

THE CAPITALIST FORM OF HOUSEHOLD PRODUCTION: SUBSIDY, ANACHRONISM, OR SOMETHING ELSE?

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ABSTRACT

Some Marxists now take for granted the notion that household production represents a necessary subsidy to the capitalist class—and as a consequence, that the commodity labour-power is paid less than its value. This contradicts the position taken by Michael Heinrich in *Die Wissenschaft vom Wert*, that workers are paid for the commodity labour-power at its value. In his rebuttal of this “subsidy” claim present in much of Marxist Feminism, Heinrich takes a wrong turn when he calls household production “a pre-capitalist relic.” In this response, I show that the capitalist form of household production is not an anachronism because it must include not only domestic labour but also commodities purchased with the wage. This interpretation strengthens Heinrich’s stance that household production is not a subsidy and the purchase of the commodity labour-power by capitalists involves an exchange of equivalents.

KEYWORDS

Household production; domestic labour; labour power; Marxist Feminism; commodities.

A short section of *Die Wissenschaft vom Wert* (1999 [1991]: 257-263), “*Labour-power – a completely ordinary commodity?*”¹, refutes several objections to Michael Heinrich’s stance that there is no contradiction between exploitation and the exchange of equivalents that takes place between capitalists and workers. In Marx’s analysis in *Capital*—against the interpretation of left Ricardians and traditional Marxists—workers are paid for the commodity they are selling at its value. The value of the commodity labour power is determined by the value of the set of commodities that the worker

¹ Unless otherwise noted, any translations from German are my own. Citations to *Die Wissenschaft vom Wert* are to the German second edition (1999 [1991]) rather than the Italian translation.

must buy to replenish his own commodity, an action that is inseparable from his effort to maintain his own life. According to this interpretation, surplus value is not the result of a discrepancy between the value of the commodity labour power and what is paid by the capitalist who buys it. Instead, surplus value can be understood as derived from the difference between the *value* of labour power and the *use value* of labour power.

In light of disputes in Marxist Feminism related to the relationship between value, unpaid domestic labour, and the reproduction of the commodity labour power, part of the rebuttal in this section of *Die Wissenschaft vom Wert* involves a brief response to the “Domestic Labour Debates” that took place in the 1970s and 80s, primarily in English, German, and Italian. While there may still be some holdouts, it is more or less a settled matter by this point that unpaid domestic labour is not directly productive of surplus value. However, the idea that domestic labour represents a necessary subsidy to the capitalist class through its role in the reproduction of labour-power—and as a consequence, that the commodity labour-power is paid less than its value—has become a taken-for-granted truism for some Marxists. This received wisdom neglects work of a number of scholars who, over the past 50 years, have made the point that domestic labour does not *necessarily*² provide a subsidy to the capitalist class³, including both myself (2021: 201, 2023: 35) and Michael Heinrich in this section of *Die Wissenschaft vom Wert* (1999 [1991]).

Unfortunately, Heinrich takes a wrong turn in this section when he asserts that household production itself is “a pre-capitalist relic and characteristic of a poorly developed capitalism,” (261). I would like to provide the friendly caveat that I am taking issue with a mere sentence fragment in a short subsection of a book that is over 30 years old—what is obviously a throw-away line in an otherwise careful and well-developed analysis. That being said, I believe it is worthwhile to briefly outline a rebuttal because my own way of thinking about household production actually *strengthens* the key claim in this section of *Die Wissenschaft vom Wert*: that capitalists purchase the commodity labour-power at its value, and thus this purchase involves the exchange of equivalents. I hope to demonstrate that the general neglect of commodities and emphasis on domestic labour’s role in the household production process throughout Marxist Feminist theorizing impedes understanding of why it must be that the value of the

² *Necessarily* is the key word here—a full evaluation of the subsidy-nature of domestic labour would require specific empirical investigation and is not possible to determine on a general basis (Vogel 2013 [1983]: 162).

³ Or, slightly different but related points, that cost minimisation from the perspective of the capitalist class can’t *necessarily* explain existing or idealised family-household configurations and/or the social assignment of domestic labour in capitalism to women. One or all of these three points are offered by Cynthia Cockburn (1977: 102), Michèle Barrett (1980: 26), Lise Vogel (2013 [1983]: 162), Rosemary Hennessy (2018 [2000]: 65-66), and Patrick Murray and Jeanne Schuler (2023: 45-46).

commodity labour-power is determined *only* by the value of the *commodities* that comprise the worker's means of subsistence. This is not a sexist oversight on the part of Marx. This is because these commodities—commodities that working class households are required to incessantly purchase as a result of the violent separation of workers from their means of subsistence—must be purchased *as commodities* with money from wages.

It would be fair to assert that many Marxists have historically overlooked the role of women⁴, household production, and unpaid domestic labour in capitalist society. Marxist Feminism was developed to correct these theoretical and political oversights, and this work has certainly helped to bring much-needed attention to the household and to overturn the stereotypical “bad” traditional Marxist convention of associating the working class exclusively with a male factory worker. But in doing so, Marxist Feminism introduces a number of serious errors: for example, the problematic bioessentialism necessary for Marxist Feminist theories that locate women's oppression in the capacity for childbirth⁵—a conflation of biological reproduction and what Marx means by reproduction. More relevant to the topic at hand here is Marxist Feminism's uncritical adoption of the economic categories of traditional Marxism (Scholz 2018: 1522) including “the positive category of labour from the Marxism of the labour movement,” (Scholz 2000:18), expanded to include domestic labour. This impulse on the part of some Marxist Feminists to adopt a positive understanding of domestic labour in order to gain recognition for these overlooked activities, or to claim moral or economic validity for the people—disproportionately women—who carry them out, is understandable but flawed (Scholz 1992: 19). Doing so not only risks evacuating these concepts of their theoretical power in political economy (Glazer 1993: 37), it is also inconsistent with an interpretation of the critique of political economy as a critique of these perverted economic categories (see for example, Bellofiore and Redolfi Riva 2015: 32; Bonefeld 2014: 15; Reichelt 2002).

⁴ It may seem odd that gender is not a factor in my discussion here. While a full explanation is outside the scope of what is possible in this intervention, my understanding of household production does not rely on the category of “wife” or “housewife” or even “women”, and does not assume a particular household structure. This is in recognition that many possible working class household structures exist, in contrast to the very narrow household structure assumed by much of feminist theory, despite having “long been in contradiction to the simplest empirical evidence,” (Vogel 1995: 27; see also Scholz 2018: 1522).

⁵ While I'm mainly referring to the Marxist Feminism of the 1970s and 80s, Amy De'Ath (2022: 237) points out the more explicit trans-antagonism of Silvia Federici's recent work. In a time when transgender people face existential threats from increasing persecution and state violence, it is essential to recognize and reject both the explicit and implicit trans-exclusionary foundations present in much of Marxist Feminist theorising.

In an effort to justify the redistribution of money, esteem, or recognition for feminised unpaid domestic labour, traditional Marxist Feminists often claim that domestic labour is a necessary subsidy to the capitalist class that enables the wage to be lower than it could be otherwise. Based on this assertion, they argue that the contribution of unpaid domestic labour to the reproduction of the commodity labour-power is responsible for the non-equivalence of the value of that commodity and the wage. But what Marxist Feminists have defined as domestic labour is not, strictly speaking, productive labour. Domestic labour cannot contribute to the *value* of the commodity labour-power because domestic labour-power is not a commodity. Since it is not a commodity, domestic labour-power also cannot be the substance of value. Domestic labour cannot be socially validated in capitalism as abstract labour. Domestic labour “is of a different character from abstract labour, which is why [it] cannot straightforwardly be subsumed under the concept of labour.” (Scholz 2009: 127). In capitalism—which is premised upon an “oddly asocial social form of labor”—the products of labour “are socially validated *only* through exchange,” (Murray & Schuler 2023: 121, emphasis mine).

I’ve found in my own teaching that pointing this out can be upsetting to students because terms like “value” and “productive” have positive colloquial meanings—valid, appreciated, beneficial, useful. Hearing that domestic labour does not produce value and is not productive might bring to mind the opposite of these positive colloquial meanings—insignificant, worthless, disregarded, idle, useless. It is not just students, but feminists and traditional Marxists, too, who take the concept of value to be a good thing rather than “understood and criticised ... as an expression of a fetishistic social relationship,” (Scholz 2000: 13). This section of *Die Wissenschaft vom Wert* (1999 [1991]: 261) positively cites a set of articles in *PROKLA* criticising the work of the Marxist Feminist Claudia von Werlhof (Beer 1983; Braig and Lentz 1983). In her rejoinder, Claudia von Werlhof (1983: 40) writes: “The obvious ‘valuelessness’ of housework in your view almost leads to a ‘valuelessness’ of all women’s work, and one could almost ‘justify’ this why women’s work outside the home does not need to be paid, i.e. valued!” She goes on to make the bizarre claim that such an approach to value and household production indicates the desire for a “political sex change” on the part of women theorists (in this case, specifically directed at Ursula Beer), who von Werlhof asserts must “prefer to be a man,” (1983: 40). For von Werlhof, an insistence on particular interpretations of Marxist theoretical categories makes Ursula Beer a malicious gender traitor who, acting as a puppet for Marxist men, believes women and all of their activities are valueless. But in capitalist society, it really is the case that only commodities are socially valid. “Money is the form of social validation [in capitalist society]. What cannot be exchanged for money is left to rot,” (Bonefeld 2023: 13).

The capitalist form of household production “is characterized by the use of domestic labor together with commodities purchased with the wage,” (Quick 1992: 2). These commodities are intermediate goods, akin to the intermediate goods used by a capitalist firm in its own production process—they are inputs into the production of a final use-value. Following Paddy Quick, I am describing household production *based on what it is* rather than based on what it (often) is not: paid (4). Household production must take place in capitalism because “the wage is necessary but not sufficient for survival,” (4). Commodities must be transformed into final use-values for individual consumption in households because “money income will in itself satisfy few wants; goods in the retail store are not yet available for use,” (Reid 1934: 14). At the same time, the wage is necessary because household production requires not only domestic labour but also commodities. This process can’t be repeated without obtaining more wages and purchasing more commodities because household production does not involve the productive consumption of commodities—instead, “the product ... is the consumer himself,” (Marx 1976 [1867]: 290).

On its surface, it may seem that the capitalist form of household production is a “pre-capitalist relic,” or part of a transhistorical general labour process—the production of use-values via purposeful activity involving objects of labour and instruments of labour, something “common to all forms of society in which human beings live,” (Marx 1976 [1867]: 290). One outcome of this transhistorical general labour process could be the renewal of labour power-in-general, defined as the capacity to labour, “the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities” that allow someone to produce use-values (Marx 1976 [1867]: 270). And some Marxist Feminists have certainly proceeded from this premise, for example by discussing household production in “class society” (Quick 1977: 2010) or by characterising the household production process in a positive light as “life making” or “social reproduction.” However, “no actual labor process ever exists independently of any specific social formation... there is no labor process in general,” (Murray and Schuler 2023: 27). There is no domestic labour process in general, no household production in general, no “social reproduction” in general, and no “life-making” in general. While many social forms—Tony Smith specifically mentions commodities, money, and profits, but this could include household production—existed before capitalism, he points out that “one of Marx’s fundamental insights is that these were not the same social forms as commodities, money, and profits in capitalism, although we use the same words.” This is because “the social forms analysed by Marx in *Capital* are historically specific,” (Smith 2006: 226)⁶.

⁶ Credit is due to Murray and Schuler (2023) for bringing my attention to this passage.

In capitalism, it is “no longer possible to distinguish exactly what constitutes a compulsory activity and what constitutes an existential expression of life,” (Scholz 2000: 20). “Man does not eat in the abstract. Nor does Man struggle for life in the abstract,” (Bonefeld 2023: 7). All production, including household production, “always has a specific social form and purpose,” (Murray and Schuler 2023: 7). The working class can only engage in the capitalist form of household production:

when it has laboured ‘productively.’ It can only cook meat for itself when it has produced a wage with which to pay for the meat; and it can only keep its furniture and dwellings clean, it can only polish its boots, when it has produced the value of furniture, house rent and boots. To this class of productive labourers itself, therefore, the labour which they perform for themselves appears as ‘unproductive labour.’ This unproductive labour never enables them to repeat the same unproductive labour a second time unless they have previously laboured productively (Marx 2010 [1863]: 21).

The capitalist form of household production is a process “in whose result the process becomes extinguished,” (Marx 1976 [1867]: 200). Working class households are compelled to engage in household production not only to survive, but so their members can appear continually on the market as renewed labour-power in order to continually buy more commodities.

I concede that there is a non-equivalence between the working-class household’s *subsistence level* and the value of commodities purchased with wages, not only because of the contribution of domestic labour but also contributions from welfare state goods, services, and transfer payments (Conference of Socialist Economists, 1977: 4). But this does not change the fact that the household is compelled to continually acquire their means of subsistence with wages earned by selling the commodity labour-power, and the household is assumed to purchase those means of subsistence at their value. The “historical and moral element” (Marx 1976 [1867]: 275) and current economic conditions determine not only the level of subsistence but also the extent to which the household depends on domestic labour, commodities, and state inputs in its household production process. While working class households can rely on these inputs in varying proportions to achieve subsistence (Munro 2019), merely changing these proportions doesn’t change the underlying household production process (Collins 1990: 17). And while I might be accused of being tautological, I nonetheless think it merits clarification: the value of labour-power is determined *only* by the commodities the worker needs to purchase to survive because *commodities are the component of the household production process that requires money*.

An examination of the capitalist form of the household production process as a whole—a process that in capitalism requires not only domestic labour but also commodities—makes clear the difference between the capitalist form of household

production and all other forms of production: the commodities that working class households rely on for their survival and must continually purchase as the result of the historical process of primitive accumulation. That all or most of the means of subsistence must be purchased as commodities with money from wages is what characterises the capitalist form of household production. In capitalism, a “generalized dependence on the wage ... must be reestablished at every moment,” (De’Ath 2022: 231).

Household production in capitalism is not an anachronism, but rather the capitalist form of household production, just as commodity production is the capitalist form of social production. Following this logic, the unwaged domestic labour involved in the capitalist form of household production is no more a “relic” than the waged labour involved in the capitalist production of commodities.

The individual consumption of commodities that have been transformed into final use-values through the capitalist form of household production “provides, on the one hand, the means of subsistence for the workers’ maintenance and reproduction; on the other hand, by the constant annihilation of the means of subsistence it provides for their continued re-appearance on the labour-market” (Marx 1976 [1867]: 719). The household production process can’t be repeated without exchanging wages for more commodities. While they are transformed into final use-values through the capitalist form of household production, members of the working class are compelled to incessantly sell their labour power so they can incessantly buy their means of subsistence with money as commodities. The essence of the violent separation of workers from their means of subsistence appears in these commodities.

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