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Rethinking Women's Oppression

The past decade has witnessed an extraordinary flowering of Marxist-feminist analysis and debate. Michèle Barrett's *Women's Oppression Today* is an ambitious recent attempt to present and synthesize this literature. Through a dialogue with the most influential currents in socialist-feminist thought Barrett attempts to construct a Marxist analysis of the relationship between women's oppression and class exploitation in capitalism that is neither reductionist nor idealist. In this concern, Barrett's project is very much a part not only of Marxist feminism, but of the contemporary re-evaluations of Marxist theory as a whole, especially the renewed emphasis on the importance of ideology, the state and class struggle. Two theoretical issues lie at the heart of the Marxist-feminist debates of the last decade: 1. The degree to which women's oppression is constructed independently of the general operation of capitalist production. 2. The degree to which the oppression of women is located at the level of ideology. Barrett's critique identifies the central dilemma her analysis will seek to transcend. Marxist-feminist approaches such as domestic labour

theory, she argues, which begin from the premise that women's oppression is an integral part of capitalism, and not independently determined, tend toward reductionism. It cannot be convincingly shown that privatized reproduction on the basis of domestic labour actually affords capital the cheapest method for reproducing labour power. Moreover, to view this system as an effect or precondition of capitalist class relations, leaves untheorized why it is women who are in the home and fails to take into account male domination of women within the working class. Theories of this kind thus naturally lead to a political strategy which simply collapses the struggle for women's liberation into the class struggle: women's social position expresses their exploitation by capital, not a relationship of dependence and powerlessness vis-à-vis their husbands and fathers.

Marxist-feminist approaches that have adopted the concept of patriarchy as an analytical tool have been concerned to incorporate precisely this fact of male power into class analysis. The attraction of this concept is that it recognizes that men have privileges as men and wield power over women, even within the working class. The problem, however, has been to unravel the relationship between class and gender hierarchies. Are we speaking of two systems, one governing 'production' and one 'reproduction', or of a single system? Barrett points out that attempts to construct a single system tend toward reductionism and functionalism by arguing that patriarchy functions to the benefit of the capitalist class. Dual analyses, on the other hand, have not yet satisfactorily linked the two types of hierarchies. Are they in conflict or mutual accommodation? And, most importantly, what is the process by which this occurs?

The Elaboration of Barrett's Critique

For Barrett, the central flaw of dual systems theory is that it unnecessarily limits the scope of Marxist theory by attempting to compensate with the concept of patriarchy for the insufficiency of 'sex-blind' Marxist categories. This resolution of the problem, however, is really no resolution, or at least it is not a Marxist-feminist resolution because it leads us away from the crucial insights of the Marxist theoretical framework and places us firmly back on the terrain of empirical sociology. Rather, Barrett sees the Marxist-feminist project as one that will revise and develop Marxist theory so that it can encompass and demystify the relationships between different social structures. By limiting Marxist theory to the realm of capitalist production, dual systems theory prevents us from building on what is absolutely essential to a materialist conception of society—the determinant relationship between different levels of human social organization and experience.

The final major Marxist-feminist approach Barrett assesses focuses on the creation of masculine and feminine subjectivity and the representation of gender difference in cultural production. This approach has been influenced considerably by the shift in Marxism's theoretical approach to ideology initiated by Althusser. The rejection of economism and the reprioritization of ideology have opened the way for Marxist feminists to place problems of gender relations at the centre

of Marxist analysis and to avoid the problems of reductionism and empiricism that plague those approaches utilizing reproduction or patriarchy as central organizing concepts.

Barrett finds two interrelated problems with these approaches. First, drawing heavily upon psychoanalytic thought, they tend to be ahistorical. To date they have failed to present an analysis of gender ideology and subjectivity that demonstrates how these have changed over time or how they relate to specific historical social formations. Second, there is a tendency in these approaches to jettison Althusser's rather nebulous but necessary affirmation of the primacy of the material 'in the last instance' in favour of a conception of ideology as absolutely autonomous. This tendency is best revealed in discourse theory, of which Barrett gives an extended critique. She argues that once ideology is severed from material reality, it no longer has any analytical usefulness, for it becomes impossible to posit a theory of determination—of historical change based on contradiction. These approaches, thus, like dual systems theory, ultimately lead us back to a bourgeois theory of multi-determination by different factors—political, ideological, economic, and so forth.

Having identified the major problems in current theoretical work, Barrett attempts to resolve them in an analysis that recognizes the importance of ideological elements—the construction of gendered subjectivity, its determinations and consequences—without severing ideology from its mooring in material relations. At the same time she proposes to utilize a historical analysis to steer between the Scylla of reductionism and the Charybdis of empiricism.

Capitalism and the Family Household

Barrett views the key to women's oppression as a complex she terms the 'family-household system'. The complex includes a given social structure—the household—and a given ideology—the family—which, while connected, are not parallel. The household structure is one in which a number of people, usually biologically related, depend on the wages of a few adult members, primarily those of the husband/father, and in which all depend primarily on the unpaid labour of the wife/mother for cleaning, food preparation, child care, and so forth. The ideology of the 'family' is one that defines family life as '“naturally” based on close kinship, as properly organized through a male breadwinner with a financially dependent wife and children, and as a haven of privacy beyond the public realm of commerce and industry.'¹

Barrett's crucial contention is that the family-household system is not inherent to capitalism but has come to form a *historically constituted* element of class relations. This structure was not inevitable, but rather emerged through a historical process in which an ideology that posited women's natural connection to domesticity was incorporated into capitalist relations of production. This ideology sprang in part from pre-

¹ Michèle Barrett, *Women's Oppression Today*, Verso Editions and NLB, London 1980.

capitalist conceptions of women's place, but was predominantly a bourgeois construction that fitted with bourgeois family relations. The ideology was accepted by the organized working class in the 19th century and was determinant in forming craft-union political strategy. The pivot in the formation of the family-household system, Barrett contends, was the mid-19th century struggle between a coalition of capitalists and male workers on the one hand, and female workers on the other, as a result of which the better organized male craft unions and the bourgeois-controlled state were able to override the interests of female workers. The expulsion of women from craft unions and the protective legislation on women's working conditions passed in Britain in the 1840s–1860s effectively forced women into the domestic sphere and laid the basis for a sex-segregated wage-labour market. Once the family-household system was in place, a sex-segregated labour market was almost inevitable. The sexual division of labour within the household and within the labour market, once established, serve to reinforce each other. Women's low wages and their segregation in a limited number of occupations effectively consolidate their position in the family, and vice versa.

Working-class men fought for the family-household system because it was in their short-term interests. However, in the long run, Barrett argues, this represented a real defeat for the class as a whole because it split the interests of working men and women. Working-class men could have organized to raise women's wages, a strategy that would have unified and thereby strengthened the working class. Instead, they fought for a family wage and unions for men, and for protective legislation for women, in an attempt to eliminate low-waged competition and force women into the domestic sphere.

On the other hand, precisely because the family-household system divides the working class, and because the system is fundamentally a conservative social force, its adoption by the working class was in the long-term *political* interests of the bourgeoisie, if not necessarily in its economic interests. Hence, the capitalist class utilized its hegemonic position in the state to help construct the system through the protective legislation implemented in the 19th century, and continues to maintain the system today through the welfare state.

Barrett's analysis concludes that women's oppression, while not having any material basis in the period when the system was historically forming, 'has acquired a material basis in the relations of production and reproduction of capitalism today.' She explains: 'A model of women's dependence has become entrenched in the relations of production of capitalism, in the divisions of labour in wage work and between wage labour and domestic labour. As such, an oppression of women that is not in any essentialist sense pre-given by the logic of capitalist development has become necessary for the ongoing reproduction of the mode of production in its present form.'²

Because women's oppression is not a prerequisite for capitalism, theo-

² Ibid., p. 249.

retically it would not be impossible for women to achieve liberation within capitalist society. Such liberation would require: 1. a redivision of labour and childcare responsibilities; 2. an end to the actual or assumed dependence of women on a male wage; 3. a transformation in the ideology of gender. These changes would be extremely difficult to achieve, however, given that they are so systematically interwoven into the fabric of capitalist social relations.

As Barrett concludes: ‘These divisions are systematically embedded in the structure and texture of capitalist social relations in Britain and they play an important part in the political and ideological stability of this society. They are constitutive of our subjectivity as well as, in part, of capitalist political and cultural hegemony. They are interwoven into a fundamental relationship between the wage-labour system and the organization of domestic life, and it is impossible to imagine that they could be extracted from the relations of production and reproduction of capitalism without a massive transformation of those relations taking place. Hence, the slogan “No women’s liberation without socialism; no socialism without women’s liberation” is more than a pious hope.’³

Barrett’s review of the state of feminist theory is impressive, particularly because it allows her to identify in a remarkably clear, if somewhat schematic manner the impasse Marxist feminism has reached. And while we do not find that her analysis ultimately succeeds in breaking the impasse, it does indicate the direction in which we must move if we are to break through onto new terrain. Barrett’s insistence that the family-household system, the crucial site of women’s oppression, is not functionally determined by capitalist needs alone, and her concomitant emphasis on an historical approach which centres on how class struggle shaped the sexual division of labour, are absolutely essential to a successful Marxist-feminist analysis. Her commitment to the development of a non-reflexive but materialist theory of gender ideology is also crucial.

Problems with Barrett’s Approach

However, in our view, Barrett’s analysis falls short of its mark in that it ultimately fails to decipher the enigma of how the ‘sex-blind’ dynamics of the capitalist mode of production described in Marxist theory and the profoundly sexist day-to-day operations of capitalist society fit together. One major reason for this is her failure satisfactorily to confront the major theoretical problem that any specifically Marxist-feminist analysis must address: how is it possible, given the capitalist drive to accumulate and to use up labour power, that women are left out of capitalist production and remain in the home to the extent that they do? Domestic labour theorists offer the explanation that the family-household system is, in fact, generated by capital accumulation itself and that, therefore, this is really not the problem it at first appears to be. As we have seen, Barrett rejects this approach in her analysis

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 254–255.

of a single, historically developed system. But she does not really resolve the theoretical issue at stake. If the laws of capital accumulation are sex-blind, as Barrett agrees they are, then how are gender divisions perpetuated? Her image of these divisions as 'embedded in the structure . . . of capitalist social relations' is really simply that. What does it mean? What exactly are the mechanisms that *recreate* and reinforce the gender division of labour within the workforce? How are these mechanisms connected to the capitalist need to maximize profit? Looking at the historical process does not allow us to ignore the theoretical issue of how capitalism perpetuates rather than undermines gender divisions.

Barrett recognizes the problem in her contention that the domestic labour system is not necessarily in the economic interests of the bourgeoisie. But if it is in their political interests, as she claims, how does it happen that capitalists are able to subordinate their short-term interest in the largest possible profit to their long-term political interests? In the same vein, in order to argue that gender divisions are not located in a separate patriarchal system, Barrett is forced to redefine *relations of production*. This term does not refer simply to *class relations*, she argues, but 'must comprise the divisions of gender, or race, definitions of different forms of labour, of who should work and at what.'⁴ But what is the relationship between *these* relations and *capitalist class relations*? Especially since, for Barrett, 'it can plausibly be argued that the wage-labour relation and the contradiction between labour and capital—the defining characteristics of the capitalist mode of production—are "sex-blind" and operate quite independently of gender.'⁵ Despite the sleight of hand, we are back to a dual systems framework—and to the same problem: How does the sex-blind contradiction between labour and capital connect with relations of production in which gender difference plays a very significant role? To say that these have evolved historically is not, in our view, sufficient.

To put our criticism slightly differently, Barrett's analysis, while materialist in approach, fails to identify any material basis for women's oppression in capitalism. She rejects not only explanations that root this development in capitalist exigencies of the reproduction of labour power, but also radical-feminist proposals that point to biological reproduction as a material basis. Further, Barrett fails to find this system to be unambiguously in the vital material interests of any social group. Certainly it is not in the interests of women. Nor in the class interests of working-class men: a) because it is not clear that women's domestic labour in the home raises the standard of living of the class as a whole; b) because it divides the working class by creating competition between men and women as wage labourers and within the family, and c) because it has never really been thoroughly established anyway. Moreover, although working-class men have some interest in the family-household system as men, Barrett does not believe that this is as great as some feminists argue. The role of male as breadwinner a) locks men effectively into wage labour, b) has deprived them of access

⁴ Loc. cit.

⁵ Loc. cit.

to their children, and c) oppresses them by imposing a rigid definition of masculinity. Thus the husband cannot be viewed, as Christine Delphy proposes, as the 'self-conscious appropriator of his wife's labour power, responsible for the exploitation of her labour in the home.'⁶

Finally, the system cannot be viewed as unambiguously serving the interests of the capitalist class, although, in Barrett's view, capitalists benefit more than any other social group. For while the system is not perhaps in their best economic interests, it is very advantageous politically as it 'divides and weakens the working class and reduces its militancy.'⁷ This is the primary reason why the bourgeoisie has invested enormous resources through the state in economic support of this form of household.

If the family-household system really is as tenuous a construction as Barrett's analysis suggests, it is difficult to explain why it has embedded itself so deeply in capitalist society. For, while it may be in the political interests of the bourgeoisie, it is not, at least in Barrett's analysis, essential to the survival of the bourgeoisie. Once again, Barrett must confront the problem of how capitalists as a class are able systematically to suspend their short-term interests in maximizing profit in favour of their political interests. Further, if the interests of working-class men, both as men and as proletarians, are not conclusively served by this system, and if no material basis in social relations of production and reproduction can be found which might push the working class to struggle for this system, it is hard to explain what has prevented the workers' movement from adopting a more enlightened strategy on this issue.

Barrett is well aware of this problem, and her solution is to give ideology great weight in the analysis. Gender ideology, she argues, must be viewed in this case as a material force. Because gender ideology becomes gender identity, it exists at the level of our very subjectivity. Thus, although the family-household system may not be in the interests of working-class men and women, 'it does not follow that all women, or the entire working class, suffer from some simple false consciousness as to where their interests really lie. Gender identity and the ideology of the family are embedded in our very subjectivity and our desires at a far more profound level than that of "false consciousness".'⁸ The suggestion is that gender ideology is powerful enough to counteract or withstand the battering of the 'sex blind' tendencies of the law of capital accumulation.

Such a formulation, of course, necessitates an analysis of the production and dynamics of gender ideology itself, and the requirements for changing its content. Barrett does not address these questions in any detail in this book. Perhaps she will explore them in further work.⁹

⁶ Ibid., p. 217.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 222-223.

⁸ Ibid., p. 226.

⁹ Unfortunately, Barrett and McIntosh do not do this in their latest collaboration, *The Anti-social Family*, NLB, London 1982.

As her analysis stands now, however, we are left with an account in which the ideology of gender difference, produced by mechanisms which we do not yet understand but which, we must hypothesize, operate independently of capitalist social relations, has been powerful enough historically to have had an autonomous effect on the shaping of capitalist social relations, and remains powerful enough to reproduce this situation on an ongoing basis. Such an analysis is, of course, subject to all the criticisms of dual systems approaches that Barrett herself makes so well.

Unions and Protective Legislation

We should now discuss in some detail, as it represents what may be considered an emerging Marxist-feminist consensus, Barrett's central historical account of the formation of the family-household system and the resulting ghettoization of women in low-paying sectors of capitalist production through protective legislation and trade-union exclusivism.¹⁰ Protective legislation, which banned nightwork for women and prevented them from working in certain industries, helped to structure the sexual division of labour by disallowing competition with men on an equal basis for certain skilled jobs—e.g. mining and printing—and by making unrestricted male labour generally more appealing to capitalists. Barrett argues that women's precarious position in capitalist production then conditioned the continuation of their domestic role within the family, and their dependence upon men.

Now, it is very difficult to make a convincing case that so precarious a social-political edifice could have played a major role in conditioning the sexual division of labour or the family household system, either in England or the United States. The US example is particularly provocative because legislation barely existed until well into the 20th century. The first women's hours law was a ten hour regulation passed in Ohio in 1852. Twenty-five years later only two other states and one territory had maximum hours regulations; by 1908 the total number of states with such laws on the books was only ten.¹¹ Furthermore, not only was the enactment of protective legislation an arduous and slow-moving process, but those laws that were passed were virtually unenforced in the 19th century and well into the 20th. Before 1908 only five or six states had provisions in the laws for factory inspectors.¹² And even when such provisions were made, inadequate policing apparatuses and

¹⁰ Heidi Hartmann, 'The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union', *Capital and Class*, Summer 1979; 'Capitalism, Patriarchy and Job Segregation by Sex', *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*, ed. Zillah R. Eisenstein, New York 1979. Also, Sally Alexander, 'Women's Work in 19th-century London', in *The Rights and Wrongs of Women*, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley, Harmondsworth 1976; Alice Kessler-Harris, 'Where Are the Organized Women Workers?', in *A Heritage of Her Own*, eds. Nancy F. Cott and Elizabeth Pleck, New York 1979.

¹¹ Judith A. Baer, *The Chains of Protection*, Westport, Conn. 1978, pp. 30–32; Elizabeth Faulkner Baker, *Protective Labor Legislation*, New York 1925.

¹² Baer, p. 30.

lenient treatment of offending manufacturers greatly weakened their impact.¹³

In Britain the issue is somewhat more complex because protective legislation was passed at the national level and appears to have been slightly better enforced. The first significant legislation was the famous Ten Hours Bill passed by Parliament in 1847, which limited women's labour to ten hours per day in textile industries only. In the course of the next two decades modified versions of this legislation were applied to other industries, and in 1867 Parliament extended protection to include workshops as well. In addition to these Acts restricting women's hours, the Mines Regulation Act of 1842 prohibited women from underground mine work.¹⁴

While the evidence is limited and somewhat impressionistic, what there is to date suggests that all of this legislation did not have any determining effect on the structuring of job segregation by sex. To the extent that the Ten Hours Bill was effective, it appears to have limited men's as well as women's labour hours.¹⁵ Insofar as this was the case, it could not have adversely affected women's chances for employment within the industry. Indeed, it was precisely because a sexual division of labour already existed in the textile industry, such that male, female and child labour were utterly interdependent, that the Ten Hours Bill could win the shortening of the working day for all through the limitation of female and child labour. Nor does this legislation appear to have resulted in any significant replacement of male for female labour, either within the industry as a whole or within particular sectors. In fact, the proportion of women to men in the textile industry continued to increase during the latter part of the 19th century.¹⁶

It is probable that the extension of protective legislation to other industries in the course of the second half of the 19th century also failed significantly to affect the sexual division of labour. On the whole such legislation was both less stringent than that which regulated the textile industry, in most cases allowing longer hours, and not very effectively enforced. However, by the time these laws became effective, skilled male workers were generally working shorter hours than those called for by such legislation; for by the 1870s many unions had

¹³ New York State is perhaps a typical case. New York first made provisions for factory inspectors in 1886. In 1911, a state investigative committee found the enforcement of protective legislation to be entirely inadequate. The committee's findings had little impact on improving enforcement, however. As late as 1921–22, the New York Labor Department had only forty-three inspectors for 35,000 factories. And even when these identified offenders, the punishment was light. Between 1915 and 1923, an estimated 50–70% of cases brought before the New York court went unfined, and in cases where fines were meted out, they were generally too small to have any impact. Baer, *The Chains of Protection*, pp. 285, 289, 296, 297, 304, 312–333, 314, 315, 339.

¹⁴ For a summary of factory legislation during the 19th century, see B. L. Hutchins and A. Harrison, *A History of Factory Legislation*, London 1903.

¹⁵ Hutchins and Harrison, *A History of Factory Legislation*; J. T. Ward, *The Factory Movement, 1830–1855*, London 1962.

¹⁶ Hutchins and Harrison, *A History of Factory Legislation*, p. 110. Norbert C. Soldon, *Women in British Trade Unions, 1874–1976*, Dublin 1978, cites statistics indicating that the ratio of women to men in the textile industries increased over the second half of the 19th century from 131 to 100 in 1861 and 148 to 100 in 1871, to 164 to 100 in 1881.

succeeded in limiting the working day in their trade to nine hours. By the turn of the century, protective legislation in this form was almost completely outdated, as the normal working day in most industries had fallen to 9½ hours.¹⁷

As with protective legislation, the impact of the skilled trades' exclusion of women cannot explain the sexual division of labour. There is no question but that trade unions followed a rigorous exclusionary policy vis-à-vis women in both Britain and the United States during the first three-quarters of the 19th century. It is also true that it was often justified by reference to a patriarchal ideology of gender difference. We are sceptical, however, that trade union policy had the effect Barrett suggests. Even if trade unions had been wholly successful in excluding women from their trade, which they were not, it is difficult to see how this could have significantly contributed to the capitalist sexual division of labour as a whole, as the skilled occupations controlled by trade unions in the 19th century represented only a very small fraction of the capitalist division of labour.

The Record of Union Struggle

The historical evidence similarly undermines Barrett's contention that the way working-class men organized in the 19th century was determined primarily by pre-capitalist patriarchal ideology. The realms of both legislative reform and industrial organization offer disconfirming historical cases. The movement for the Ten Hours Bill is particularly revealing in this respect as it was one of the earliest and most successful reform efforts. The movement, from Barrett's point of view, embodied men's desire to exclude women from production as an expression of the pre-capitalist ideology of gender difference. However, many historians argue that the main goal of at least the working-class component of the movement was the shortening of the working day for all. Hutchins and Harrison, for example, suggest that the demand for the restriction of women's labour hours, which first surfaced in 1841, quite late in the movement's history, represented an alternative approach to the restriction of adult labour and was adopted only after earlier strategies focusing on the restriction of child labour and/or motive power had failed.¹⁸

The earliest and most consistent demand made by the working-class component of the factory movement was a call for the reduction of

¹⁷ Hutchins and Harrison, pp. 197–198, 174, 193. Also see Barbara Drake, *Women and Trade Unions*, Trade Union Series No 6, London, Labour Research Department, 1920. The 1842 Mines Regulation Act prohibiting women from underground labour in the mines did take away jobs for women. However, these were almost exclusively confined to the unskilled and low-paid job of carrying coal from the pit to the surface. Women almost never did the skilled work of hewing. See Jane Humphries, 'Protective Legislation, the Capitalist State, and Working-Class Men: The Case of the 1842 Mines Regulation Act', *Feminist Review*, p. 10. It is not clear precisely what impact the restriction on nightwork had on women's labour opportunities. It does not appear to have displaced women in the printing trades in Britain, however, as most female compositors worked shops which prepared weekly or biweekly journals where night work was not the rule. J. R. Ramsay MacDonald, *Women In the Printing Trades*, London 1904, p. 75.

¹⁸ Hutchins and Harrison, *A History of Protective Legislation*.

the working day for all.¹⁹ However, the bourgeoisie's adamant opposition to any restriction of adult male labour on the one hand, and the growing middle-class outcry against the condition of factory children, and later factory women, on the other, moulded the strategy which emerged from the 1830s onwards.²⁰ The strategy was to reduce the adult working day indirectly, through legislation that would fix the hours of child labour in such a way as to make it impossible for adults to work longer hours. This would have been the effect of Sadler's movement-backed bill, introduced into Parliament in 1832, which called for a limit of 10 hours labour per day for children under eighteen and the prohibition of nightwork for all under twenty-one. The government's bill, which was passed by Parliament in 1833 in lieu of Sadler's, while providing for more stringent restrictions on child labour, actually represented a defeat for the Short-Time Movement because it allowed manufacturers to continue to employ adults for long hours by using children in relays.²¹ The Short-Time Movement responded by agitating for restrictions on motive power and for a new factory act, eventually introduced by Lord Ashley in 1837, that would have restricted the labour of all under twenty-one to ten hours. Parliament rejected both bills precisely because its members recognized them to be thinly veiled attempts to restrict the labour time of all.²²

It was at this point that the agitation for the restriction on women's hours was first voiced by the Movement, which mounted an energetic campaign in the 1840s on behalf of this new demand. The vigour of this offensive, combined with the economic depression, was substantial enough to persuade Parliament to vote the Ten Hours Bill into law in 1847.²³ Barrett is aware of this line of interpretation, though she ignores

¹⁹ For example, in 1818 the Operative Cotton Spinners of Manchester petitioned Parliament for a universal 10½ hour day with 9 hours of actual work. Hutchins and Harrison, pp. 43–44. In 1831, when workers' short-time committees were taking the first steps towards forming an alliance with Oastler and other middle-class reformers to agitate for the regulation of child labour reform, the Lancashire Trades Unions were campaigning for a short time bill for all classes of workers in all trades. Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *History of Trade Unionism*, London 1950, p. 123. In their public rallies and demonstrations, operatives continually demanded an act that would directly or indirectly limit adult labour. See Hutchins and Harrison, *History of Protective Legislation*. Also Cecil Driver's very interesting account, *Tory Radical: The Life of Richard Oastler*, New York 1946.

²⁰ Driver, *Tory Radical*.

²¹ J. T. Ward argues that the government bill was passed only to prevent a ten hours bill that would have effectively limited adult as well as child labour. J. T. Ward, *The Factory Movement: 1830–1855*, p. 115. Also see Ward's 'The Factory Movement', in *Popular Movements, 1830–1850*, ed. J. T. Ward, London 1970, p. 68.

²² Hutchins and Harrison, pp. 60–61. From 1833 to 1855, the Short Time Movement periodically attempted to win a restriction on motive power as the ultimate means for enforcing factory acts and limiting adult labour. All attempts were unsuccessful. Ward, 'The Factory Movement', p. 68; Hutchins and Harrison, *History of Protective Legislation*, pp. 52, 104, 108–109, 110–112.

²³ Both Ward and Hutchins and Harrison attribute the success of the movement to a series of factors—the force of its organized campaign, Tory-Whig conflict, the trade depression of 1847 which temporarily weakened the textile masters' resistance to the measure. With the return of favourable trade, manufacturers began to evade the act through use of relay systems, as well as to organize for its repeal. As a result, the Bill was amended in 1855 to allow for 10½ hours' labour within a set working period, thus making evasions more difficult. The 10½ hour day remained in effect in the textile industries until 1874, when it was reduced to ten. See Ward, *History of the Factory Movement: 1830–1855*.

it in *Women's Oppression Today*. In an article co-authored with Mary McIntosh she writes: 'It has been said that the Ten-Hours Movement in a sense compromised with the philanthropists, seeing the restriction of women's and children's factory hours as the only way to achieve a reduction of hours for all. As Ray Strachey put it, the men were "hiding behind the petticoats of women" in pushing for the 1847 Ten Hours Act on compassionate grounds for women and young persons, knowing that it would force their own hours down to ten as well. . . . But the factory legislation did play a part in further differentiating men's from women's work and in reinforcing patterns of job segregation in which women were found mainly in a narrow range of low-paid occupations, especially outside of the factories themselves.'²⁴ Barrett and McIntosh do not seem to take issue here with the contention that the major motive of the factory movement was to limit all adult labour. Yet they maintain that regardless of motive the effect of the legislation was to contribute to a discriminatory sexual division of labour. Of course, the argument that protective legislation 'further differentiated men's from women's work' and 'reinforced patterns of job segregation' is quite different from the proposition of *Women's Oppression Today*—that this legislation was primarily responsible for job segregation by sex.

Trade union history poses similar problems for Barrett's analysis. While one can cite numerous cases in which trade unions practised discriminatory policies towards working women and justified them by waxing eloquent on woman's 'proper sphere', there are also many examples of trade-union support for women's organizational and strike activities, and one can even upon occasion find trade-union journals and conferences supporting feminist viewpoints.²⁵ We do not point out that male trade unions often supported women as workers in order to paper over their unquestionable, substantial history of discrimination. But we would suggest that an explanation of trade-union activity vis-à-vis women that hangs on the power of patriarchal ideology is clearly inadequate. It would indicate a history of trade unions far more homogeneous on this issue than was in fact the case.²⁶

The almost complete unanimity with which trade unions virulently

²⁴ Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh, 'The Family Wage: Some Problems for Socialists and Feminists', *Capital and Class*, no. 11, 1980.

²⁵ For example, in 1829 the Mechanics Union of Trade Associations of Philadelphia, the first central labour body in the United States, invited Francis Wright to deliver the Fourth of July Address. The address, on women's equality, was reprinted by the Associations and distributed to their workers. Particularly in the 1830s, several labour journals took a very progressive stance towards the issue of women's labour and women's rights—*The National Laborer* of Philadelphia, the *New York Daily Sentinel*, and *Working Man's Advocate* among them. One labour party in the 1830s, the Association of the Working People of New Castle, Delaware, even demanded enfranchisement for women. Philip Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement*, New York 1980, pp. 51–52.

²⁶ The same argument applies to dual systems accounts. While Barrett stresses the role of ideology in shaping male responses to women's employment, Hartmann, for example, emphasizes male material interests. Hartmann argues that the trade unions' decision 'to exclude women rather than to organize them is explained . . . by patriarchal relations between men and women: men wanted to assure that women would continue to perform the appropriate tasks at home.' Hartmann, 'Capitalism, Patriarchy and Job Segregation by Sex', in *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case of Socialist Feminism*, p. 219.

opposed the entry of women into their craft was part and parcel of a general attempt to limit potentially ruinous competition from labour willing to work at reduced rates. The 'dishonourable trades', the euphemism for unapprenticed labour, were, even more than mechanization, the major threat to the privileged craft workers during the first two-thirds of the 19th century, and control of entry into the trade was the major weapon used by unionists to preserve their relatively privileged position in the labour market. This was attempted either by enforcing traditional craft apprenticeship regulations, or, in the case of new factory trades such as mulespinning, by creating an artificial apprenticeship system.²⁷

It is entirely unnecessary to resort to ideology to explain why trade unions were particularly adamant in their opposition to female entry into their trades. It is quite clear that when unions were unable to exclude women, a rapid depression of wages and general degradation of work resulted. Barbara Taylor's account of the London Journeymen Tailors Union strike against homework in 1833 well illustrates this dynamic.²⁸ The LJTU was in fact one of the strongest unions in Britain during the 18th century, strictly controlling hours, prices and labour recruitment. By the early 19th century, the privileged position of the tailors was threatened by a reorganization of production that made it possible for capitalists to replace the relatively expensive labour of the male tailors with the cheaper labour of women working at home. The LJTU attempted to block this by preventing production outside of workshops and was fairly successful as late as the 1820s. The growth of the ready-made clothing industry, however, which centred on women engaged in homework for pitifully low wages, broke the back of the union in the 1830s. The 1833 strike against homework (female tailoresses) was the tailors' last attempt to preserve their position.

In mid-century, a tailor summarized the effect of female labour thus. 'When I first began working at this branch (waistcoat-making), there were but very few females employed in it. A few white waist-coats were given to them under the idea that women would make them cleaner than men . . . But since the increase of the puffing and sweating system, masters and sweaters have sought everywhere for such hands as would do the work below the regular ones. Hence the wife has been made to compete with the husband, and the daughter with the wife . . . If the man will not reduce the price of his labour to that of

²⁷ W. H. Fraser, 'Trade Unionism', in *Popular Movements: 1830-1850*. Unions often utilized kinship and sometimes regional criteria to limit access to their trade. National conferences of cotton-spinners held on the Isle of Man in 1829 and at Manchester in 1830, for example, resolved that spinners were to be allowed to train only their own families and poor relations of mill owners. Glasgow spinners, on the other hand, attempted to prevent mobility by excluding those who had not started as a piecer in Glasgow. Fraser, 'Trade-Unionism,' p. 97.

²⁸ Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, New York 1983. Barrett cites this case as an example of how male trade unions organized to exclude women from high-paying skilled work. Interestingly, they overlook two of the most important points of Taylor's research: first, that the Tailors' Union was entirely unsuccessful in this attempt, and secondly, that the consequence of their failure was the destruction of the union and the degradation of their trade.

the female, why he must remain unemployed . . .²⁹ This scenario was repeated in many other industries during the course of the 19th century: Edinburgh printing, Scottish tailoring trades, pottery and cigar-making.³⁰

That competition, rather than ideology, was the crucial determinant of male exclusivism is underscored by the fact that in cases where women were not competing with men, or where women were in the industry from the start, unions tended to include women and even gave substantial support to their attempts at organization and strike activity.

Sometimes the very same unions that barred women from their trades supported women's organizing and strike efforts in other industries or sectors of their own industry. Thus, the London Union of Journeymen Bookbinders supported women folders and sewers in their dispute with the Bible Societies in the 1830s and 1840s, and the Glasgow Mulespinners campaigned for equal wages for women in the 1830s.³¹ A famous US example is that of the Iron Molders who, while strictly excluding women from their union, provided substantial financial support to the Troy laundresses' strike in 1869.³² Another impressive US example is that of the male shoemakers of Lynn, Massachusetts who consistently supported female shoemakers throughout the 1830s and 1860s.³³

In unskilled trades that included women, unions almost always followed a policy of including women—the earliest unions of this type in Britain were the weaving unions. The New Unions which organized unskilled workers in the latter part of the 19th century generally included women on an equal basis with men.³⁴ In the US the prime example is, of course, the Knights of Labor, the only national union in the 19th century to organize on an industrial rather than a craft basis.³⁵

Again, we do not wish to suggest that male trade unionists or male workers in general supported women's right to equality in work as well as in all other aspects of social life, or to deny that they held sexist ideas about women. Rather, these examples suggest that if the history of trade-union attitudes towards women is to be properly understood, we require a far more complex analysis of the social-economic background than that which Barrett and other proponents of her general standpoint tend to offer. Furthermore, the facts that

²⁹ Quoted in Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, p. 106.

³⁰ Barbara Drake, *Women in Trade Unions*, pp. 31–38.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 4–6.

³² Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement*, p. 155. Printing unions, building trades, iron work, and shoemaking unions also supported the strike with financial donations.

³³ In 1834 the men's cordwainers' union supported Lynn female shoemakers in their strike for higher wages. The union raised funds for the strike and boycotted manufacturers not supporting the strike. Foner, *ibid.*, p. 47. In 1859–60, male cordwainers and women shoebinders together created the famous strike of 20,000 in Lynn. Foner, p. 90.

³⁴ Drake, *Women in Trade Unions*, p. 5.

³⁵ Foner, *Women in the American Labor Movement*, pp. 185–212.

(1) trade unions were not wholly successful in their attempts to bar women from their trades and (2) that working-class men, especially in unskilled unions, often did support women workers—suggest to us that something more than trade-union behaviour underlay the formation of the sexual division of labour in the 19th century. Indeed, trade union strategies, like protective legislation, cannot be explained without recognizing that women came into the capitalist labour market at a disadvantage. The organizing strategies of working-class men appear to have been a response to, rather than a cause of, the marginalization of women in wage work.³⁶

The Material Basis for the Family Household System

In sum, the problems we have identified in Barrett's interpretation can all be traced to one major lacuna in her analysis—the absence of a material basis for the historical development and reproduction of the family-household system, the sexual division of labour, and women's oppression in capitalism. We do not take issue with the contentions that such a system may serve the bourgeoisie's political interests, that working-class men (at least those in skilled jobs) wanted to exclude women from higher paying sectors of production, or that all men had an interest in maintaining control over women's lives for both practical and emotional reasons. In fact, we would even contend that their short-term interests in such a situation are greater than Barrett allows. However, the crucial question, in our view, is how men were able to accomplish this against the opposition of women, given the 'sex-blind' tendencies of capitalist accumulation which were pushing in the opposite direction.³⁷

In the remainder of this essay we would like to suggest an alternative analytical and historical interpretation that places considerable weight on the exigencies of biological reproduction. This is a somewhat heretical stance for socialist feminists. Most, Barrett among them, are extremely reluctant to acknowledge any role for biological differences in determining women's social position. Underlying this reluctance is a healthy concern that any such focus may inadvertently lead down the path to biological determinism.³⁸ Let us be clear at the outset. We do not wish to argue that biological facts of reproduction in themselves determine social relations, in capitalism or in any other social formation. We do propose, however, to take seriously Timpanaro's suggestion that the *relationship* between the natural and the social must be built into the analysis.³⁹ In our view, a materialist account of women's oppression simply must consider the way in which the class-structured

³⁶ For an interesting study of the shifting strategies (and conditions leading to their adoption) by which male printers tried to cope with the employers' use of cheap female labour, see Ava Baron, 'Women and the Making of the American Working Class', *Review of Radical Political Economics*, vol. 14, no. 3 (Fall 1982).

³⁷ It should be clear that *working class* women's oppression poses the key theoretical problem here; for unlike women's subordination in feudal society or within the bourgeoisie, it cannot be related to male control of property.

³⁸ Barrett, p. 250.

³⁹ Sebastiano Timpanaro, *On Materialism*, London 1975, pp. 29–54; but see also Barrett, p. 74.

capitalist system of production can incorporate the biological facts of reproduction, and the extent to which biological differences, considered in such a context, condition women's participation in economic/political life, their capacity for self-organization in defence of their interests and needs, and so forth. Furthermore, this problem must be approached in a historical way. We must consider how the historical development of capitalism may have altered this relationship.

We propose to analyse the development of the sexual division of labour in capitalism and the formation of the family-household system within the context of the contradiction between the capitalist dynamics of production and the exigencies of biological reproduction. On the one hand, as Marx and Engels argued, there is the distinct tendency of capital accumulation to pull women into wage labour and thus to lay the material basis for their independence from men. On the other hand, however, the exigencies of biological reproduction have historically posed a significant barrier to the full development of this tendency.

The contradiction seems to us to be apparent. Biological facts of reproduction—pregnancy, childbirth, lactation—are not readily compatible with capitalist production, and to make them so would require capital outlays on maternity leave, nursing facilities, childcare, and so on. Capitalists are not willing to make such expenditures, as they increase the costs of variable capital without comparable increases in labour productivity and thus cut into rates of profit. In the absence of such expenditures, however, the reproduction of labour power becomes problematic for the working class as a whole and for women in particular.⁴⁰

In what follows we will explore the impact this contradiction has had on women's position in capitalism in the 19th and 20th centuries. Our analysis is in three parts. In the first part we will argue that both the sexual division of labour and the family-household system, as they developed in 19th-century England and the US, were crucially conditioned by the exigencies of biology and class structure. As Barrett points out, while capital leaves the problem of the reproduction of labour power to the working class, it does not require that this be accomplished within a set of hierarchical, gender relations. Nor does it require that women be primarily responsible for childrearing and domestic labour. We will argue, however, that the biological facts of reproduction, insofar as they conditioned both sexual divisions of labour *and* power balances between men and women, made this outcome likely if not inevitable.

In the second part we will consider how capitalist development in the 20th century has affected this situation. We will argue that the rapid development of the forces of production under capitalism has laid the

⁴⁰ For a more extended discussion of this point and its relationship to Marx's contention that labour power must be paid the cost of its reproduction, see Johanna Brenner, 'Women's Self-Organization: A Marxist Justification', *Against the Current*, vol. 1 no. 1, Fall 1980, pp. 25–27.

basis for women to transcend the constraints of biological reproduction, but that at the same time, capitalist relations of production continue to limit the development toward equality. This is the case not because gender divisions are 'embedded' in capitalist relations of production, as Barrett argues. Indeed, there is a real tendency within capitalism to threaten and undercut these divisions and to restructure the labour force. Rather, the tendency of capitalism toward periodic crises and therefore toward cuts in the standard of living of the working class, prevents a break from the family-household system and reinforces the subordination of women.

We will conclude by briefly considering the role of the state and ideology in the creation and reproduction of women's oppression. We will argue that once the material basis for women's oppression has been located, it becomes possible to construct a framework for analysing the respective roles of the state and ideology that grants both relative autonomy while recognizing their ultimate connection to material relations.

Biological Reproduction and Class Structure in the Nineteenth Century

The assignment of women to reproduction and their marginalization in wage work is prior to, rather than an effect of, protective legislation or trade union policy. All studies of women's work in the 19th century indicate that for the most part women withdrew from full-time work in factories and shops with the birth of their first child. Long before protective legislation or union contracts, married women were shaping their employment around their domestic responsibilities. Along with their children, women made crucial economic contributions to their households. However, whereas their sons and daughters went into unskilled wage work, women with children gained income in those employments that fitted with the demands of childcare and housework: part-time work, homework, seasonal work, taking in boarders, etc.⁴¹ The exception proves the rule: where women could work with their children, their participation rate rose—for example, Italian mothers in the New York canneries, immigrant mothers in New England textile mills and early English cotton factories.⁴² Married women who took factory work, most commonly in the textile and garment industries,

⁴¹ See, among others, Alice Kessler-Harris, *Women Have Always Worked*, New York 1981, p. 73; Robert Smuts, *Women and Work in America*, New York 1971, pp. 2–3, 23, 56; Louise A. Tilly and Joan W. Scott, *Women, Work and Family*, New York 1978, pp. 123–129; Carol Gronemann, 'She Earns as a Child, She Pays as a Man', in *Class, Sex, and the Woman Worker*, ed Milton Cantor and Bruce Laurie, Westport, Conn 1977, pp. 89–98; Barbara Mayer Wertheimer, *We Were There*, New York 1977, pp. 209–213; Theresa M. McBride, 'Women's Work and Industrialization', in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, eds. Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz, Boston 1977, pp. 285–287; Mary Lynn McDougall, 'Working-Class Women During the Industrial Revolution', in *Becoming Visible*, pp. 267–268, 273; Tamara K. Harevan, *Family Time and Industrial Time: The Relationship between the Family and Work in a New England Industrial Community*, New York 1982, p. 198; Mary P. Ryan, *Womanhood in America: From Colonial Times to the Present*, 2nd ed., New York 1979, p. 125.

⁴² Virginia Yans-McGalughan, 'Italian Women and Work', in *Class Sex and the Woman Worker*, pp. 109–111; Smuts, p. 57.

belonged to families whose husbands were employed in highly seasonal work or were extremely low-waged.⁴³ Even in the textile towns where opportunities for women to work were far greater than for their husbands, a relatively unusual case, the wives' participation rate was low—17% in Roubaix in 1872, of whom 54% were factory workers; 26% in Preston in 1851, two-thirds in factories.⁴⁴ In the United States in 1887, well before any significant legislation, only four per cent of all women factory workers were married.⁴⁵

This raises two issues. First, why did certain aspects of working-class reproduction—in particular childcare—remain outside capitalist production, so that a division of labour developed in which one person in the household became primarily responsible for this necessary labour? Secondly, why were women relegated to this position of domestic labourer rather than men?

In the pre-industrial economy, reproduction could be accommodated to the demands of production because the organization of production remained in the hands of the artisanal or home-based workers themselves.⁴⁶ The rise of factory production fundamentally altered this situation by robbing the workers of control over the production process. The increasing determination of work rhythms by complex, coordinated machine production posed difficulties in matching productive and reproductive work. However, in the abstract, the organization of production itself does not prevent the reconciliation of these two kinds of work. Capitalist class relations of production—the capitalist control of the workers' time and the constant squeezing out of surplus value that accompanies it—in fact determined that the rise of factory production would pose a severe threat to the survival of the working class. The family-household system emerged as the resolution to this crisis. Barrett's contention that this particular resolution was determined by an ideology of gender difference that pre-dated capitalism assumes that alternatives to locating the reproduction of labour power in the household existed—an assumption that must be addressed and justified.

The elimination of the household as a site for reproducing the labour

⁴³ Tilly and Scott, pp. 129–131; Elizabeth Pleck, 'A Mother's Wages,' in *A Heritage of Her Own*, Nancy F. Cott and Elizabeth H. Pleck, eds., New York 1979, pp. 382–382. High wages also seem to pull women into the labour market. Thus Pleck notes for the early 20th century that Italian women married to low-waged men were far more likely to work in cities where wages for women (in the garment industry) were relatively high (p. 382).

⁴⁴ Tilly and Scott, pp. 87–88.

⁴⁵ Smuts, p. 19.

⁴⁶ This is not to argue for some idyllic pre-capitalist past for women, but only to explain the more attenuated division of labour between men and women in pre-capitalist society. Feudal serf and proto-industrial households could be forced by ruling class exactions to labour so intensively as to endanger the health of the entire family. But this pressure could only be exercised indirectly through the level of surplus demanded, allowing producers an important degree of flexibility in how they would meet that demand. Therefore, except at a very extreme point, women could regulate their work to take account of children's needs, for example by taking nursing breaks while working in the fields.

force on a daily and inter-generational basis requires relatively cheap goods and services to be available through the market—sending out laundry, hiring servants to clean, eating out or buying prepared meals, paying for child-care, and so forth. If wages are not sufficient to purchase the whole range of these services, domestic labour has to be done in addition to wage work to make up the difference. The evidence is overwhelming that the income of several earners was necessary to provide even the bare necessities for the majority of working-class families in the first half of the 19th century and even in the second half when wages did rise.⁴⁷ Therefore, a sizeable amount of domestic labour remained to be done under extremely primitive conditions which made it physically arduous and time-consuming.⁴⁸ At the same time, the working day was long in capitalist production outside the home—from twelve to fourteen hours, sometimes more. Given these circumstances, a division of labour in which one person undertook domestic labour along with supplementary wage work, while another earned wages full time, was preferable to a division of labour in which two adults worked long factory hours and then returned home to do additional labour.

The determining factor, however, was the incompatibility of childcare and work outside the home. In theory it might have been possible for both husbands and wives to work and pay for childcare, but in practice, the survival of their children was jeopardized when both parents worked. Wages were generally low, and the additional cash for childcare could not be generated if both adults were working just to purchase the necessities of life. In many working-class districts women often could not make provision for childcare. They left children on their own, under the care of slightly older siblings, or under the supervision of a neighbour who looked in from time to time.⁴⁹ Engels reported that children were killed by domestic accidents twice as often in Manchester where factory work prevailed for women, as in Liverpool where mothers found other employment.⁵⁰ The demands of childcare were particularly difficult to reconcile with the long and exhausting hours of wage work demanded by the capitalist employers.

The need for care and supervision of older children cannot, however,

⁴⁷ Susan Estabrook Kennedy, *If All We Did Was Weep At Home: A History of White Working-Class Women in America*, Bloomington 1979, p. 52; Kessler-Harris, p. 71; Susan M. Strasser, 'An Enlarged Human Existence? Technology and Household Work in Nineteenth-Century America', in *Women and Household Labour*, ed., Sarah Fenstermaker Berk, London and Beverly Hills 1980, pp. 44–45. The percentage of the weekly wage spent on food by a Massachusetts labourer was 85.8% in 1830, 76% in 1860, according to Strasser. For income in relation to basic necessities in England and France, see Tilly and Scott, pp. 137–138.

⁴⁸ On the conditions of housekeeping, which had not improved for many women as late as the 1920s, see Kessler-Harris, pp. 44–45; Ryan, p. 129; McDougall p. 274; Strasser, *passim*; Leslie Woodcock Tentler, *Wage-Earning Women*, New York and Oxford 1979, p. 149.

⁴⁹ On child-care arrangements, see Kennedy, p. 167; Ryan, p. 128; Harevan, pp. 204–207; Tentler, pp. 153–160.

⁵⁰ Friederich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Palo Alto, Calif. 1969, p. 160; McDougall, p. 274, reports that in the 1870s working mothers in Bradford, England lost 68.8% of their children.

account for why the mother was assigned to the home . . . but women's biological role in reproduction can.

Many 19th-century observers considered that factory work was especially unhealthy for women. Engels reported that female factory workers experienced more difficult childbirth than other women and that miscarriages were more frequent among them than the average.⁵¹ The issue here is not so much the physical demands placed on pregnant women, since women in pre-capitalist society combined physically demanding work with pregnancy, nursing, etc. However, where this had been done successfully, women retained control over their participation in production. They were able to regulate their work so as to take account of their different physical needs in pregnancy—for example, by taking more frequent rest periods.

While the consequences of factory work were harmful for women, they appear to have been disastrous for their children because working mothers could not nurse. Bottle-feeding was not an acceptable substitute for most of the 19th century. Sterilization techniques were unknown and bottle-feeding appreciably increased infant mortality rates. The only other alternative, wet nursing, was also generally unacceptable for the working class, as infants had to be sent long distances to board with poor women who took in far too many babies and generally could not feed them all adequately. Here again, infant mortality rates were quite high.⁵²

Because the nursing of infants was necessary to guarantee their survival, and because employers would not make provision for the needs of pregnant women and infants, it made sense for the woman to stay home if the family could afford it, while her husband went to work. When women spent much of their married life bearing and nursing children, as they did throughout the 19th century, the logic of the sexual division of labour embodied in the family-household system was overwhelming.

In order to participate fully in production, women required a range of support services—most crucially, job-site care for infants, nursing breaks for working mothers, paid maternity leave. Yet where working conditions in general were barely supportable, where employers were consistently hostile to unions, where unemployment insurance, workmen's compensation, occupational safety, etc. were unknown, the provision of such services could only be a utopian dream. A working class barely strong enough to establish simple weapons of defence was in no position to wrest these enormous concessions from capital. In the absence of these necessary supports, equal wages for women and equal access to skilled trades would not have solved women's problems, even had the labour movement adopted a much less ambiguous stance

⁵¹ Engels, p. 182.

⁵² Tilly and Scott, 132–133. Ann Oakley, *Women's Work*, New York 1976, pp. 48–49, argues that wet-nursing was not particularly dangerous, apparently contradicting Tilly and Scott. However, since her figures are for Britain, where, unlike in France, wet-nursing was not a common practice among the working class, class differences may explain the different findings.

toward women's work for wages. Even a skilled woman worker would have had to withdraw from work once her childbearing began. Moreover, most female workers, like most male workers, were neither highly skilled nor highly paid. Thus, it simply cannot be assumed that the combined incomes of two equally paid full-time workers would have generated enough income to allow them to purchase acceptable substitutes for the mother's reproductive labour. Far more than equal pay would have been necessary in order to construct a non-patriarchal form for reproducing the working class.⁵³

To argue that the sexual division of labour had a material base is not to say that either the pre-capitalist ideology of the patriarchal family or the 'dual spheres' ideology of the bourgeoisie had no role in the construction of the family-household system within the working class. It is also not to deny that men had a material interest in a family where men retained control over women and children, were given respect and power, and where men's needs came first. But working-class men did not have the means to impose this form of household over the opposition of women. Nor are we satisfied to explain the ascendance of the family-household ideal as 'false consciousness' within the working class. Rather, given the historical conditions under which the system emerged, the forces and relations of capitalist production imparted a coercive charge to biological reproduction. Where pressures on the wage level of the working class were great, where the low level of development of the forces of production made domestic work exhausting and time-consuming, and where the proletariat struggled just to eke out survival, the necessity for women to bear and nurse children seriously constrained the alternatives open to the working class for organizing its reproduction.

The Class Basis of High Fertility

It may be asked, of course, whether women had no choice but to have many pregnancies and many children. The techniques available for contraception throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, primarily abstinence and coitus interruptus, were not highly reliable. Interfering with sexual activity and requiring the cooperation of men, these techniques were difficult to practise except under tremendous pressure. However, they were effective enough to allow American women to cut their birthrate in half over the course of the 19th century.⁵⁴ Nonetheless, up until the 1920s American women continued to have large numbers of children, and fertility rates among immigrant and working-class families remained high. For the cohort of mothers born in 1890, 43.5% had four or more children, 60% had three or more.⁵⁵ In 1910, native-

⁵³ Jane Humphries argues that the family wage for men was both a necessary demand and ultimately in the interests of the working class as whole ('Class Struggle and the Persistence of the Working Class Family', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, vol. 1, no. 3, September 1977). As will soon be clear, we do not agree with the second part of her argument.

⁵⁴ Daniel Scott Smith, 'Family Limitations, Sexual Control and Domestic Feminism in Victorian America', in *A Heritage of Her Own*, p. 226.

⁵⁵ *Perspectives on American Fertility*, US Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Special Studies, Series P-23, no. 70, p. 11.

born married women had 3.4 children on average, while immigrant women had 4.2.⁵⁶ Working-class fertility appears to have remained high through the 19th century in France and England as well.⁵⁷ After 1920, without any substantial increase in the use of newer birth control mechanisms, American fertility rates were sharply reduced. Therefore, to understand why women did not limit the number of years in which they were bearing and nursing children, we have to take into account not only the inadequacy of birth control techniques but also how high fertility fitted into an overall strategy for survival within the working class.

Studies of fertility in relation to economic change have shown that opportunities for young couples to find work, or land in the rural economy, and the usefulness of child labour point in the direction of large families. The possibility of establishing a household independent of one's parents early in life encourages earlier marriage. The demand for child labour depresses the incentive to practise birth control during the early years of marriage. Together these factors produce high fertility levels. This pattern was especially typical of domestic industry.⁵⁸ The same argument that has been used to explain the greater fertility and family-size associated with proto-industrialization can be applied to the 19th-century working class. Opportunities for wage work for both men and women allowed young couples to set up house at an early age. Probably even more important in determining high fertility rates, however, was the value of child labour combined with the very high levels of infant and child mortality that prevailed in many of the urban quarters throughout the 19th and even into the 20th century.⁵⁹ While the utility of very young child labour declined by the end of the 19th century, it seems that the labour of older children and teenagers remained an important source of family income well into the 20th century.⁶⁰ In the absence of social security or pension systems,

⁵⁶ Ryan, op. cit., p. 130.

⁵⁷ Tilly and Scott, pp. 99–102; Ellen Ross, 'Fierce Questions and Taunts: Married Life in Working-Class London, 1870–1914', *Feminist Studies*, vol. 8, no. 3, Fall 1982, p. 578.

⁵⁸ D. Levine, *Family Formation in an Age of Nascent Capitalism*, New York 1977. See also Hans Medick, 'The Proto-Industrial Family Economy: the Structural Function of Household and Family during the Transition from Peasant Society to Industrial Capitalism', *Social History*, no. 3 (October 1976), pp. 291–315.

⁵⁹ Ryan, op. cit., p. 129; Levine, op. cit., pp. 68–71; Tilly and Scott, op. cit., p. 91.

⁶⁰ Hareven, op. cit., pp. 189–191; Ryan, op. cit., pp. 124–126. Dublin reports that in Lowell in 1860, the average son or daughter worked a minimum of eight years while living at home. Given the average family size, families could count on seventeen years in which children's earnings would supplement family income. Thomas Dublin, 'Women, Work, and the Family: Female Operatives in the Lowell Mills, 1830–1860', *Feminist Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1/2, Fall 1975, p. 36. In Chicago in 1920, nearly 80% of unskilled workers' teenage children living at home were working; 70% of all 16–17 year olds living in Chicago and in New York in 1920 were not in school. Throughout the early decades of the 20th century, a large proportion of working-class families were forced to withdraw their younger children illegally from school. School systems, not particularly anxious to meet the expenses of expanding school places, turned a blind eye to truancy, while child labour laws were unenforced. Only in the 1930s did school attendance among working-class teenagers begin to rise significantly. Miriam Cohen, 'Italian-American Women in New York City, 1900–1950: Work and School', in *Class, Sex and the Woman Worker*, pp. 128–133; Tentler, pp. 93–95, 100–101; Winifred D. Wandersee, *Women's Work and Family Values, 1920–1940*, Cambridge, Mass. 1981, pp. 60–62. For France and Britain, see Tilly and Scott, pp. 178–181.

teenagers' wages provided crucial old-age security, perhaps allowing the parents to accumulate savings or property.⁶¹ Since it was necessary for the family to have a large number of surviving children, and since infant and child mortality rates were high, there was little reason for couples to limit the number of births.

Sexual Division of Labour and Wage Differentials in Capitalist Production

Barrett contends that women's low wages and the uneven distribution of women in certain segments of the labour force cannot be explained without reference to a pre-capitalist sexual division of labour and a concomitant ideology of women's work. From the beginning men, as employers and co-workers, have accepted women only in jobs which correspond to familial roles. 'Occupations such as charring, domestic service, spinning, weaving, millinery and so on were very common for women, while their major engagement in factory and mining work lasted only for a short while.'⁶² Capitalist competition and the drive for capital accumulation, she argues, produced the sexual division of labour, e.g. by skill, but these fundamental processes did not construct a *sexual* division in which women were the less skilled workers and some skills are defined as male, some as female. Moreover, Barrett argues, the category of skilled work itself is ideological. Whether a particular trade is recognized as 'skilled work' and is paid accordingly depends on its members' ability to insist on that differential. Thus female work, though not always less skilled, is always lower-paid than male work because female skills are culturally devalued. Barrett concludes that 'because the wage-labour relation and the contradiction between labour and capital . . . are "sex-blind" and operate quite independently of gender,'⁶³ the gender division of labour can only be explained in terms of a historical development in which pre-capitalist ideology crucially conditioned the outcome: men reserved certain kinds of highly paid work for themselves and accepted women only in those jobs that reflected and reinforced their domesticity.

In our view, however, it is both possible and preferable to explain the origins and reproduction of sex segregation in the occupational structure precisely in terms of the 'sex-blind' operation of the capitalist labour market, in which capitalists compete to hire labour for the least cost and workers search for the highest-paid work available. Sex-segregation of jobs and low female wages are intimately connected. Both have their roots in the barriers women face in defending their pay and working conditions. Women are disadvantaged on the labour market because of their family responsibilities. Women's skills are less 'valued' not because of an ideological devaluation of women, but because women are less likely to be unionized, less mobile in making job searches, more constrained in general by their domestic duties.

Barrett argues that 'the entire history of women's work, including their

⁶¹ Cohen, op. cit., p. 125; Ross, op. cit., p. 576.

⁶² Barrett, p. 181.

⁶³ Barrett, p. 99.

function as cheap substitutes for male labour, rests on the fact that from the earliest years of capitalist production it has been possible to insist on this differential. This discrepancy can be related to ideological definitions of the basic element of food consumption.⁶⁴ From the pre-capitalist division of labour within the home, it was not only assumed that women needed less food and could subsist on lower wages, but also that they often sacrificed their own needs to those of husbands and children. This ideology of women's sacrifice allowed employers to pay women less.

In our view, ideology concerning women's lower costs of reproduction may have encouraged employers to pay women less and may have made it more difficult for women to organize themselves to demand more. But all else being equal, ideology alone could not have forced women to accept lower wages. Of course, all else was not equal—women's intermittent participation in waged labour, the supplementary character of their wage earning, their ultimate destination as wives and mothers, distinguished them from men. If we remember which women were working and why, we can see how women could be utilized as cheap competitors with men. Adult women workers usually had children to support, were widows or married to men with unstable incomes. These women constituted a particularly defenceless and desperate labour pool. Their home burdens made it difficult for them to find the time or energy to organize; their lack of mobility made it difficult for them to search for better work.⁶⁵

The other group of working women, young women living in the parental home, did not face the same constraints. And it is clear from the history of female unionization that young single women were the backbone of the union organization that did take place.⁶⁶ Where young single women made up the majority of the workforce, the chances of organized struggle were improved. There were cultural and ideological barriers which hindered women from defending themselves, but these were often overcome. Nonetheless, on the whole, because young women were usually living at home and could expect to remain working for only a short period of their lives, they were also more easily exploited and less motivated to defend their skills or to learn the higher-paying skills which required a fight to break into male industries.

Knowing that she was likely to leave work once married, and having opportunities for steady albeit lower-paid 'women's work', a young woman might have been reluctant to make the kind of fight required to enter and remain in skilled male work. Many working-class daughters may have preferred the feminine support of the garment factory to the hostility of the printshop. And given that women's wages were

⁶⁴ Barrett, pp. 182–183.

⁶⁵ Smuts, op. cit., p. 51 ; Tentler, op. cit., pp. 143–146.

⁶⁶ Alice Kessler-Harris, 'Organizing the Unorganizable', in *Class, Sex, and the Woman Worker*, footnote 2, p. 161. For contemporary data, see Kate Purcell, 'Militancy and Acquiescence Amongst Women Workers', in *Fit Work for Women*, ed. Sandra Burman, New York 1979, pp. 112–133, 128–129.

quite low even when they did factory work, young women might have reasonably chosen the new jobs in retailing and clerical work which did not pay enough to attract men.

Underlying the sex-segregation of jobs, then, are the material difficulties women face in striking a wage bargain with their employers. These difficulties are fundamentally related in turn to the sexual division of labour within the family, itself conditioned by women's role in biological reproduction. The place of ideology in this determination is secondary. Barrett contends that the ideological origins of sex-segregation are evidenced in the fact that women's jobs replicate their domestic pursuits. This, however, puts the cart before the horse. Historically, the sex-typing of jobs has been fairly flexible. Weaving and spinning were male and female respectively in domestic industry, but in the factories mule-spinning became a male job, powerloom weaving a female job. Two of the most important fields for women's waged work today—teaching and office work—were originally male jobs. On the other hand, medicine was largely women's work and became an exclusively male profession in the course of the 18th century. In the sexual change-over, the character of the jobs also changed. Medicine was redefined as a 'science'; the secretary became a handmaiden instead of an administrative assistant. But these changes followed rather than preceded the change from one sex to the other.

In all the instances of feminization, the availability of women as cheap workers and men's inability or disinclination to defend their jobs were key elements. For example, in the United States in 1840, 60% of schoolteachers were men, but by 1860 only 14% were men.⁶⁷ The redefinition of the schoolteacher as a substitute mother for young children paralleled the increasing emphasis on the mother's moral training in child development. But the major motivation for the feminization of teaching was economic. As one contemporary observed: 'It is true that sentimental reasons are often given for the almost exclusive employment of women in the common schools; but the effective reason is economy. . . . If women had not been cheaper than men, they would not have replaced nine-tenths of the men in American public schools.'⁶⁸

The history of the textile workforce in New England provides another example. The first factory hands were young, single farm women recruited when male labour was scarce and expensive. As the female operatives became leading militants and organizers in the 1830s and 1840s, the employers turned to Irish men and their families to replace the women. In the immigrants employers found large numbers of men and boys willing to work for 'women's wages'.⁶⁹ The low wages and poor working conditions of the industry ultimately forced the farm girls out, following the failure of their organizing efforts. Unlike the

⁶⁷ Margery Davie, 'Woman's Place Is at the Typewriter: The Feminization of the Clerical Labor Force', in *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*, ed. Zillah Eisenstein, New York 1979, p. 251.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Dublin, *op. cit.*, pp. 34–35.

Irish men and their children, the Yankee women had options: to return to their family farms, or to enter new fields then opening up. During the mid-19th century, at the same time that immigrant men were replacing women in the cotton mills, women were replacing native-born men in teaching.⁷⁰

Many jobs that are 'women's work', such as charring and dressmaking, were taken up because they could more easily be combined with family responsibilities than factory work. They remained female not because of their connection to domesticity, but because they were also among the lowest-paid jobs. Men do janitorial work where it pays a competitive wage. Female jobs have tended to stay female because they are low-paid; once a female job begins to pay relatively high wages, it also begins to attract male labour—for example, work in nursing or libraries.⁷¹

In sum, whereas Barrett argues that a pre-capitalist ideology of female dependence played a major role in determining the household-family system, we suggest that biological facts of reproduction conditioned the sexual division of labour. Because factory production in particular, and capitalist production in general, could not accommodate childbearing and early nurturing, married women were forced to seek more marginal, lower-paying kinds of work. Already in the 1830s and 1840s—the crucial period when, according to Barrett, class struggle shaped the sexual division of labour—few married women were working in anything other than the most marginal forms of waged work.

The formation of the family-household system must be viewed within this context. Given that a sexual division of labour and wage differentials favouring men already existed, the most logical and indeed only real alternative for resolving the crisis of working-class reproduction was the family-household system. For any meaningful alternative would have demanded the wresting of substantial concessions from the capitalist class, concessions they could not afford to make. In any case, the working class was in no position to win them, given the balance of class forces prevailing during the period.

⁷⁰ Alice Kessler-Harris, *Women Have Always Worked*, p. 65.

⁷¹ Cultural and ideological elements do affect the distribution of men and women into certain kinds of jobs. For example, employers hire men or women for some jobs in order to use the power and authority relationships which prevail in the society. Lazonick argues that factory employers preferred men for spinning because they were better able than women spinners to discipline the children working under them as piecers and helpers. Women's cheaper labour was preferred in powerloom weaving where only a single operator was required. W. Lazonick, 'The Subjection of Labour to Capital: The Rise of the Capitalist System', *Review of Radical Political Economy*, vol. 10, no. 1 Spring 1978, pp. 8–9. In general, of course, men have been favoured for supervisory and management positions, especially when the workforce is male. Men are preferred as waiters in high-class restaurants because more symbolic power is conferred on the patron who is served by a man than by a woman, etc. Finally, men may resist 'women's work', even when it pays comparably, and women may not enter 'men's jobs' for fear of being unfeminine. Nonetheless, the evidence does not support the view that ideological elements are the major cause of sex segregation.

This resolution was tragic for women because it made possible the continuation of female dependence and subordination. Insofar as it amplified the tendency for women to be placed in a precarious position in the labour market, it increased the power imbalance between men and women, allowing men to exert control over women's sexuality, to shift a major portion of the burden of domestic labour onto women, and to make unreciprocated emotional demands.

The Family Household System in the 20th Century

While the 19th century saw the emergence and consolidation of the family/household system, the 20th century, especially since World War II, has witnessed a very different trend—the disappearance of the full-time housewife. This is a consequence of one side of capitalist development. The drive to accumulate pulls married women into wage labour by increasing the demand for women workers, as production expands faster than the labour supply (in, for example, clerical work after World War II), and by increasing the supply of women able to work. Increased productivity of capital allowed for higher working-class incomes without jeopardizing accumulation. Through struggle over the social and the private wage, the working class captured some of the benefits of their higher productivity. In turn, social security, pensions, improved health, etc. all encouraged lower marital fertility, both by decreasing infant mortality and by increasing old-age security, thereby decreasing the parents' need for their children's labour.

Correlatively, in the search for new markets, capital commodified reproduction and expanded the array of goods and services available and necessary for an acceptable standard of living. By cheapening commodities used in domestic production and lowering fertility, capitalist development has reduced the domestic labour time necessary for reproduction, allowing women to work at two jobs.⁷² Women have been brought back into wage labour to replace their teenage children as the major source of income required to supplement the male wage.⁷³ This change has laid the basis for the re-emergence of feminism and a challenge to the traditional family.

⁷² Many feminists have argued that changing household technology cannot account for women's work outside the home. They cite time-distribution studies showing that the total hours per week housewives devote to housework and family care have remained the same since the 1920's. But this is only true of full-time homeworkers, and more important, the time is spent differently. Time devoted to childcare has increased, while the time spent on preparing and cleaning up after meals has declined. Laundry and housecleaning time has remained the same, because standards have risen . . . which means that by lowering standards a woman can reduce the burden. With washers and dryers, laundry hours may be distributed over an entire week; our grandmothers had to devote an entire day. Flexibility in planning housework is greater, and the physical energy expended is less. (See Susan Strasser, *Never Done: A History of American Housework*, New York 1982, for descriptions of the various housework tasks in the 19th and early-20th centuries.)

⁷³ It has been also argued that women had to re-enter wage work because the economic penalties to teenagers of early school-leaving became too high. In the USA in 1920, only 30% of children 16-19 years old were in school; by 1970, only 35% were working for wages. Bonnie Fox, 'Women's Double Work Day: Twentieth-Century Changes in the Reproduction of Daily Life', in *Hidden in the Household*, ed. Bonnie Fox, Toronto, 1980, pp. 200-202.

On the other hand, the incorporation of women into wage labour on an equal basis with men has been limited by their continued responsibility for childrearing. In the US, for example, only 15% of married women with children under six work full-time, and only 27% of married women with school-age children work full-time, compared to 48% of married women without children.⁷⁴ The number of years in which women work full-time is still conditioned by the number of children they have. As women have fewer children, they have more available years to work, but unless they have no children and therefore no responsibility for child care, their wages will be lower than men's. So long as women earn less than their husbands, they will be less able to force men to take equal responsibility for family care, reinforcing their inequality in the labour market.⁷⁵

In the 19th century, the assignment of women to domestic labour was biologically determined. But how can we account for it today, when women have few children and there are alternatives to maternal child care?

While the capitalist development of the forces of production tends to undermine the family-household system by pulling women into wage labour, capitalist class relations set up a counter-tendency reinforcing the sexual division of labour. This is not, as Barrett argues, because gender divisions are 'embedded' in capitalist relations of production. It is because one consistent tendency of the capitalism system is to reduce working-class living standards and to force working people to accomplish the labour necessary for their reproduction in their 'own' time. The amount of this labour depends on how high wages are relative to services available on the market. This relationship is partly a matter of the development of the forces of production—increasing efficiency and lowered costs of prepared meals and foods, household appliances, domestic services such as laundry.⁷⁶ However, while

⁷⁴ 'Full-time' means 35 hours or more per week for 50–52 weeks. The category of married women without children includes only those whose husbands are under the age of 55. In 1978, 56% of married women with children under six worked, 15% full-time, 41% part-time (20% full-time for part of the year, 21% part-time for part or all of the year). Among married mothers of school-age children, 65% worked, 27% full-time, 38% part-time (13% full-time for part of the year, 25% part-time for part or all of the year). Among married women without children, 77% worked, 43% full-time, 34% part-time (19% full-time for part of the year, 15% part-time for part or all of the year). US Bureau of Labor Statistics, Special Labor Report No. 237, *Marital & Family Characteristics of the Labor Force, March 1979*, January 1981. Part-time work for married women appears to be even more prevalent in Europe. See, for example, Alice M. Yohalem, *Women Returning to Work: Policies and Progress in Five Countries*, Gotowa, NJ., 1980, p. 114.

⁷⁵ Divorce, separation, and single parenthood are multiplying the households in which women are the primary breadwinners. Still, a heterosexual couple and their children remain the fundamental living unit. Even at the current high divorce rate, a half of all marriages endure. Moreover, high rates of divorce are matched by high rates of remarriage. Five out of six men and three out of four women remarry, generally rather quickly: about a half of remarriages take place within three years following divorce. In 1978, 78% of all children in the USA were living in two-parent families. Andrew Cherlin, *Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage*, Cambridge, Mass. and London 1981, pp. 29–30.

⁷⁶ Contrasting the lives of migrant workers and traditional working-class households, Maxine Molyneux suggests that domestic production represents a higher standard of living for workers than going to the market ('Beyond the Domestic Labour Debate',

sufficient for reproducing adult labour, capitalist methods of cheapening production are generally inappropriate to the care of people. Adequate substitutes for family care through the market have to be labour-intensive and therefore relatively expensive.⁷⁷

To provide quality childcare and to allow parents to organize their work around the demands of child-rearing—flexitime, infant care at the worksite, parenting leave, after-school care, paid time off for family responsibilities—would represent a substantial increase in the wage bill. The amount of necessary labour workers have to perform in addition to waged work, therefore, will also depend on the class struggle: on whether the working class can force capitalists to underwrite the labour involved in child-rearing (and incidentally, the care of older people, the sick, disabled, etc.) by raising the social or the private wage, or both. Up to now, even in the most advanced capitalist economies, the working class has not been able to achieve such gains.

Because individual families have to take responsibility for their dependent members, and because for most families even two incomes are not sufficient to purchase adequate substitutes on the market, a substantial amount of work remains to be done within the household. In this context, the traditional sexual division of labour retains its force. This is partly an effect of gender ideology (the apparently natural connection between women and children) and socialization—even today women will be more likely to have the necessary skills. But in addition to this cultural and psychological inheritance, present economic realities force women into the mother role. Women earn less than men. Recurrent economic crises intensify the uncertainty facing working people even in good times. With secure and high-paying employment always in short supply, it is important for families to protect the higher-paying job. If one person has to stay home or organize their work around children's needs, it is in the interest of both wife and hus-

New Left Review 116, July-August 1979, pp. 10–11). This is an important point, but misses two issues. First, in some cases the market can provide a higher standard of living by making it possible to entirely buy out of domestic work—witness the lifestyles of urban middle-class professionals. Secondly, the case of migrant workers does not solve the problem of intergenerational reproduction within capitalism, since the next generation of workers is produced outside the capitalist system.

⁷⁷ Like the definition of working-class subsistence, quality child care has both a biological and a 'moral and historical' element. What is acceptable care in one era may fall well below standard in another. Moreover, the 'needs' of character formation, intellectual development, and so forth vary greatly between societies and historically. A society which intends to utilize the capacities of its people to the fullest would surely define adequate child rearing very differently than a capitalist society does. On the other hand, advanced capitalism may require a more labour-intensive and extended period of dependency (education) among children than did pre-capitalist society. The assumption that only an intense bond between mother and child can produce a healthy personality, the extended period of dependency in children that prevails today, surely are socially/historically and not biologically determined. Nonetheless, it seems beyond doubt that in human development there is a biological limit to how short the period of dependency can be and a biologically determined need for a substantial investment in labour time by adults (although not necessarily the biological parents) in order for children to develop.

band that she, not he, subordinates wage work to home responsibilities.⁷⁸

The capitalist drive for profit creates the conditions under which men and women negotiate the division of labour within the household. In this process, men have an incentive to protect their traditional family roles which, however burdensome, also confer important privileges. For men to share childcare and housework equally would substantially decrease their (already small) leisure time, since domestic work has to be done along with a normal work day. Moreover, men have a claim on their wives' emotional support, respect, deference and sexuality, while the family-household system sustains a more generalized sexist culture in which even working-class men enjoy rights to social honour and respect that women do not have. It is hardly surprising, then, that even when their wives work, husbands do not expand their domestic labour. The traditional ideology ('domestic life is her responsibility') strengthens men's position and undermines women in the conflict over who will have how much free time. But this ideology is underpinned by the reality that even when she works, he makes more money and she cannot afford to push him too hard. If the marriage breaks up, she will end up financially worse off.⁷⁹

Ultimately, then, the 'sex-blind' operations of the relations of capitalist production create the framework within which the working class organizes its reproduction. The decisions to have children at all, how many children to have, how to care for them, how to define their needs, are neither purely economic nor purely instrumental. On the other hand, they are not exclusively cultural or ideological. In constructing a life, in developing a strategy for survival, working-class people make choices, both individually and collectively, which have to take into account the material constraints shaped by capitalist class power.

The sexual division of labour still has a logic. But the complex of forces pressing women into their domestic role is far more contingent today than in the 19th century. A minority of women have already been able to break out of the vicious cycle in which home responsibilities reinforce low wages and vice versa. These women have reaped the gains of the feminist movement to enter professional/managerial jobs with high incomes. Their higher incomes allow them to challenge traditional roles, especially because they have less to fear from being on their own. On the other hand, they can compete with men because their high incomes allow them to buy out of their domestic responsibilities. These women have resolved the problem on an individual

⁷⁸ Married women's rate of absenteeism from work is significantly higher than that of single women and married men. (Among blacks, both single and married women have much higher rates than married men, probably because single black women are much more likely than single white women workers to have children.) Daniel E. Taylor, 'Absences from Work Among Full-Time Employees', *Monthly Labor Review*, March 1981, p. 69.

⁷⁹ A 1973 US study of divorced people married in 1968 found that when household income was adjusted for needs (number of persons, age of children), divorced men gained 17% in household income, divorced women lost 7%. Cherlin, p. 82.

basis—but the majority of women cannot. For them, a breakthrough depends on collective struggle—the self-organization of women within the working-class movement to change the conditions of daily life so that they can take men on inside the family. This means primarily changing the organization of reproduction by expanding collective responsibility for dependent people, especially children. Reducing the individual household's responsibility depends on the class struggle and the capacity of the feminist movement to organize within that struggle to ensure that childcare, etc., would be a demand.

These gains may be difficult to win in a recession. Recessions do draw more women into work, increasing their potential for self-organization. But recessions also intensify the material pressures that reinforce the sexual division of labour. Women pay high penalties when they work, simply in order to maintain the family's previous standard of living. Their income is required to buy the same wage goods as before, so they can't afford market services to substitute for their own domestic labour. Employers have no reason to make concessions such as child care, since female labour is oversupplied as more wives are forced to seek work. State service-cuts further increase the pressure on the household. The capitalist response to contraction—to attack the working-class standard of living—puts distinct limits on how far working-class families can reorganize the division of labour within the household by aggravating the dynamics which created the rationale for the traditional division of labour in the first place. The more desperate women are to work, the more burdened by home responsibilities, the more difficult for them to organize against their employers, the more intractable income inequalities between men and women remain.

Moreover, in a contracting economy, the qualitative changes that would solve the problem collectively by relieving the family of care for dependants could only be gained at the expense of capitalist profitability . . . and they will therefore meet consistent resistance from employers. On the other hand, feminist organization can make a difference to the demands raised by social movements and substantially shift the terrain of the class struggle. But it is unlikely that the movement will actually win these demands, short of revolution.

Should the capitalist system manage to survive the crisis, renewed prosperity may open the way for significant gains. An expanding economy allows the capitalist class greater flexibility in responding to working-class movements, and therefore creates the conditions under which, through struggle, the working class can go beyond the family-household system. While the cyclical return of depressions may limit how far this tendency can go, we cannot foreclose the possibility of significant changes in the way reproduction is carried out and of a long-term development toward sexual equalization within capitalism.

Women and the Welfare State

Barrett argues that the capitalist state 'props up' the family-household system through its welfare provision, protective legislation, and other avenues of state regulation. Left to itself, the private economy tends

to deprive the working class—or at least broad sections of it—of the means to establish the male breadwinner/female housewife family. By providing a material base for the working class to adopt the middle-class form of the family, the welfare state allowed the bourgeoisie to ‘hegemonize the working-class family under its own rubric’ and helped ‘forge a major link in the chain of women’s dependence’.⁸⁰

State welfare policies assume a male breadwinner and male responsibility for wife and child, thereby encouraging women to rely on men economically and reinforcing the bourgeois ideal of the family within the working class, Barrett contends. For example, in England a wife’s unemployment benefit covers only herself, while her husband’s is raised above that of the single man to take account of wife and children. The family income supplement for low wage earners is available only where the husband, not the wife, is in full-time, low-paid work. As Mary McIntosh argues, ‘policies like this make it unwise for a couple to rely too heavily on the wife’s income.’ Similarly, ‘provisions like widow’s pensions . . . make it less necessary for a wife to be able to support herself alone.’⁸¹

We find this approach to the welfare state, the dominant one in the Marxist-feminist literature, entirely unconvincing. In the first place, the legislation and programmes which Barrett and others⁸² see as the basis for the ‘male breadwinner’ family form did not develop until after World War II. Yet large sections of the working class had organized households around a dependent housewife long before this. In only the most abjectly poor and insecure working-class families did wives go out to full-time wage work.

Secondly, Barrett lays far too much stress on state policies which reinforce women’s dependence on men and ignores the contradictory trend within the welfare state toward social responsibility for children and other dependants, freeing women who would otherwise shoulder the burden. Barrett is right that income maintenance programmes are regarded as temporary substitutes for, or supplements to, the husband’s wage. It is assumed that the mother will stay at home to take care of the children, and that intact families rely primarily on the man’s wage. On the other hand, during its rapid expansion in the 50’s and 60’s, the welfare state developed services to care for dependent adults and, to a lesser extent, children *outside* the family—mental hospitals, convalescent hospitals and hospitals for the physically disabled, pensions and retirement homes as well as hospitals for the elderly, pre-school and after-school programmes such as Latch-Key and Headstart in the US.

If we compare welfare legislation before and after World War II, we

⁸⁰ Barrett, p. 229.

⁸¹ Mary McIntosh, ‘The Welfare State and the Needs of the Dependent Family,’ in *Fit Work for Women*, pp. 164–165.

⁸² Elizabeth Wilson, *Women and the Welfare State*, London 1977. Hilary Land, ‘Who Cares for the Family?’, *Journal of Social Policy*, vol. 7 no. 3, 1978; Mary McIntosh, *op. cit.* for the English case.

see not a firmer location of responsibility for dependants within the family, but a halting, grudgingly-given movement toward the narrowing of familial responsibility. Most important, we see in the post-war years the extension of state support to husbandless mothers—a benefit which is justified on the grounds of women's special responsibility for children, but one which in fact makes women far less dependent on men than they have previously been.

In England, for example, the state's reluctance to relieve the family of its responsibility for dependants was clearly evident in pre-war welfare policies. The Poor Law Act of 1927 mandated: 'It shall be the duty of the father, grandfather, mother, grandmother, husband or child of the poor, old, blind, lame, or impotent person or other person not able to work if possessed of sufficient means, to relieve and maintain such a person.'⁸³ On the other hand, since 1948 financial dependence has been assumed solely between husband and wife and parents and minor children. Children are no longer legally required to support their elderly parents, and parents are not responsible for their incapacitated adult children.

So far from reinforcing the male breadwinner family, some early welfare provisions refused to recognize that men *had* dependants. The National Insurance Act of 1911 provided sickness and unemployment benefit only for the male worker and not for his wife or children. Today in England, benefits make allowance for a man's, though not a married woman's, dependants.⁸⁴ Did the pre-war policies encourage female independence? Or did they simply further impoverish working-class women's lives?

Similarly, it makes little sense to argue that widow's pensions encourage women to rely on men rather than prepare to be self-supporting. Widow's pensions were demanded to meet the needs of older women and women with children who already could not support themselves. In the US at the turn of the century, roughly one out of every five husbands was dead before the age of forty-five.⁸⁵ Yet, also at this time, the vast majority of working-class wives did not work for wages outside their homes. Prior to the development of pensions, women were not more likely to be 'self-sufficient', but widows were more impoverished, more insecure, more burdened.

Despite the obvious need of abandoned women with children, before World War II, both British and US governments were very reluctant to provide adequate support. Generally, opponents argued in terms of the need to prevent desertion and to force men to shoulder their responsibilities. But it should be remembered that, rhetoric notwithstanding, full support for women with children would have been expensive, and governments no doubt feared that deserted women and children would become permanent burdens on the community instead

⁸³ McIntosh, p. 167.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

⁸⁵ Smuts, *op. cit.* pp. 51-54.

of on the men in their families—brothers, fathers, uncles, etc.⁸⁶ A 1909 Commission on the Poor Laws reported that ‘relatively low relief is granted and the mother is expected to earn something in addition.’⁸⁷ In the US also, husbandless women with children received meagre assistance or none. Aid to Dependent Children, established in New Deal legislation in 1934, paid benefits to children but not support to mothers. Even so, it was hedged with so many eligibility restrictions that it was available only to a small minority of the women in need.⁸⁸ Again, did these policies encourage women to remain on their own? Or would they not have made women even more anxious to find another male breadwinner?

In contrast since World War II, the trend in both the US and Britain has been to provide a minimal state subsistence allowing mothers of young children to stay home. Benefits are inadequate but they do tend to reduce womens dependance on men.⁸⁹

Finally, Barrett’s approach to the relationship between the welfare state and the family gives too much weight to functionalist and conspiratorial views. It contradicts her own conclusion that the state is a ‘site of struggle’.⁹⁰ Neither Barrett nor the major sources on which she bases her claim that the bourgeoisie had a pressing political interest in remaking the working-class family in its own image⁹¹ demonstrate that welfare reforms which helped the working class to maintain its families originated with, or found widespread political support within, capitalist circles. The common contention that advanced elements of the bourgeoisie supported the welfare state in order to guarantee the reproduction of the working class (Hartmann) or conservatize and divide it remains substantially unproved. It must be shown not only that some individuals spoke of the need for the state to step in—this is the bulk of the ‘evidence’ to date—but also that they envisioned something other than a meagre supplement, grudgingly given, which they were willing to grant in the absence of a serious working-class political challenge. Confronted with the alternative of a potentially revolutionary working-class movement, some capitalists *were* willing to support some welfarist concessions—hardly proof that capitalists wanted or preferred such policies for the achievement of their own economic or political aims.

The welfare state is a major arena of class struggle, within limits imposed by capitalist relations of production. Those limits can accom-

⁸⁶ Blanche D. Coll, *Perspectives on Public Welfare*, U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1969, pp. 13–15, 54.

⁸⁷ Barret, p. 232.

⁸⁸ W. Norton Grubb and Marvin Lazerson, *Broken Promises: How Americans Fail Their Children*, New York 1982, pp. 190–191, 200; on the ‘employable mother’ rule, low level of payments, restrictive eligibility: Coll, pp. 77–81.

⁸⁹ In the US, still, very few intact families receive support. Grubb and Lazerson, p. 199.

⁹⁰ Barrett, p. 246.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 222–223. For a nuanced presentation of this position which recognizes the contradictory tendency within capitalism to undermine the traditional family-household, see Irene Breugel, ‘What Keeps the Family Going?’, *International Socialism*, Series 2, no. 1 (July 1978).

moderate substantial reforms. However, these reforms have not been handed down from above as part of a strategy to impose the bourgeois family form on the working class. Welfare state policies have been achieved as political concessions to working-class movements and middle-class reformers. On the other hand, to regard the welfare state as a direct expression of working-class needs would be to ignore the constraints within which reform movements have operated. It is obviously beyond the scope of this article to show precisely how different social forces interacted to shape the modern welfare state. But it is necessary to emphasize that despite important gains in the most advanced capitalist societies, welfare provisions have been hedged with restrictions and only establish a bare subsistence floor for working-class living.

As political outcomes, state policies have necessarily reflected the balance of power, not only between classes, but between men and women in the working class. Insofar as state policies aim to shore up rather than substitute for the family/household system, this is, in part, because men have been better organized within the working-class movement. Men's point of view, men's needs, and men's assessment of priority demands have dominated the struggle: for example, state-supported quality childcare at the bottom of the agenda, high wages for men at the top. But more fundamentally, we would argue, the capitalist class has consistently resisted expanding state responsibility for children and other dependent persons. While recognizing the need to provide for the poor in order to retain legitimacy and to control the lower orders, the ruling class is also quite concerned to maintain work incentives. State subsidy above a bare minimum threatens to draw the sting of unemployment and undermine labour discipline. Protection of capitalist accumulation demands, therefore, a welfare policy that is cheap (does not cut into profits) and minimal (does not undercut the necessity to labour).⁹²

Middle-class reformers, always anxious to defend their programmes in terms of the long-run needs of the capitalist system, often spoke as representatives of the capitalist class, but we should not confuse them with their rulers. The reformers' vision of the welfare state, often elitist and technocratic, sought through education and the conditional provision of support to encourage the working-class family to achieve the 'male breadwinner/female housewife' standard. Like the reformist labour leaders who emphasized that they were not denying the employers' property rights but asking for the workers' fair share, so middle-class reformers affirmed the bourgeois ideals of self-reliance and the work ethic at the same time as they insisted that individuals had a claim on the community, when they were in need, due to forces beyond their control.⁹³ Despite these assurances, the capitalist class

⁹² Grubb and Lazerson, p. 190; Coll, p. 15; Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, *Regulating the Poor: The Function of Public Welfare*, New York: 1971, Chapters 1 and 4.

⁹³ While disagreeing with his overall interpretation, we agree with Zaretsky's characterization of middle-class reform ideology. Eli Zaretsky, 'The Place of the Family in the Origins of the Welfare State,' in *Rethinking the Family: Some Feminist Questions*, ed. Barrie Thorne with Marilyn Yalom, New York 1982, pp. 188–224.

remained substantially unmoved—in both England and the US through the inter-war years, the working-class family and the women in it continued to bear the burden of dependants unaided by the state.

In the face of this array of forces, we can understand how the demand for the family wage and for a welfare policy supplementing rather than replacing the family as the primary site for the care of dependants might have arisen within the working class. State services have always been seriously underfunded and understaffed, therefore of poor quality, bureaucratic and inaccessible to their clients. As a result, working-class people have had a fundamentally ambivalent attitude toward state substitutes for home care. Moreover, because a thoroughly socialized system of care is enormously expensive and apparently out of reach, a welfare programme which substitutes for the family only temporarily appears to be a more realistic and pragmatic goal . . . and one that can win support from middle-class allies.

We do not wish to deny that broader ideological assumptions affected the direction of reform demands. The bourgeois ideal of individual self-reliance and the patriarchal ideal of the male breadwinner surely informed many working people's vision of the good life. Nonetheless, we would also contend that the strength of these ideals can only be accounted for in the context of the social and political forces that marginalized alternative visions—most particularly the circumstances in which very militant and generalized working-class struggles were necessary to make even small gains toward state support for the reproduction of the working class. In the face of this consistent resistance, the working class, including working-class women, has been forced to choose *not* between programmes which acknowledge community responsibility for all dependent people and those which merely supplement a system of privatized familial care, but between a welfare state which assumes the male-breadwinner family and no state help at all.

The Role of Gender Ideology

The crux of Barrett's analysis is that the development of women's oppression in capitalism must ultimately be laid at the door of ideology. The ideology of gender, quite simply put, shaped capitalist social relations of production. Barrett makes this clear in a number of passages. For example, writing of protective legislation: 'Protective legislation represented a material defeat of the interests of working women and, furthermore, a defeat that is not simply explicable in terms of a proposed logic of capitalist development. It involved an assumption, shared by the labour movement among others, that the relegation of women to domesticity and childcare was natural and desirable. In this respect the eventual outcome was the product of an ideology of gender division that was incorporated into the capitalist division of labour rather than generated by it.'⁹⁴ As we suggested earlier, gender ideology is Barrett's *deus ex machina*, her means of escape from the vexing dilemma of the Marxist-reductionist/dual

⁹⁴ Barrett, pp. 137–138.

systems-idealist impasse of socialist feminist thought. However, to give gender ideology so determining a role without slipping into an idealist formulation requires that certain questions be answered. What, for example, is the relationship between this ideology and others? Is it alone so autonomous and determining, or do all ideologies have this capacity? How is gender ideology produced and reproduced, and what allows its autonomy? What, if anything, is the material basis of gender ideology?

Barrett attempts answers to some of these questions, but, in our view, with little success. She suggests that gender identity is created 'in an ideology of family life' rather than within actual concrete families, and is 'continually recreated and endorsed, modified or even altered substantially, through a process of ideological representation.'⁹⁵ But how exactly one appropriates gender identity and how it is reinforced or transformed in adult life, remain untheorized. Barrett argues that gender ideology is culturally reproduced through mechanisms of stereotyping, compensation, collusion and recuperation.⁹⁶ But where exactly these mechanisms are located, why they occur, and how they affect the process by which individuals develop a gender identity, remain unclear.

Ultimately, Barrett treats the appropriation of gender ideology as the relatively passive internalization of an already defined set of ideas about men and women that exists at the level of 'culture'. This seems clear in her explanation of the adoption of 'familial ideology' by the working-class. She argues that this ideology has little connection to actual social relations. 'Familial ideology' is at odds with the working-class household structure in which women provide necessary income; moreover, 'familial ideology' serves no individual interests—i.e. holding such ideas meets no one's needs.⁹⁷ In this approach, ideology can only be conceived as a mysterious, powerful, unchanging phenomenon—one that imposes itself upon individuals who accept it passively and for reasons that are really not very clear.

In our view, ideology and consciousness are processes in which individuals actively, creatively engage. The 'imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence' is the work of human creativity.⁹⁸ Thus we would argue that gender ideology, like all ideology, is rooted in and shaped by women's and men's actual experience and practice in everyday life. We agree with Barrett that the relationship between experience and consciousness, between social relations and ideology, is not an unmediated one. To define the relative autonomy of ideology is precisely to decipher these mediations. However, such explorations must be placed within a general framework of levels of determination—of the limits to 'autonomy'—if we are not to risk granting powers to ideology that we did not originally intend. One

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 205, 108.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 205, 213–225.

⁹⁸ The quote is, of course, Althusser's in 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' in *Lenin and Philosophy*, New York 1971, p. 162.

way to understand these levels of determination is to place the creative process of ideological construction within historically defined limits. Historically developed social relations construct the possibilities within which women and men imagine and order their existence.

For example, the determined nature of the sexual division of labour and the family-household system in the 19th and early-20th centuries entailed that the ideas of 'male breadwinner'—'female childrearer/dependant' (the key components in Barrett's 'familial ideology') were not really negotiable. These ideas retained their force precisely because they were underpinned by an inescapable social reality. Because the family-household system imposed itself on individuals with unrelenting logic, women and men had to take these social relationships into account when forming their ideas about themselves and their world. This was true not only for the bourgeoisie but also for the working class.

However, the very intricate, complex web of ideas constituting gender ideology that was in continual process of definition and redefinition during the 19th century cannot be explained solely by reference to necessary social relations. This is easily seen in the case of 19th-century bourgeois gender ideology. Many excellent works in middle-class women's history have recently been written by feminist historians who argue that the bourgeois ideology of domesticity was not simply imposed upon women but was in good part shaped by women themselves. In this way they created a world view, out of circumstances not of their choosing, that explained their experience and was forged by their needs. For example, in her interesting essay on the origins of the Victorian sexual ideology of female 'passionlessness', Nancy Cott argues that this notion, initially tied to the rise of Evangelical religion, was pivotal in the transformation of the female image from sexual to moral being, and was embraced and further developed by women because it allowed for the construction of an improved view of women's character and social purpose.⁹⁹ This idea was, of course, just one element in a cluster of related ideas, loosely defined as the ideology of domesticity, that legitimized a host of varied social campaigns by middle-class women in the 19th century. These ideas, rather than merely reflecting social reality, helped to transform it by widening bourgeois women's spheres of influence and activity. In this sense, the creation of gender ideology is a continual social, political act.¹⁰⁰

However, this formidable creativity always rested upon the bedrock

⁹⁹ Nancy Cott, 'Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790–1850', *Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 4, 1979, pp. 210–236. Also see *The Bonds of Womanhood*, New Haven 1977; Linda Gordon, 'Voluntary Motherhood: The Beginnings of Feminist Birth Control Ideology in the U.S.', in *Clio's Consciousness Raised*, eds. Mary Hartman and Lois Banner, New York 1974, and *Woman's Body, Woman's Right*, New York 1976; Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class*, Cambridge 1981; and Kathryn Kish Sklar's masterful *Catherine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity*, New York 1976.

¹⁰⁰ It is beyond the scope of the present article to assess the potential contribution that can be made to understanding gendered subjectivity by psychoanalysis but we believe this to be underestimated by Barrett.

of a seemingly inescapable sexual division of labour. During the 19th century feminists and anti-feminists alike accepted the notion of 'dual spheres'; feminists based their demands for greater social and familial power in part on the importance of women's domestic/mothering role. Nineteenth-century feminists could not escape the seeming inevitability of domesticity. Only in the 20th century did feminists really begin to challenge the sexual division of labour itself—particularly in childrearing and domestic labour. But then again, only in this century has the possibility of transforming the sexual division of labour become real.

Conclusion

We have argued that historically developed capitalist class relations of production, in combination with the biological facts of reproduction, set up a powerful dynamic toward the family-household system, assuring women's continued subordination to men and their exaggerated vulnerability to capitalist exploitation. While emphasizing that women's oppression in capitalism emerged from the confrontation between the demands of capitalist accumulation and the structures of human reproduction, our analysis, nevertheless, places the self-organization of women and the development of a working-class women's movement at its centre. For while capitalist development in the 20th century has laid the basis for alternatives to the family-household system, the implementation of these requires political struggle. Capitalist class relations, especially the drive for profit, will continue to push in the direction of privatizing reproduction and forcing the working-class family to shoulder responsibility for its dependants. It is this tendency, and the inability of the working class thus far to counter it significantly, that underlies the persistence of the sexual division of labour and gender inequality.

Thus, gender divisions are not so much embedded in the capitalist division of labour or relations of production, as produced by a complex balance of forces at a given point in the history of capitalism. Most crucial among these are the development of the forces of production, the organization of the working class, the self-organization of women, the state of the economy. Any significant alteration in working-class women's position requires the expansion of collective responsibility for dependants—especially children. Because the current system benefits men, at least in the short-run, a change depends upon the capacity of the feminist movement to shape working-class struggle to include such a vision. Thus it appears to us that Marx and Engels were correct about a tendency toward sexual equalization with capitalism. Of course, sexual equality within capitalism is not the same as women's liberation; that would require the transcendence of capitalism. Nor do we contend that equalization is an inevitable consequence of capitalist development. Rather, we view capitalism as a dynamic system, changing the conditions of daily life and making possible new forms of struggle and consciousness. The outcome of its history, and ours, will be shaped by political struggle for which we need to understand its contradictory tendencies.