

## Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism

### Domestic-Labour Debate

A: al-mas'ala al-ḡauhariya fī al-falsafa. –  
G: Hausarbeitsdebatte. – F: débat sur le travail  
ménager. – R: diskussia o domasney rabote. –  
S: debate sobre el trabajo doméstico. –  
C: zhexu de genben wenti 哲学的 根本问题

The 'domestic-labour debate' was one of the important controversies within Second, Wave feminism. In the late 1960s, North-American and British women's liberationists, mostly socialist-feminist in political perspective, launched an inquiry into 'domestic labour'. In their usage, the term referred to the unpaid housework and child-care performed in private family households by women family members, especially wives and mothers. Theorising domestic labour and its relationship to the reproduction of labour-power would be key, these feminists thought, to understanding women's subordination from a simultaneously feminist and Marxist perspective. The voluminous literature produced in this international effort became known as the domestic-labour debate.

1. In pursuit of an analysis of domestic labour and the reproduction of labour-power, feminists studied Marxist texts and wrestled with Marxist concepts. Two passages, written nearly forty years apart, seemed of particular importance. The first, from the never-published *German Ideology* of 1846, occurred in the course of **Marx's** and **Engels's** discussion of the family as the site at which individuals are maintained and reproduced. 'The production of life, both of one's own in labour and of fresh life in procreation, now appears as a twofold relation: on the one hand as a natural, on the other as a social relation' (*MECW* 5, 37). The second passage was from the preface to

**Engels's** 1884 *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. Here, **Engels** wrote of two kinds of production proceeding in parallel, 'on the one side, the production of the means of existence... on the other side, the production of human beings themselves' (*MECW* 26, 131). Although the thesis of a two-fold production of things and people was not taken up later by the socialist movement, 1970s socialist feminists found it irresistible. Several factors contributed to the attraction: first, it emphasised the importance of activities for which women held major responsibility; second, it implied that the process of the production of human beings has not only an autonomous character but also a theoretical importance equal to that of the production of things; and third, it seemed to authorise feminist efforts to theorise domestic labour and to build an autonomous women's movement.

**Marx's** *Capital* also drew the attention of domestic-labour theorists, for it suggested links between wages and domestic labour, the reproduction of labour-power, and household structure. As with every commodity, the price of labour-power fluctuates around its value. At the individual level, 'the value of labour-power is the value of the means of subsistence necessary for the maintenance of the labourer'. Uniquely, this value involves 'a historical and moral element' so that at any given historical moment there is a socially established normal level of subsistence. Because the worker is mortal, moreover, the means of subsistence that corresponds to labour-power's value 'must include the means necessary for the labourer's substitutes, i.e., his children' (*MECW* 35, 180). For example, the introduction of machinery, 'by throwing every member of the [worker's] family onto the labour market, spreads the value of the man's labour-power over his whole

family. It thus depreciates his labour-power' (*MECW* 35, 398). Marx's discussions of 'relative surplus population' and the 'industrial reserve army' appeared pertinent to the domestic-labour debate as well, for they placed the reproduction of the working class at the centre of overall capitalist social reproduction.

**Lenin** also had something to say of relevance to the domestic-labour debate. In discussing women's subordination, he focused on the core role of household labour in perpetuating women's oppression. Peasant and proletarian women are overwhelmed by 'domestic slavery', subjugated 'by the savage demands of kitchen and nursery drudgery' (*LCW* 29, 429). After 1917, **Lenin** noted that despite 'all the laws emancipating woman, she continues to be a domestic slave, because petty housework crushes, strangles, stultifies and degrades her, chains her to the kitchen and the nursery, and she wastes her labour on barbarously unproductive, petty, nerve-racking, stultifying and crushing drudgery' (*ibid.*). **Lenin's** emphasis on the material rather than ideological basis of women's subordination was highly unusual for the period.

2. Unbeknownst to most, the 1970s domestic-labour debate had a direct predecessor in a controversy within the US Communist Party. In *In Woman's Defense* (1940) and subsequent polemics, CPUSA member Mary **Inman** explored the complexities of women's oppression under capitalism. For **Inman**, women's oppression had multiple aspects, cultural and psychological as well as economic, political, and legal. Most relevant to the domestic-labour debate, **Inman** asserted that women's housework and childrearing produces present and future labour-power; that is, she claimed unpaid family labour participates in an independent form of production and, indeed, that it is productive labour for capital. **Inman's** arguments were at first favourably reviewed in CPUSA circles, but the CP soon repudiated the analysis and **Inman** resigned from the Party. According to K. **Weigand** (2001), her work nonetheless influenced women party members and, eventually, its postwar work with women. Meanwhile, **Inman** continued

to advocate for her positions, writing myriad letters and articles addressed to the Left, privately publishing *Two Forms of Production* (1964), following the burgeoning women's liberation movement, and even having some direct contact with young socialist feminists in California. It may be that the domestic-labour debate was somehow directly influenced by **Inman** and her work. More likely, the influence was indirect, transmitted in some manner through the earlier impact of her ideas within the CP.

The domestic-labour debate took the form of a series of papers, often widely disseminated and discussed long before publication. In the late 1960s, Margaret **Benston**, a US citizen living in Vancouver, Canada, and Peggy **Morton**, a Canadian feminist based in Toronto, circulated essays that launched the debate. In many ways echoing **Inman**, they identified family households as sites of production and housework and childrearing as labour processes. For **Benston**, women's secondary status has an 'economic' or 'material' root in women's unpaid domestic labour within the family. Women are 'that group of people who are responsible for the production of simple use-values in those activities associated with the home and family' (**Benston** 1969, 16). Hence the family is an economic unit whose primary function is not consumption, as was generally thought at the time, but production. **Morton's** article criticised and extended **Benston's** analysis. She sees the family 'as a unit whose function is the maintenance of and reproduction of labor power' (**Morton** 1971, 214), meaning that 'the task of the family is to maintain the present work force and provide the next generation of workers, fitted with the skills and values necessary for them to be productive members of the work force' (**Morton** 1971, 215-6) In this way, **Morton** tied her analysis of the family to the workings of the capitalist mode of production, and focused on the contradictions experienced by working-class women within the family, in the labour force, and between the two roles. Her discussion of the contradictory tendencies in women's situation introduced a dynamic element that had been missing from **Benston's** approach.

An article by Mariarosa **Dalla Costa**, published simultaneously in Italy and the United States in 1972, took the argument several steps further. Polemicalising against both traditional left views and the literature of the women's liberation movement, **Dalla Costa** argued that housework only appears to be outside the arena of capitalist production. In reality, it produces not just use-values for direct consumption but also the essential commodity labour-power. Indeed, she claimed, housewives are exploited 'productive workers' in the strict sense, for they produce surplus-value. Appropriation of this surplus-value is accomplished by the capitalist's payment of a wage to the working-class husband, who thereby becomes the instrument of woman's exploitation. Domestic labour is thus a 'masked form of productive labor' (**Dalla Costa** 1972, 34). **Dalla Costa** proposed two strategic options: first, mobilise working-class housewives around the wagelessness of housework, the denial of sexuality, the separation of family from outside world, and the like; second, reject work altogether; women have worked enough and they must 'refuse the myth of liberation through work' (**Dalla Costa** 1972, 47). – The polemical energy and political range of **Dalla Costa's** article had a substantial impact on the women's liberation movement on both sides of the Atlantic. Unlike **Benston**, **Morton**, and other North-American writers, **Dalla Costa** seemed to have a sophisticated grasp of Marxist theory and socialist politics. Even more than **Benston** and **Morton**, she had situated the question of women's oppression within an analysis of the role of their unpaid domestic labour in the reproduction of capitalist social relations. Moreover, since her analysis functioned as the theoretical foundation for a small but aggressive movement to demand wages for housework, it offered an attractive connection to political practice.

As the domestic-labour debate developed, discussion centered on three problems: the nature of the product of domestic labour; whether domestic labour is productive or unproductive; and the relationship of domestic labour to capitalist social reproduction and oppositional activism. Two general positions

emerged. One claimed that the product of domestic labour is the commodity labour-power, bearing both use-value and exchange-value. This could be taken to imply that domestic labour is productive of surplus-value and that those who do domestic labour – women – are exploited. In this way, sex contradictions acquire a clear material basis and housewives occupy the same strategic position in the class struggle as factory workers. The second position maintained that domestic labour produces only use-values for direct consumption by household members, including the worker, and thereby contributes to the overall maintenance and renewal of the working class. Neither productive nor unproductive, domestic labour had to be theorised as something else, an undertaking few attempted. Likewise, this theoretical position had no obvious direct correlate in oppositional political strategy.

3. The domestic-labour debate was from the beginning an international phenomenon (**Hamilton/Barrett** 1986 and **Armstrong/Armstrong** 1990 provide an overview of England and Canada). In France, it was conducted with great vehemence. Already in the narrow circle of theoretical feminist journals there were at least two contrary positions. 1) The work of housewives is unproductive, because it creates no surplus-value and does not occur directly under the command of capital. Precisely because it socialises for the capitalist production process in its backwardness, it should be abolished, socialised. A political strategy had to be developed which would analyse the patriarchal oppression system with its basis, the family, also with the goal of abolishing the family. The representatives of this position referred extensively to **Marx** and **Engels**, and also to **Lenin**. This position in France found itself in opposition to the official politics of the Communist Party, even though it was proposed by women from the Party. Since the argumentation of the French Communist Party resembled that of the other Western-European Communist Parties, there were feminist rebellions in all these parties. 2) In the main currents of the French

Communist Party, domestic labour in its private form was not placed in question in principle. Rather, equal division among the genders of domestic labour and technical alleviation was advocated, which would thus make professional activity and family life compatible for women. Danièle **Leger** (1982) argued that, in this way, the connection of content and form of labour would be broken and the family and its position in the totality of the relations of production would be naturalised.

The idea was also diffused that domestic labour constituted its own mode of production. Christine **Delphy** (1984), for example, proposed the conception that housewives produce no surplus-value. This did not mean, however, that women were excluded from the overall economy, but rather, that they only had greater difficulties in selling themselves freely (in the sense of the free wage-labourer) on the market. They did not possess their own labour-power, which belonged, rather, to the family. This was, in turn, connected to the capitalist mode of production as an independent mode of production. She thus concluded that women were to be mobilised as a class against men.

In the GDR, there was a much noted discussion with the chief thesis that women create less value as soon as they enter the market because a part of their labour-power is employed for the reproduction of male labour-power, which is thus unnoticeable as capitalist extra surplus-value. This argument was summarised by Sigrid **Pohl** (1983), not with the strategy, for example, of demanding wages for domestic labour, but of abolishing the sphere of extra profits, since it perpetuated the capitalist system together with its discrimination against female wages.

The domestic-labour debate also reached the countries of the 'Third World'. Beginning from examples of domestic production in India, Gabrielle **Dietrich** (1984), for example, rejected arguments from Western feminism as inadequate; despite this, she emphasised that the socialist movements in the entire world would lose female members if they were not capable of taking up the questions thrown up

in the domestic-labour debate in a renewed Marxism.

The burgeoning domestic-labour literature seemed initially to confirm, even legitimate, socialist feminists' double commitment to women's liberation and socialism. Before long, however, a range of problems surfaced. Concepts and categories that had initially seemed self-evident lost their stability. For example, the meaning of the category 'domestic labour' fluctuated. Did it refer simply to housework? Or did it include childbearing and childcare as well? Circular arguments were common, as when domestic labour was identified with women's work, thereby assuming the sexual division of labour theorists wished to explain. In addition, the debate's almost exclusive concern with unpaid household labour discounted the importance of women's paid labour, whether as domestic servants or wage-workers. And its focus on the economic seemed to overlook pressing political, ideological, psychological, and sexual issues. Women's liberationists also found the abstractness of the domestic-labour literature frustrating. The debate developed in ways that were not only hard to follow but also far from activist concerns. Concepts appeared to interact among themselves without connection to the empirical world.

4. The domestic-labour debate of the 1970s addressed two distinct audiences: feminists, especially socialist feminists, and the Left. By the end of the decade, most feminists concluded that the debate had been a misguided undertaking. Heidi **Hartmann** captured their disappointment in an immensely influential paper, 'The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism', whose first version began circulating in 1975. Noting that 'the categories of Marxism are sex-blind', **Hartmann** proposed that two theoretical paradigms be adopted. 'Both Marxist analysis, particularly its historical and materialist method, and feminist analysis, especially the identification of patriarchy as a social and historical structure, must be drawn upon' (**Hartmann** 1981, 2–3). This 'dual-systems' approach postulated a partnership of capitalism and patriarchy, each analysable by a distinct theoretical method.

From this perspective, the domestic-labour debate's effort to bridge the boundary between the two systems made little sense.

The idea of two different systems – capitalism and patriarchy – soon became hegemonic in socialist-feminist theorising. Yet this meant that Marxist theory remained untouched by feminist insight. As Iris Marion **Young** put it, 'dual systems theory allows traditional Marxism to maintain its theory of production relations, historical change, and analysis of the structure of capitalism in a basically unchanged form. . . . Thus, not unlike traditional Marxism [it] tends to see the question of women's oppression as merely an additive to the main questions of Marxism' (**Young** 1981, 49). In any case, women's movement agendas were bursting with other theoretical and practical matters and interest in socialist feminism, much less domestic-labour theorising, dramatically declined.

In the 1980s, audiences for domestic-labour theorising contracted further. Playing a role in the downturn, certainly, were the increasingly conservative political climate and the decline or destruction of many radical social movements. Feminist intellectual work managed to advance, even prosper, but with far fewer links than earlier to women's movement activism. Surviving on college and university campuses, its practitioners encountered a range of disciplinary constraints and professional pressures. Younger generations of feminist scholars had missed, moreover, the chance to participate in a radical women's movement rooted in the upheavals of the 1960s.

Despite the retrenchments of the 1980s and 1990s, a certain level of interest in theorising domestic labour has persisted. Where there are relatively strong traditions of Marxist theory, for one reason or another, small communities of economists, sociologists, and historians, male as well as female, have continued to address questions descended from those posed in the domestic-labour debate literature. Working within a Marxist framework, they offer a range of approaches that resist dual-systems analyses, on the one hand, and class-first theorising, on the other. The tone was perhaps set in Maxine **Molyneux's** 'Beyond

the Domestic Labour Debate', which argues for a redirection of the socialist-feminist discussion along two paths. First, interest in domestic labour should move away from the abstract level of the mode of production towards the more concrete 'level of determinate social formations and their reproduction' (**Molyneux** 1979, 22). Second, theoretical inquiry should enlarge its object of analysis beyond domestic labour, since women's subordination 'cannot be reduced to economic or material factors alone' (**Molyneux** 1979, 22). A continuing stream of articles and books show that both directions have been pursued.

In England, for example, Miriam **Glucksmann** undertook the more empirical of the two suggested routes. In *Women Assemble*, she examines how industrial restructuring between the Wars ultimately impacted upon British women's postwar position within both household and wage economies. For **Glucksmann**, 'structural changes in commodity production . . . can be explained adequately only by reference to the concomitant changes taking place both within the domestic economy and between the domestic economy and commodity production' (**Glucksmann** 1990, 28). More generally, she proposes that her method of analysis could be applied to other historical cases. That is, 'the abstract question of the relation between gender and class division can be answered in terms of particular cases. An accumulation of these will aid in the formulation of a more general theory' (**Glucksmann** 1990, 274).

Two recent studies, both by economists, incorporate discussions of the domestic-labour debate within larger overviews of the literature on women and capitalism. In *Women's Employment and the Capitalist Family* (1992), Ben **Fine** rejects the presumed opposition between Marxism and feminism as well as the analytical schizophrenia of dual-systems theory. He criticises the earlier literature for an Althusserian structuralism that shaped its limitations. Unable to confront its problems, 'the domestic labour debate simply expired, with a flurry of often unflattering obituary notices' (17). **Fine** argues for a renewed Marxist-feminist effort. Jean **Gardiner**, in *Gender, Care, and Economics* (1997) is less sanguine about such

an effort, but offers a valuable survey and evaluation of the domestic-labour debate. For **Gardiner**, the debate was ‘an ambitious project launched from a weak, unresourced and marginalized base of Marxist feminist intellectuals’ (97). It was able to clarify the issues that needed examination but it could not overcome its own failings.

Those who continue into the 1990s and beyond to use concepts associated with the domestic-labour debate often do so without reference to the need to clarify and correct the debate’s earlier weaknesses. Domestic labour, for example, is still taken to be something whose site, agents, and content are self-evident. Reproduction, a concept with meanings within several distinct intellectual traditions that were at first the subject of much discussion (see **Edholm, Harris and Young** 1977; **Beechey** 1979; **Himmelweit** 1983), has acquired a generic significance. Likewise, the notion of reproduction of labour-power has become surprisingly elastic, stretching from biological procreation to any kind of work that contributes to people’s daily maintenance, whether it be paid or unpaid, in private households, in the market, or in the workplace. The new phrase, ‘reproductive labour’, now often covers a wide range of activities contributing to the renewal of people, including emotional and intellectual as well as manual labour, and waged as well as unwaged work. Evelyn Nakano **Glenn** summarises these developments (**Glenn** 1992, 4).

Lise **Vogel** (1983, 2000) attempts to incorporate domestic labour within a significant reconstruction of Marxist political economy. For example, she positions domestic labour as a second, hitherto hidden, component of necessary labour and thus a category specific to capitalism. Alongside the necessary labour discussed by **Marx** (renamed ‘the social component of necessary labour’) lurks a second, hitherto hidden, ‘domestic component of necessary labour, or domestic labour’ – the unwaged work that contributes to the daily and long-term renewal of bearers of the commodity labour-power and of the working class as a whole (162). Although domestic labour lacks value, it is indispensable, together with

the social component of necessary labour, to surplus-value appropriation and capitalist social reproduction.

Brief though it was, the domestic-labour debate had an important and longlasting impact. Its identification of private households as production, not consumption, units, significantly shifted the framework within which women’s activities were analysed. Using categories borrowed or derived from Marxist political economy, domestic-labour theorists began the work of delineating as labour processes the unpaid housework and child-care performed in private households by family members. More broadly, the domestic-labour literature sought to place domestic labour and the reproduction of labour-power in the context of capitalist social reproduction, specifying a range of tendencies and contradictions. And, along with other developments (e.g. women’s rising labour-force participation; the emergence of strong women’s movements; mainstream economists’ interest in households and human capital), it helped to both make domestic labour socially visible as work and put it onto the public policy agenda. The domestic-labour debate sought to move women from the analytical periphery to the heart of Marxist theorising about capitalism. Domestic-labour theorists were thus among the first to begin exploring the limitations of then-current Marxist theory and to intuit the coming crisis of Marxism. Despite the domestic-labour debate literature’s considerable ambiguity and many loose ends, its challenge to feminist theory and to the tradition of Marxist political economy remains an unfinished project.

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capitalism, classes, crisis of Marxism, division of labour, family labour/ house work, feminisation of wage-labour, feminism, housewife, identity politics, labour, mode of production, patriarchy, production of life, productive/unproductive labour, reproductive labour, reproductive rights, student movement, surplus-value, women's movement, women's studies, working class

Arbeit, Arbeiterklasse, Arbeitsteilung, Familienarbeit/ Hausarbeit, Feminismus, Frauenbewegung, Frauenstudien, Hausfrau, Hausfrauisierung der Lohnarbeit, Identitätspolitik, Kapitalismus, Klassen, Krise des Marxismus, Mehrwert, Patriarchat, Produktion des Lebens, Produktionsweise, produktive/unproduktive Arbeit, Reproduktionsarbeit, reproduktive Rechte, Studentenbewegung.