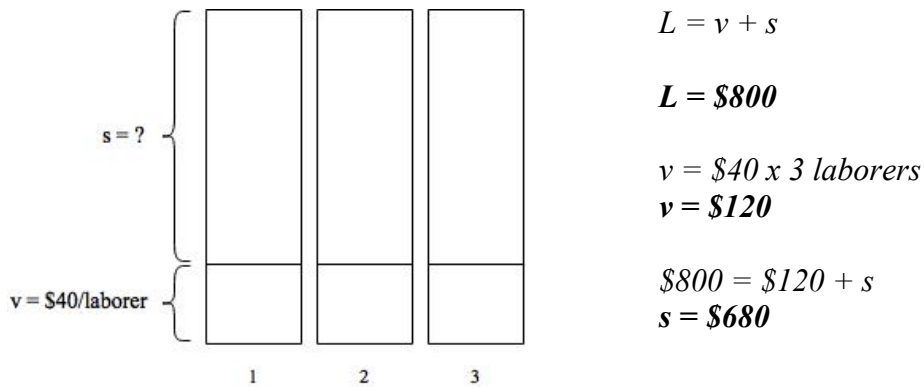


Figure 4. Exploitation of three laborers

further increases and therefore pushes down on necessary labor time. Instead of advancing \$200 in wages now, the capitalist only needs to advance \$120, but in return he extorts \$680 in surplus value from the laborers. The rate of exploitation therefore becomes 567%. With the intensification of labor, the efficiency of labor power increases as a result of the laborer being able to reproduce her labor in its full capacity. This is subsequently accompanied by a higher degree of regularity and energy of labor, which benefits the capitalist. For the laborers, on the other hand, the drive to extract relative surplus value has kept a minimum of women employed in

⁸ See Marx, *Capital Volume I*: “Mr. E., a manufacturer ... informed me that he employed females exclusively at his power-looms ... gives a decided preference to married females, especially those who have families at home dependent on them for support; they are attentive, docile, more so than unmarried females, and are compelled to use their utmost exertions to procure the necessaries of life. Thus are the virtues, the peculiar virtues of the female character to be perverted to her injury—thus all that is most dutiful and tender in her nature is made a means of her bondage and suffering. (Ten Hours’ Factory Bill. The Speech of Lord Ashley, March 15th, Lond. 1944, p. 20),” pp. 440.

modern industry so as to invest as little as possible in wages and expropriate as much as possible in surplus value. Sustaining the minimum of workers employed has increased capital's control over women and their families.

Impact of modern industry on the family and gender

The family does not simply function as “the backdrop against which the wage moves and where the commodity labor power is ‘restored’” for the only male laborer, as Fortunati claims that Marx argues (Fortunati 1995, 91). How all members of the family reproduce their labor power depends on their definite relation to production. The wage and the reproduction of labor power cannot be understood as totally separate from the family. The family plays the role of reproducing the relations of exploitation by subjecting all members to the domination of capital. That is, under modern industry, the male laborer is not the only labor power that capital exploits: women and children are also sought after by capital. Hence, the family is transformed into the unit of exploitation under modern industry. Marx clearly demarcates this transition as a product of the introduction of machinery:

In so far as machinery dispenses with muscular power, it becomes a means of employing labourers of slight muscular strength, and those whose bodily development is incomplete, but whose limbs are all the more supple. The labour of women and children was, therefore, the first thing sought for capitalists who used machinery. That mighty substitute for labour and labourers was forthwith changed into a means for increasing the number of wage-labourers by enrolling, under the direct sway of capital, every member of the workman's family, without distinction of age or sex.” (Marx 431)

The most significant point to take from this is not the cause of the introduction of women into the workforce, but the fact that the integration of women into production has occurred after the introduction of machinery, as Heather Brown, author of *Marx on Gender and the Family*” says (Brown 82). To the extent that this broke women out of the isolated household, the integration of

women into modern industry is progressive because it laid the basis for posing the question of women's equality. There was, on the other hand, also a negative effect: "Compulsory work for the capitalist usurped the place, not only of the children's play, but also of free labour at home within moderate limits for the support of the family" (Marx 431). Since all members of the family were obligated to labor in order to subsist, the reproduction of labor power for productive consumption was not limited to the male laborer, but expanded to include the entire family. Labor within the household was restrained as a result of time expended in production. It followed that the value of labor power was determined not only by the single male laborer but by the labor-time necessary to maintain the family:

Machinery, by throwing every member of that family on to the labour market, spreads the value of the man's labour-power over his whole family. It thus depreciates his labour-power. To purchase the labour-power of a family of four workers may, perhaps, cost more than it formerly did to purchase the labour-power of the head of the family, but, in return, four days' labour takes the place of one, and their price falls in proportion to the excess of the surplus-labour of four over the surplus-labour of one. In order that the family may live, four people must now, not only labour, but expend surplus-labour for the capitalist. Thus we see, that machinery while augmenting the human material that forms the principal object of capital's exploiting power, at the same time raises the degree of exploitation. (Marx 431-2)

That is, the capitalist may have to pay more in wages but he will receive many more times over the quantity of surplus value. The wage, then, no longer measured the value of the means of subsistence for the individual laborer, but the value of the means of subsistence for the family.

Although the incorporation of women and children depreciated the value of labor power of the male laborer as a result of their cheap labor and the deskilling effect of machinery, their incorporation is progressive to the extent that it breaks the economic power that men formerly held with the single wage. More importantly, members of the family now faced a common struggle. As it exists currently, however, the family serves capital to the extent that it strengthens

capital's chokehold on members of the working family—particularly women laborers who are now faced with a double burden of maintaining the family and work⁹:

Since certain family functions, such as nursing and suckling children, cannot be entirely suppressed, the mothers confiscated by capital, must try substitutes of some sort. Domestic work, such as sewing and mending, must be replaced by the purchase of ready-made articles. Hence, the diminished expenditure of labour in the house is accompanied by an increased expenditure of money. The cost of keeping the family increases, and balances the greater income” (Marx 432).

Since women laborers are obligated to work outside the home and still perform domestic labor, they had little choice but to purchase ready-made commodities to replace their domestic work. Although wages increased for the family as a result of their need to purchase these commodities, a portion of these wages were subsequently returned to the capitalist when laborers purchased these ready-made products.

Contrast this to Fortunati's characterization of the wage:

Women have tended to use [the wage] not to guarantee the reproduction of the working class, but instead, to determine a level of reproduction that has gone fairly consistently *against* the interests of capital. The criteria for consumption have become steadily less productive for capital, and have contributed to the breakdown of the hierarchy within family consumption and to the *breakdown of the stratification of power* within the class. Increasingly now, it is *women* who decide both which needs to prioritize and whose needs will be satisfied first; women thus determine the quality and quantity of consumption in relation to the wage... Certainly, the male worker often still has the “last word” in many houses, because he still earns the wage, but his word is beginning to count less (Fortunati 1995, 38).

Managing the wage, according to Fortunati, is a “strategic struggle directly between the female houseworker and the male worker, and indirectly between the female houseworker and capital” (Fortunati 1995, 37-8). From this, one would conclude that she accepts the position of the housewife to be revolutionary as such. This seems to further reinforce the dominant view of

⁹ Dismantling the family as it is, through mass incarceration or other acts of state violence—which is what happens most frequently and systematically to Black families in the United States—only serves to incapacitate a section of the working class from being able to reproduce its labor power and to be mobile between classes. The breaking-up of families under capitalism consequently traps a section of the working class to the lowest strata of society.

women as belonging in the home. The wage is considered by Fortunati to be apart from the conditions that gave rise to it. She gives the wage a neutral character, denying the inherently antagonistic nature of the wage itself. That is, the mode in which the working class reproduces itself is through its exploitation by the capitalist class. The wage is merely a portion of the value that the laborer produces through its exploitation in order for the family to subsist. To claim otherwise is to give the wage a mystical quality. More importantly, to assume that the male member of the family is the only one earning a wage is to provide a one-sided and distorted analysis of women's oppression under capitalism.

The super-exploitation of women in modern domestic industry

After capital displaced women laborers from large-scale industry during the “miracle years” in Italy, women were subsequently channeled into more precarious forms of labor, often into modern domestic industry. This work involved mostly textile piecework, small-scale food processing and secretarial work. It was carried out undeclared in the *bassi* (the ground floors of old tenements) and in small semi-illegal workshops, all of which were scattered throughout rural areas or towns (Bracke 2014, 159). The vast majority of laborers engaged in such work were married women with children, who looked after their children while they worked (Bracke 2014, 38, 159). As such, there was an extreme disparity between the laborer's time for her individual and family maintenance and the time that she worked for the capitalist. This again points to capital's general tendency to minimize necessary labor-time. Here, specifically, the women laborers were paid as little as possible because they were cheap labor, thus sinking their necessary labor-time to the limit. Correspondingly, the capitalist could extend surplus-labor time for as long as the day allowed because the laborers lacked union protection and legal regulations:

But as regards labour in the so-called domestic industries and the intermediate forms between them and Manufacture, so soon as limits are put to the working day and to the employment of children, those industries go to the wall. Unlimited exploitation of cheap labour-power is the sole foundation of their power to compete. (Marx 520)

The female laborers often labored for long hours for a mere pittance, almost always for piece-rate (Betti 190). In 1959, two-thirds of housewives would put in from 15 to 32 hours per week, and over 5,000 worked from 33 to 48 hours (Betti 188). Because the value of labor power was so low, the capitalists of the modern domestic industries had no incentive to invest in constant capital, or the means of production (the raw material auxiliary material and the instruments of labor combined). In these circumstances, the technical foundation that was often found in factories of large-scale industries was absent. As a result, women were forced to do labor-intensive work for a meager sum, while the capitalist reaped enormous profits from exploiting their labor power. This was the reason why women employed in the modern domestic industries often worked from home, not because their status as housewives determined their participation in production, as Fortunati claims, but because the capitalist was cutting all costs for himself. All this work is further made possible by the fact that the capitalist was able to infringe upon the laborer's time to maintain herself and her family. The competition between small and medium domestic industry and large industry, therefore, had its basis in the unlimited exploitation of women and children. In other words, the capitalist had no interest in "exploiting women primarily in their capacity to produce and reproduce labor power" (Fortunati 1995, 165). His interest hinged on exploiting women as cheap labor, first and foremost.

In order to retain a constant supply of cheap labor, maintaining a town and country divide was necessary. As a result, rural areas became important sources of unskilled labor and advantageous geographic locations for workshop installations. The informal family networks and the scattering of laborers throughout rural areas easily hid this work from plain sight, making the

exploitation of a section of the working class invisible. Some common regions that had high concentrations of female laborers who worked from home were Tuscany, Emilia-Romagna and the Veneto:

Economically, the Veneto, largely rural up to World War Two, saw accelerated processes of industrialisation and urbanisation during the 1950s and the 1960s. Its high production and profit rates were less based on large-scale manufacturing, as was the case in Milan and Turin, and more on small, often family-owned businesses. This created a situation different from other economically advanced regions in Western Europe: the family remained a key site of production and the boundaries between the formal and informal economy were often blurred. Officially, the level of female employment was relatively low here compared to the whole of the economically advanced North. In reality, however, women's work tended to exist in a grey area between waged and unwaged labour, declared and undeclared production. During the 1970s various forms of informal labour in the home, often done by women, became widespread across Italy, but particularly in the Veneto. (Bracke 2013, 633)

Families in the south, in particular, were dependent on these jobs (Bracke 2014, 39). Since men often went north for factory jobs, those who remained in the south were primarily women and children. As such, the family was the unit of production and all members of the family were required in this phase of capitalism to labor because the wage of the husband was not sufficient to support the family. During the beginning of the economic boom, between 600,000 and 700,000 women in Italy worked from their homes. A massive influx to commodity production at home occurred again in the 1970s as a result of the outsourcing of production (Betti 190). Estimates in 1971 placed the number of women engaged in undeclared waged work in the home at about 1.7 million. Among these 1.7 million, there were about 190,000 laborers who were below the age of 14 (Bracke 2014, 38-9).

Although these laborers were dispersed, they often constituted a significant portion of production. For example, in the town of Carpi in the province of Modena, Emilia-Romagna, a quarter of garment production was carried out undeclared in laborers' homes in the late 1950s

(Bracke 2014, 39). The concentration of laborers in large-scale industries was mutually dependent on the scattering of laborers in the modern domestic industry:

Besides the factory operatives, the manufacturing workmen and the handicraftsmen, whom it concentrations in large masse at one spot, and directly commands, capital also sets in motion, by means of invisible threads, another army; that of the workers in domestic industries, who dwell in the large towns and are also scattered over the face of the country. (Marx 505)

This division undermined wages for the working class. Although every member of the family was working and thus increased the amount of income generated, actual family income actually declined because of high levels of inflation (Bracke 2014, 633). Thus, the question of the wage should not be seen as a problem that is secondary to the purview of the female laborers, as historian Maude Bracke characterizes it:

The Communist-Socialist trade union confederation the CGIL (Confederazione generale italiana del lavoro) in the late 1950s started to discuss the issue of undeclared waged work in the home as a problem requiring regulation. It was herein motivated foremost by the need to halt the undercutting of wages, and only secondarily by genuine concerns for the conditions of outworkers. A law was introduced in 1958 regulating labour in the home ('Tutela del lavoro a domicilio' [protection of home work]), though only following European pressure. Due to inadequate policing, it remained largely ineffective. (Bracke 2013, 39)

Neither should the conditions of work be characterized in solely economic terms, as the CGIL posed it. When capitalists in the modern domestic industry were no longer able to lower the price of their commodities because they overworked women and children to their biological limits, they lost their competitive edge. When this happened, they converted their enterprises from those of the scattered domestic industry into large-scale industry (Marx 514). This transition was a catalyst for a chain of effects, in which the working class was forced to succumb to capital in the form of machinery:

The wage of the machine hands rises compared with that of house-workers, many of whom belong to the poorest of the poor. That of the better situated handicraftsmen, with whom the machine competes, sinks. The new machine hands are exclusively girls and

young women. With the help of mechanical force, they destroy the monopoly that male labour had of the heavier work, and they drive off from the lighter work numbers of old women and very young children. The overpowering competition crushes the weakest of the manual laborers. (Marx 516)

The conditions of work and the question of wages, therefore, constitute one and the same problem: the domination of capital. The capitalist class concentrates one portion of the working class and decentralizes another portion in order to divide the working class and to prevent it from cohering its power. Politically, it is a struggle between two powers: the exploited and the exploiter.

Domestic labor as productive labor?

Up until now, the fluctuation of women laborers in and out of the labor market was shown to be the effect of capital's drive to exploit women as cheap labor, not the result of women's obligation to be housewives as Fortunati argues. The massive exodus of women out of large-scale industry was carried out through the spinsterhood clauses, which then funneled women into precarious jobs within small and medium modern domestic industries. Women who were engaged in this form of undeclared waged work were subjected to the most extreme kind of exploitation. They were confronted with the double burden of maintaining their family while simultaneously producing surplus value for the capitalist. Within the modern domestic industry, a sharp disparity existed between the labor-time dedicated to the maintenance of the laborer and her family and the labor-time devoted to the production of surplus value. The super-exploitation of women affected the economic strength of the working class because it lowered wages overall. The super-exploitation of women also affected the political strength of the working class because of the decentralization of woman laborers from those in large-scale industry.

What remains to be determined is if the production and reproduction of labor power produces value. On this matter, Dalla Costa argues that:

It is often asserted that, within the definition of wage labor, women in domestic labor 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. (Dalla Costa 1973, 31) [emphasis mine]

Under a footnote, Dalla Costa clarifies her usage of the term “productive”: “What we meant precisely is that housework as work is *productive* in the Marxian sense, that is, is producing surplus value” (Dalla Costa 1973, 52). Housework, according to Dalla Costa then, is labor that produces surplus value because the housewife performs a large quantity of labor. Fortunati makes a similar claim, also as an attempt to demonstrate the quantitative significance of housework:

Capital appropriates this maximum [amount of surplus value] when it buys the male worker’s labor power at its exchange-value, i.e. when it buys it for considerably less than it is worth, given that with just one exchange, between itself and the male worker, capital appropriates the surplus labor of both him and the female houseworker. Thus, the surplus value produced within the housework process passes over to the capitalist leaving no visible trace, and capital gains twice over. (Fortunati 1995, 96-7) [my emphasis]

Assuming that the housewife is not engaged in waged labor, the surplus value produced by the housewife is extorted by the capitalist through the husband. The capitalist does this under the guise of the male breadwinner’s wage. With one wage, the capitalist is therefore able to extort twice as much surplus value. That is, the capitalist is able to buy the labor power of both husband and housewife with one wage. For the housewife in particular, this unequal distribution of the wage is almost slave-like, since she receives a wage for the domestic labor that she performs; the husband monopolizes the wage.¹⁰ This unfair distribution of the wage would therefore be

¹⁰ See Fortunati, Leopoldina, *The Arcane of Reproduction*, pp. 84: “The capitalist wants two things from the housework process. Firstly, it wants the male worker to reproduce himself as labor power, i.e. produce a use-value—labor power—that has an exchange-value. A commodity that the worker can sell. Secondly, the capitalist requires

corrected if the housewife directly received proper compensation for the labor that she expended for the capitalist (Fortunati 1995, 95). Thus, to receive a wage is a challenge on two accounts: to the power of the male laborer as head of the nuclear family and to the power of capital.

Fortunati's premise for Wages for Housework finds its sense in this conception of the wage, which equates receiving a wage with producing surplus value. Such a conception of the wage is incorrect and problematic for two reasons. The first reason is that Fortunati does not have a Marxist concept of productive labor. The second reason is that she poses the wage in terms of unequal exchange, as if the unequal exchange would be resolved through a more equal exchange. The third reason is that she assigns the husband as the sole earner of the wage and assumes that women are primarily housewives whose main duty under capitalism is to remain at home.

Neither Dalla Costa nor Fortunati define productive labor in the Marxist sense. They project a certain kind of moralism into the concept itself, implying that labor that is not "productive" is perceived as marginal or secondary to productive labor. This false hierarchy of labors misrepresents the technical function of these concepts. The technical function of these concepts, as feminist Caroline Freeman argues, is useful for "allowing us to describe the relation between housework and capital" (Freeman 203). Unproductive labor that is performed under the capitalist mode of production is still capitalist; it does not mean that unproductive labor is

the production of this commodity takes place in such a way that the magnitude of its value is greater than the sum of the values of the commodities used to produce it, i.e. it is higher than its exchange-value. To accomplish this capital forces the male worker to exchange part of 'his' variable capital with the woman, so that it can obtain the use-value of her labor power in its capacity for the production and reproduction of labor power. But the cost of maintaining this female houseworker and the outlay of her labor power are two separate things. The value contained within the commodities necessary to reproduce the woman—value contained within the exchange-value of labor power as capacity for production—is much less than the value produced by the female worker. The first magnitude expresses itself in its exchange-value, and the second in its (use) value. Thus the exchange-value of labor power as capacity for production and its valorization within the process of reproduction, are two different magnitudes, a difference that the capitalist aims to create. At the end of the housework process, the product has a value which is much greater than its exchange-value. A value difference which is even greater when the woman produces new labor powers."

irrelevant or lacks a pivotal role in capitalism. It is simply a category that makes a distinction between labor that produces value and labor that does not produce value.

In posing the wage in terms of unequal exchange, surplus value is surplus labor as such, and not in the theoretically determined sense of labor that the laborer performs beyond that which is necessary for the reproduction of the value of the means of subsistence for her family. Fortunati's erroneous conception of surplus value leads her to the conclusion that capital cheats both the male worker and housewife out of a fair wage by underpaying them. Under capitalism, being fully compensated for the total amount of labor expended is impossible, which is why it is precisely an *exploitative* system. In other words, the wage is fundamentally an expression of the exploitation that occurs: one is not paid for the entire day's work but for only that part of the day that reproduces the value of the means of subsistence. While Fortunati's line of argument is attempts to show that housewives perform an enormous quantity of domestic labor, this is not a sound theoretical basis for arguing that they produce surplus value because housework and production are two distinct forms of labor. What makes this argument even more dubious is that it asserts that the capitalist buys the labor power of the husband below its value. If the labor power of the husband were bought below its value, the laborer would have trouble exerting his labor power to the necessary degree or strength that is required for the production of surplus value. This would be detrimental to the capitalist.

In their essay "Women's Domestic Labor," Gardiner, Himmelweit and Mackintosh criticize the approach that Dalla Costa and Fortunati takes:

... an approach which equates domestic labour-time with wage labour-time tends to blur the differences from a capitalist viewpoint between the contributions of women's labour in these different forms and therefore fails to expose the forces for change in the relationship between the two. As a result and because, in addition, no account is taken of the wife's potential for wage work, we find this approach static and ahistorical. (Gardiner, Himmelweit and Mackintosh 244)

The distinction that they make here is that housework entails concrete labor that produces use-value for the maintenance of laborers and their families while production entails abstract labor that produces values during commodity production. Housework and production, therefore, cannot be compared in quantitative terms since they are qualitatively different types of labor. This is the weakness in relying on an interpretation of surplus value as any large quantity of work: it fails to identify the specificity of women's labor in its various forms. Moreover, it cannot detail how these forms of labor relate to one another. To the extent that the labor performed by housewives is an "enormous quantity of social services," the labor of housewives has a specific content with a particular utility. This specific kind of labor is of no concern to the capitalist, as long as the laborer is able to reproduce her labor power:

The individual consumption of the labourer, whether it proceed within the workshop or outside it, whether it be part of the process of production or not, forms therefore a factor of the production and reproduction of capital; just as cleaning machinery does, whether it be done while the machinery is working or while it is standing. The fact that the labourer consumes his means of subsistence for his own purposes, and not to please the capitalist, has no bearing on the matter. The consumption of food by a beast of burden is none the less a necessary factor in the process of production, because the beast enjoys what it eats. The maintenance and reproduction of the working-class is, and must ever be, a necessary condition to the reproduction of capital. But the capitalist may safely leave its fulfillment to the labourer's instincts of self-preservation and of propagation. All the capitalist cares for, is to reduce the labourer's individual consumption as far as possible to what is strictly necessary..." (Marx 627)

It is therefore necessary to make theoretical distinctions between what pertains to the laborer's individual consumption and productive consumption in order to delineate what particular forms of labor performed by women contribute to the maintenance of laborers and to the production of surplus value:

The labourer consumes in a two-fold way. While producing he consumes by his labour the means of production, and converts them into products with a higher value than that of the capital advanced. That is his productive consumption. It is at the same time consumption of his labour-power by the capitalist who bought it. On the other hand, the

labourer turns the money paid to him for his labour-power, into means of subsistence: this is his individual consumption. The labourer's productive consumption, and his individual consumption, are therefore totally distinct. In the former, he acts as the motive power of capital, and therefore belongs to the capitalist. In the latter, he belongs to himself, and performs his necessary vital functions outside the process of production. The result of the one is, that the capitalist lives; of the other, that the labourer lives." (Marx 625-6)

Thus, labor power is split as productive consumption and individual consumption. The former refers to exploitation of the wage laborer by the capitalist while the latter refers to the maintenance of the wage laborer. In the hands of the capitalist, labor power contains the ability to transfer and preserve the existing value of his capital and simultaneously produce new value.¹¹ For the capitalist, consuming labor power of the laborer reproduces himself as such because he owns the means of production. However, the same process for the capitalist from the laborer's perspective is the means by which the laborer obtains her livelihood, which merely maintains of her vital functions and reproduces her as a laborer. For the laborer, her labor power does not function as capital because she owns nothing but her labor power. As such, the reproduction of labor power is not the same as commodity production. Instead, the reproduction of labor power perpetually constitutes two poles of a single relation: the wage laborer, on the one hand, who is compelled to perpetually sell her labor power to produce the value of her means of subsistence, and the capitalist, on the other, who buys the labor power of the laborer in order to exploit it and extract value. The constant reversion of the means of subsistence on the part of the laborer is, therefore, simultaneously, a renewal of fresh labor power at the disposal of capital for

¹¹ See Marx, Karl, *Capital: Volume I*, pp. 230: "While productive labour is changing the means of production into constituent elements of a new product, their value undergoes a metempsychosis. It deserts the consumed body, to occupy the newly created one. But this transmigration takes place, as it were, behind the back of the labourer. He is unable to add new labour, to create new value, without at the same time preserving old values, and this, because the labour he adds must be a specific useful kind; and he cannot do work of a useful kind, without employing products as the means of production of a new product, and thereby transferring their value to the new product. The property therefore which labour-power in action, living labour, possesses of preserving value, at the same time it adds it, is a gift of Nature which costs the labourer nothing, but which is very advantageous to the capitalist inasmuch as it preserves the existing value of his capital."

exploitation. It is the production and reproduction of the most indispensable means of production for the capitalist: the laborer herself (Marx 627).

The confusion about where surplus value is produced comes from Fortunati wrongly assuming that the family is a possible site of production:

The place for the production of absolute surplus value moved from the factory into the house. It became secondary with respect to production. Within the entire cycle of capital, the passage to the production of relative surplus value within the factory was accompanied by a corresponding passage to the production of absolute surplus value within the house. (Fortunati 1995, 176)

While the family is dominated by capital, it does not produce commodities for the capitalist. This is not to deny those who are employed in the modern domestic industry are unproductive laborers. On the contrary, to the extent that there exists a dispersed female proletariat that produces absolute surplus value in the home, Fortunati's argument is correct. However, the production of absolute surplus value does not occur at the level of reproduction through the unwaged domestic labor of housewives—housewives do not sell their labor power to the capitalist. As shown above, the production of surplus value transpires at the level of production where women are directly employed and paid a wage by the capitalist in the modern domestic industry. Instead, the labor performed within this institution produces use-values that maintain the laborers and reproduces their labor power. The family and the factory are therefore not comparable in terms of their role at the economic level, as Marxist feminist Lise Vogel asserts:

Reproduction of labour-power is a condition of production, for it reposes or replaces the labour-power necessary for production. Reproduction of labour-power is not, however, itself a form of production. That is, it does not necessarily involve some determinate combination of raw materials and means of production in a labour-process whose result is the product labour-power. While some have argued that the reproduction of labour-power is a production-process taking place in family households, in fact such activities represent only one possible mode of renewing the bearers of labour-power. Labour-camps or dormitory facilities can also be used to maintain workers, and the work-force can be replenished through immigration or enslavement as well as by generational replacement of existing workers. (Vogel 144-5) [Emphasis mine]

In other words, the reproduction of labor power is not synonymous with production. The reproduction of labor power is a condition of production.

Conclusion

The works of Dalla Costa and Fortunati emphasized the role of women in unwaged domestic labor and the significance of this labor in the capitalist mode of production, especially how it contributes to the reproduction of labor power. However, their analysis of women has tended to erode the distinct categories of production and reproduction, because they equated the real subsumption of labor under capital with commodity production. This distorted understanding of ‘the social factory’ caused them to reduce all of the particular forms of labor performed by women to commodity production. The particularities of the labor performed in by women in production, on the one hand, and outside of production, on the other hand, were therefore obliterated.

Dalla Costa and Fortunati created a false bifurcation of commodity production, where they categorized women as being primarily determined by reproduction and men as primarily being determined by production. Characterizing the structural determination of women under the capitalist mode of production in this way created a one-sided analysis. More importantly, it also wrongly inverted the relationship between production and reproduction, defining production as an effect of reproduction. This thesis attempted to argue against this characterization and has aimed to clarify the relationship between production and reproduction. It has focused on the phase of modern industry—in which the events of Hot Autumn had transpired in Italy—where the incredibly high percentage of housewives gave the appearance of an overwhelming number of women being unemployed. The large number of housewives would seem to confirm Dalla

Costa and Fortunati's theory that women are exploited mainly as producers and reproducers of labor power when capital begins to extort relative-surplus value instead of absolute surplus value. However, this was not the case.

Although the number of women in modern industry may have been small, their quantity should not be mistaken for their marginality to production. Their integration into production after the introduction of machinery changed capitalist production in a qualitative way. On the one hand, capital aggravated the town and country divide in order to have at hand a population of unskilled, cheap labor. Women were also expelled out of large-scale industry and into modern domestic industry so that their dispersion would weaken any potential political unity of the working class against capital. On the other hand, although women were not integrated into production on an equal basis with their male counterparts—since they were distributed into mainly textile and food industries and relegated to unregulated and undeclared work—their introduction, nevertheless, laid the basis for posing the question of women's liberation. Because of these transformations in production, the emergence of women's organizations was now also possible.

Furthermore, it is precisely these transformations brought to the fore the new double burden carried by working-class women, who struggled to provide for their families as a result of capital's grip on the working class family. The distinction between the maintenance of the working class family—which entailed the production of use-values for the consumption of laborers—and production for the capitalist—which entails the production of surplus value for the capitalist—contours the economic struggle in which working class women are situated. It is this distinction that Dalla Costa and Fortunati failed to make, leading them to narrowly focus on women's role in the family.

Moreover, in their analysis, the use-values that women produced for the the maintenance of the working class family were compared in quantitative terms the values that laborers produced for capitalist production. This mapping of reproduction onto production resulted in a theory and a slogan (wages for housework) predicated on unequal exchange, which assumes that a “fair” wage is possible under capitalism. The experiences of women in both modern industry and modern domestic industry, however, clearly demonstrated the tendency of capital to minimize necessary labor-time and to maximize surplus labor-time.

The analysis provided in this thesis is merely an abstract structural analysis that outlines the relationship between production and reproduction at the economic level as it relates to working-class women. This alone is not sufficient to mobilize women as political actors; it could only provide the contours of the economic struggle between working-class women and capital. As such, to create a slogan and mobilize the masses of women based on such an analysis is to provide a pre-determined solution. It treats working-class women as objects of analysis and those who theorize as the sole possessors of knowledge. Such an orientation fails to account for women’s experiences and it neglects the importance of a concrete analysis.

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