

Debates and Reports

BEYOND PATRIARCHY: A CLASS-BASED EXPLANATION OF WOMEN'S SUBORDINATION

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Introduction

In the last five years or so, one of the major challenges to conventional thinking in geography has come from feminism. Feminist scholars have forced many geographers into an uneasy rethinking not only of their ways of seeing and analysing the world, but also into a re-examination of their daily practice in the academy and in the world at large. In the first part of their thought-provoking article in a recent edition of *Antipode*, Foord and Gregson (1986) have documented the ways in which feminist scholarship has altered the content of our discipline by its contribution to describing and explaining the key features of women's oppression in different parts of the advanced capitalist world and in other societies. Their survey provides an invaluable record of just how much progress has been made in the last few years. However, it also reveals the difficulties involved in rethinking basic concepts in the context of a rapidly changing debate about the bases of women's oppression: a debate which of necessity has been held off-stage for most geographers.

In the second part of their paper, Foord and Gregson indicated some of the main features of the theoretical debates that have absorbed feminists and are (rightly) critical of the ways in which feminist geographers have both utilised and contributed to ideas about gender roles and relations. In particular, Foord and Gregson argued that the attempts by socialist feminists to unify marxist and feminist theories are fundamentally misplaced.

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Unity or Separation?

Foord and Gregson suggest that the way forward for feminist geographers, and feminists as a whole, lies in a reconceptualization of patriarchy based on a realist philosophy of science. Their approach basically is a variant of dual systems theory. They argued that theoretically capitalism and patriarchy are fundamental and separable structures in advanced capitalist societies, albeit intercut in reality in a variety of complex ways in time and space. Utilising the methods of realism, they attempted to demonstrate that the necessary relations of patriarchy, defined as men's subordination of women, consist of biological reproduction and heterosexuality and that these should be theorised separately from the necessary relations of capitalism. In this paper I want to address the issues they raise in this latter part of their article as I have fundamental disagreements with their approach. Far from seeing gender relations in general, or patriarchy in particular, as a separate structure, I want to argue that women's oppression in capitalist societies needs to be explained by a class analysis, at the *theoretical* as well as at the empirical level. Unlike Foord and Gregson, I do not accept that child bearing and heterosexuality can be theorised separately from an analysis of class relations in capitalist societies.

My main thesis is that the oppression of women is based on the role that women in the exploited class play as reproducers of labour power in a class society. This is based on Engels' extension of the relations of production to the relations of reproduction of people as well as the reproduction of the means of subsistence. However, rather than being based on the inheritance of property as Engels argued, the basis of women's subordination lies in the particular contradiction between the extraction of immediate surplus labour and the reproduction of labour power over time.

I have no argument with Foord and Gregson's contention that all social relations between people are based on a division of labour and that gender relations are founded in the 'nature given' biological differences between women and men: that only women are capable of child bearing and breast feeding. My main problem with Foord and Gregson's analysis is how they explain women's subordination. How they take the argument to use their terms, from gender relations to patriarchy, from the general nature of social relations between the sexes to the particular form of women's oppression under patriarchy. While they demonstrate by example how men (in general?) control, among other things,

women's fertility and sexuality, there was little indication in their discussion of *why* these oppressive relationships between women and men develop and are maintained. To explain this, we need to simultaneously understand the class relations between the exploited and the exploiters in capitalist societies, for unlike Foord and Gregson who assert that "the theoretical relation between capital and wage labour is contingent to an analysis of patriarchy" (p. 200), I believe it is central.

Women's oppression has a material basis. Patriarchal social relations are further strengthened by the political and ideological functions of the state that has a vested interest in supporting the domination of individual women in the exploited class by individual men in that class. I shall also argue that the oppression of women in the exploited class has a different origin to that of women in the capitalist class. The notion of a universal female experience is, in Angela Carter's words, "a clever confidence trick" (Carter, 1979: 12). As she vividly explains even the expression of our sexuality – identified by Foord and Gregson as of key significance in the struggle against oppression – has a material basis:

our flesh arrives to us out of history, like everything else does. We may believe we fuck stripped of social artifice; in bed, we even feel we touch the bedrock of human nature itself. But we are deceived. Flesh is not an irreducible human universal. Although the erotic relationship may seem to exist freely, on its own terms, among the distorted social relationships of a bourgeois society, it is, in fact, the most self-conscious of all human relationships, a direct confrontation of two beings whose actions in the bed are wholly determined by their acts when they are out of it . . .

Class dictates our choice of partners and our choice of positions . . . The nature of actual modes of sexual intercourse is determined by historical changes in less intimate human relations, just as the actual nature of men and women is capable of infinite modulations as social structures change. (Carter, 1979: 9–11)

In a class society, calls, such as that by Foord and Gregson, to "challenge patriarchal gender relations by constructing our (women's) own sexualities and our own relations of biological reproduction" (p. 205) have, in my opinion, no meaning.

The Economic Basis of Women's Oppression

There has been a long debate within socialist feminist theory about the potential for extending marxist categories to the analysis of women's specific oppression. Recent studies encompass what has become known as the domestic labour debate (Malos, 1980; Molyneux, 1979 and Seccombe, 1974), Firestone's (1970) analysis of reproduction, Delphy's (1977) work on men's control of their wives' labour power and Barrett's (1980) extension of Althusser's approach to ideology, as well as Engels' (1984) original analysis of the importance of property as the basis for women's subordination and early marxist writing on women in the wage labour system (for example Bebel, 1904). Rather than summarize this considerable body of literature and the critiques that have been published, I want here to outline an approach originally developed by Quick (1977) and extended by Vogel (1983) that seems to me to have great potential in unifying marxist and feminist analyses of production and reproduction and to offer a basis for geographical analyses of the empirical variety of women's experiences.

In common with most feminists, including Foord and Gregson, I shall argue that the basic site of women's oppression is in their role in social reproduction and in the reproduction of labour power, and in particular in their ability to bear children. Feminists have often been hesitant to introduce child bearing into their analysis as it appears to lead too easily to a biologically determinist position. However, this is easily countered once it is recognized that reproduction relations are social constructs. In all societies, at least those which have survived, some form of human reproduction is inevitable. The processes involved in the construction of gender relations are socially specific. Sexual relations and sexuality have no essential nature prior to their social construction but rather are shaped and controlled, as Foucault (1979) has demonstrated, by the social construction of categories and definitions and the set of institutions that arise to control sexual practices. As Foord and Gregson argued this is merely to state a truism. The real question that needs explanation is the particular form that these gender relations take.

In advanced capitalist societies, I would contend, gender relations can only be analysed as part of the capital-wage relation. They are not as Foord and Gregson argue contingently related structures but an integral part of explaining how labour power is reproduced, of how people become 'free' to sell their own labour power. The key to the explanation of the unity of capitalism and

patriarchy lies in an extension of Marx's concept of socially necessary labour.

In capitalist societies, as Marx showed, the working day is divisible into two components. Part of the time is spent by workers in producing value equivalent to the value of the commodities that must be purchased in order to reproduce labour power on a daily basis. This is by definition necessary labour. For the rest of the day, workers produce surplus value for capitalist accumulation for which they are not paid. For the individual worker, of course, there is no distinction between these two components of labour time and the wage appears to cover both.

However, as Vogel has argued, socially necessary labour itself is divisible into several components. For workers not only purchase commodities to ensure the daily and generational reproduction of labour power, but additional labour – domestic labour – must generally be performed to enable these commodities to be consumed. In addition necessary labour must inevitably include all labour performed in the maintenance and renewal not only of wage labourers themselves, but all those members of the exploited class not working as direct producers at any one time – the elderly, children, the sick and disabled and, crucially women engaged in child bearing and rearing. Thus the concept of necessary labour can be seen to include a number of distinct processes: first supplementary labour to enable basic necessities to be consumed in an appropriate form (in general meals have to be cooked, clothes mended and so on); secondly, labour to provide the means of subsistence for dependants and thirdly, labour to ensure the generational replacement of the subordinate class. Daily and generational replacement usually, although not necessarily, *takes the form of daily living and the raising of children in kin-based structures*. However, other forms of the social reproduction of labour power are possible, such as workers barracks under apartheid in South Africa, migrant labour and also children's homes, orphanages and other institutions.

Of these three aspects of socially necessary labour it is only the third – the generational replacement process – that depends on a gender division of labour. For children to be born, women must conceive, carry and deliver them. It is in women's differential role in this part of the reproduction of labour power that Quick and Vogel have located their oppression in class society. In the following Vogel elaborates on this point:

The argument hinges on the relationship of childbearing to the appropriation of surplus labor in class society.

Childbearing threatens to diminish the contribution a woman in the subordinate class can make as a direct producer and as a participant in necessary labor. Pregnancy and lactation involve, at the minimum, several months of somewhat reduced capacity to work. Even when a woman continues to participate in surplus production, childbearing therefore interferes to some extent with the immediate appropriation of surplus labor. Moreover, her labor is ordinarily required for the maintenance of labor power, and pregnancy and lactation may lessen a woman's capacity in this area as well. From the ruling class's short-term point of view, then childbearing potentially entails a costly decline in the mother's capacity to work, while at the same time requiring that she be maintained during the period of diminished contribution. In principle, some of the necessary labor that provides for her during that time might otherwise have formed part of the surplus labor appropriated by the ruling class. That is, necessary labor ordinarily has to increase somewhat to cover her maintenance during the childbearing period, implying a corresponding decrease in surplus labor. At the same time, childbearing is of benefit to the ruling class, for it must occur if the labor force is to be replenished through generational replacement. From the point of view of the dominant class, there is therefore a potential contradiction between its immediate need to appropriate surplus labor and its long-term requirement for a class to perform it (Vogel, 1983: 145).

This contradiction, it must be emphasized, lies at a theoretical level. The particular strategies that are implemented by the dominant class to ensure the minimum necessary labour while ensuring the reproduction of labour power are a site of class struggle. The actual arrangements in advanced capitalist societies tend to result in individual men in the exploited class being forced to provide the material means of subsistence for women during child bearing and lactation. By various means, the ruling class encourages male supremacy within the exploited class. Quick (1977: 47) has explained the logic behind this as follows:

Any attempt by women to appropriate to themselves more than is required for their subsistence is an indirect demand for part of the surplus appropriated by the rul-

ing class. Thus male authority over women is supported and even enforced by the ruling class. On the other hand, any attempt by men to evade their 'responsibilities' for the support of women is also resisted, within the confines of a system which relies on male supremacy. Men's control of means of subsistence greater than needed for their own reproduction on a day-to-day level is 'granted' to them only in order to enable them to contribute to the reproduction of their class.

Thus it is the "provision by men of the means of subsistence to women during the child bearing period, and not the sex division of labour itself, that forms the material basis for women's subordination in class society" (Vogel, 1979: 147). It is in this material dependence, in the ways in which the dominant class resolves the contradictions arising from the need to appropriate surplus labour, that women's oppression lies, rather than in, as Foord and Gregson seem to imply, the power of the penis *per se*. The social construction of male sexuality and the dominance of family forms based on sexuality and kinship networks in class societies are historical resolutions of the contradiction, rather than necessary elements of gender relations.

Whereas, in principle, women's and men's differential roles in the reproduction of labour power are of finite duration – the child bearing and lactation period – in reality the roles take a particular historic form that varies over time and between places. Women's responsibilities, in practice, extend to the maintenance as well as the reproduction of labour power. The different gender divisions of labour in the performance of necessary and surplus labour are a matter for empirical investigation.

The Tendency to Reduce Socially Necessary Labour

In most class societies, women also participate in surplus production as well as in necessary labour. As many feminists have documented (Beechey, 1977; Breugel, 1979) their participation in this sphere is influenced by their specific responsibilities and subordination in the tasks of necessary labour. Depending on the historical circumstances, women's participation in either or both spheres may be emphasized. Vogel has argued that at certain periods the ruling class's need to maximize surplus labour predominates and causes severe dislocation in the institutions of

family life and male dominance. She suggests that this was the case in industrializing England during the nineteenth century and is the case today in advanced capitalist countries. This is not an unopposed tendency and is an arena of struggle and negotiation between women and men and between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Research on the variety of ways in which these struggles are resolved should be a key area for feminist geography.

In general, in advance capitalist societies, the constant drive for accumulation and the commodification of all areas of life results in a tendency to reduce domestic labour. As a component of necessary labour, domestic labour potentially takes away from workers' commitment to performing surplus labour through participation in waged work. One of the major ways in which domestic labour has been reduced, or commodified, is by the replacement of many previously domestically-performed tasks and home-produced goods by capitalist equivalents. Fast food chains, laundries, ready made clothing are all areas where capitalist entrepreneurs are searching for profit. The state, too, has taken over responsibility for particular areas of previously domestic labour, for example public education and health care. However, in certain areas, the cost of both private and public services seems to be prohibitively high especially in the area of child-care services.

The reduction of domestic labour is also a contested area and there are important ideological as well as economic barriers to the complete socialization of domestic labour. There are many examples of working class men combining to exclude women from waged labour (Hall, 1982). Further Humphries (1977, 1981) has argued that the working class family, and the struggle for the family wage in the nineteenth century can be interpreted as a strategy of resistance to capitalist exploitation. Rose (1980) has argued in a similar vein about the value of home life and owner occupation. As Vogel points out:

As a component of necessary labor, domestic labor potentially takes away from the commitment workers can make to performing surplus labor through participation in wage work. Objectively, then, it competes with capital's drive for accumulation. If one tends one's own garden plot, chops one's own firewood, cooks one's own meals, and walks six miles to work, the amount of time and energy available for wage labor is less than if one buys food in a supermarket, lives in a

centrally heated apartment building, eats in restaurants, and takes public transportation to work (Vogel, 1979: 145–6).

The difficulty with these arguments is that, in isolation, they under-emphasize the subordination of women within the family, and also divisions within the working class. The family wage has been, and is, only available to certain sectors. Most working class households cannot survive on one wage. Rather than being a victory against capital, the family wage might more correctly be viewed as a concession made to certain sectors in return for political stability based on male dominance. When family forms are changing, and female-headed households are growing in number, demands for a family wage for men threaten women's position in the labour market and deepen gender divisions within the working class.

Women Against Men?

The working class family household should be seen as an historically evolving form where capitalist social reproduction is undertaken primarily by women. It has a key and contradictory role in capitalist accumulation as both a haven against exploitation but simultaneously a concentrated locus of antagonistic relations between women and men. Women's struggles against their isolation in the domestic sphere, against economic dependence on individual men, against the appropriation of their bodies, and their struggles to acquire political and social equality result in strong tensions within the family. In these circumstances women's subordination may appear to be solely an oppression by men, based on a transhistoric gender division of labour. However, I have argued here that it is rather the particular way in which working class women undertake the domestic labour necessary for capitalist social reproduction that is the key element in their oppression.

A final question to raise is the degree to which all women share common experiences of subordination in capitalist societies. Women in the ruling class are also subjected to male domination. Like working class women, they are denied full political and civil equality and experience the same ideological structures of male supremacy. These shared experiences lead to a degree of real solidarity between women across class lines. However, the position of women in the dominant and exploited classes is *theoretically*

distinct. Amongst the bourgeoisie, as Engels recognized, the key issue is the generational transmission of property. This is not to deny in any way the indubitable fact of all women's oppression in advanced capitalist societies. The demarcation between the so called 'women's sphere' of domestic labour and the 'men's sphere' of waged labour remains extremely powerful and the institutional structures of male supremacy are apparently so unyielding that as, Vogel (1979: 167–8) suggests, 'advanced capitalist societies have become . . . the first class societies in which differences between women and men societies appear to outweigh differences between the classes . . . Socialist feminists insist that Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis is not, in any real sense, a sister, but other distinctions tend to fade.' In fact, in current socialist – feminist work, the distinctions between women based on class and race (see for example, the 1986 editions of *Feminist Review*) have become a focus of analysis. The different ways in which women in different positions experience their oppression are now beginning to be documented.

Conclusions

Like Foord and Gregson, I have isolated biological reproduction of child bearing as the key element in women's subordination but, following Quick and Vogel, I have attempted to demonstrate that women's oppression is located in the relationship of child bearing to the appropriation of surplus labour in a class society.

The actual form and character of women's involvement in socially necessary and surplus labour, the structure of gender relations in the domestic sphere and in the labour market, and the institutional and individual bases of male supremacy are matters for empirical investigation. Feminist geographers have a key part to play here in uncovering the spatial and temporal variations in gender relations within and between class societies. In terms of their "long research agenda" (Foord and Gregson, 1986: 186) there are no disagreements between Foord and Gregson and myself. I also believe that issues such as sexuality, child rearing and men's violence against women should become part of the subject matter of geography. However, unlike Foord and Gregson, I believe that a class analysis of women's subordination situating it in the context of the overall reproduction of advanced capitalist societies leads to a more complete understanding than the theoretical separation of the exploitative institutions of patriarchy and capitalism.

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