

DOMESTIC LABOR REVISITED

LISE VOGEL

INDEX

I. THEORIES AND THEORIZING 2
II. A DIFFERENT STARTING POINT 4
III. CAPITALISM AND DOMESTIC LABOR..... 6
IV. AUDIENCES AND PARADIGMS 9
V. DOMESTIC LABOR IN THE 21ST CENTURY 11
VI. REFERENCES 12

1. From the late 1960s into the 1970s, socialist feminists sought to analyze women's unpaid family work within a framework of Marxist political economy.ⁱ Such an analysis would provide a foundation, they thought, for understanding women's differential positioning as mothers, family members, and workers, and thereby for a materialist analysis of women's subordination. At the time, interest in the bearing of Marxist theory on women's liberation seemed perfectly normal—and not just to socialist feminists. Radical feminists also adopted and transformed what they understood to be Marxist concepts (*e.g.*, Firestone, 1970; Millett, 1970).

2. From these efforts came a voluminous literature. Women's liberationists studied Marxist texts, wrestled with Marxist concepts, and produced a range of original formulations combining, or at least intermingling, Marxism and feminism. Their enthusiasm for this work is hard today to recapture.ⁱⁱ It turned out, moreover, to be relatively brief. By the end of the 1970s, interest in domestic labor theorizing had dramatically declined. The shift away from the so-called domestic labor debate was especially pronounced in the United States.

3. In this paper I look again at the challenge of theorizing the unwaged labor of housework, childbearing, and childrearing. I argue that much of the early domestic labor literature followed an intellectual agenda that has not been well understood, reviewing my own work in this light. I then consider the reception of such endeavors by their audiences. Finally, I suggest that the early domestic labor theorists' unfinished project deserves further attention.

I. THEORIES AND THEORIZING

4. The notion that something called “domestic labor” should be theorized emerged as part of a

critique launched by North American women's liberationists in the late 1960s and soon picked up elsewhere, notably in Britain. Although central in women's experience, the unpaid work and responsibilities of family life were rarely addressed in radical thought and socialist practice. Women's liberationists, wanting to ground their own activism in more adequate theory, began to wonder about the theoretical status of the housework and childcare performed in family households, usually by women. Over the next years, an enormous set of writings known collectively as the domestic labor debate examined this puzzle.ⁱⁱⁱ

5. The domestic labor literature identified family households as sites of production. Reconceptualized as domestic labor, housework and childcare could then be analyzed as labor processes. From this beginning came a series of questions. If domestic labor is a labor process, then what is its product? people? commodities? labor power? Does the product have value? If so, how is that value determined? How and by what or whom is the product consumed? What are the circumstances, conditions, and constraints of domestic labor? What is domestic labor's relationship to the reproduction of labor power? to overall social reproduction? to capitalist accumulation? Could a mode of reproduction of people be posited, comparable to but separate from the mode of production? Could answers to these questions explain the origins of women's oppression?

6. The burgeoning domestic labor 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 notion of reproduction of labor power became surprisingly elastic, stretching

from biological procreation to any kind of work that contributed to people's daily maintenance— whether it be paid or unpaid, in private households, in the market, or in the workplace. Likewise, the meaning of the category domestic labor fluctuated. Did it refer simply to housework? Or did it include childbearing and child care as well? Circular arguments were common. For example, domestic labor was frequently identified with women's work and conversely, thereby assuming the sexual division of labor women's liberationists wished to explain. In addition, the debate's almost exclusive concern with unpaid household labor discounted the importance of women's paid labor, whether as domestic servants or wage workers. And its focus on the economic seemed to overlook pressing political, ideological, psychological, and sexual issues.

7. Women's liberationists also found the abstractness of the domestic labor 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. Not only was the discussion abstract, it seemed ahistorical as well. Perhaps most damaging, much of the domestic labor literature adopted a functionalist explanatory framework. A social system's need for domestic labor, for example, was taken to imply that need was invariably satisfied. Where in the debate, many wondered, was human agency?

8. Meanwhile, feminist agendas were bursting with other matters, both theoretical and practical. By the early 1980s, most socialist feminists had decided to move “beyond the domestic labor debate.” They left behind the ambiguity, conceptual fuzziness, circularity, and loose ends of an unfinished project (Molyneux, 1979).

9. The shift away from the effort to theorize domestic labor within a framework of Marxist political economy seemed to make sense. Many women's liberationists assumed theory to be

directly pertinent to day— to— day activities and thought a given theory had determinate political and strategic implications. Conversely, they looked to empirical accounts of history and current circumstances as a way to constitute the appropriate basis for theory.^{iv} Rejecting the abstractions of the early domestic labor literature, they sought a conceptual apparatus that could be used to organize and interpret the data of women's lives.

10. This approach reflected a particular epistemological orientation, one that put theory into a kind of one— to— one relationship with the empirical. Theory was assumed to be isomorphic with what was understood to be reality. As such, it could produce empirical generalizations, statements of regularity, and models. Explanation and prediction would then depend on extrapolation from these presumably accurate representations. In this view, familiar from the social— scientific literature, theory is a broad— ranging intellectual activity, grounded in the empirical and capable of supplying descriptions, explanations, and predictions— and thereby able as well to guide policy or strategy.

11. This is not the only way to think about theory, however. Much of the early domestic labor literature implicitly adopted a different perspective, rooted in certain readings of Marxist theory current in the 1960s and '70s. Associated most famously with the French philosopher Louis Althusser, this alternative perspective accords theory an epistemological specificity and a limited scope. Theory, in this view, is a powerful but highly abstract enterprise and sharply different from history (see, among others, Althusser, 1971; Hindess and Hirst, 1975; Willer and Willer, 1973; as well as Marx, [1857]/1973). As Althusser put it, speaking of Marx's *Capital*:

12. Despite appearances, Marx does not analyze any “ concrete society,” not even England, which he mentions constantly in Volume One, but the *capitalist mode of production* and nothing else. This object is an abstract one:

which means that it is terribly real and that it never *exists* in the pure state, since it only exists in capitalist societies. Simply speaking: in order to be able to analyse these concrete capitalist societies (England, France, Russia, etc.), it is essential to know that they are dominated by that terribly concrete reality, the capitalist mode of production, which is “invisible” (to the naked eye). “Invisible,” i.e., *abstract*. (Althusser, 1971, 77.)

13. From this perspective, theory is necessarily abstract as well as severely constrained in its implications. It can point to key elements and tendencies but it cannot provide richly textured accounts of social life. Even less does it directly explain events, suggest strategies, or evaluate the prospects for political action. These are matters for a qualitatively distinct kind of inquiry— — one that examines the specifics of particular historical conjunctures in existing social formations.

14. To put it another way, this alternative approach conceptualizes theory as a sort of lens. By itself, the lens tells us little about the specifics of a particular society at a particular moment. It is only by using the lens that observers can evaluate such specifics and strategize for the future. Compared to theorizing— producing the lens— these tasks of empirical investigation and political analysis constitute intellectual work of a different and, I would argue, more challenging sort.

II. A DIFFERENT STARTING POINT

15. I turn now to my own work on domestic labor. My purpose in so doing is to offer an example of women's liberationist theorizing within the intentionally abstract framework just described. From this perspective, the domestic labor debate was a theoretical rather than historical or sociological project. Its outcome would be expected to take the form of sets of abstract concepts and identifications of possible mechanisms and tendencies. These could not, by themselves, really “explain” anything

concrete— neither the rich, idiosyncratic, and constructed character of experience nor the specific nature and direction of popular mobilization or social transformation. Even less could they suggest political strategies. Such questions would be matters for empirical investigation and political analysis by the actors involved.

16. The challenge, then, was to discover or create categories to theorize women's unpaid family work as a material process. Women's liberationists, myself included, examined the classic texts of Marx, Engels, Bebel, and others, discovering only a precarious theoretical legacy at best. This finding led, in my case, to a lengthy critical reading of Marx. In this reading I followed what I understood to be Althusser's advice:

17. Do not look to *Capital* either for a book of “concrete” history or for a book of “empirical” political economy, in the sense in which historians and economists understand these terms. Instead, find in it a book of theory analysing the *capitalist mode of production*. History (concrete history) and economics (empirical economics) have other objects. (Althusser, 1971, 78.)

18. Using this approach to theory, I hoped to be able to contribute to the construction of a more satisfactory theoretical lens with which to analyze women's subordination.

19. As my conceptual point of departure I considered two notions basic to Marx's work: labor power and the reproduction of labor power. For Marx, labor power is a capacity borne by a human being and distinguishable from the bodily and social existence of its bearer. Labor power's potential is realized when its bearer makes something useful— a use— value— which may or may not be exchanged. The bearers of labor power are, however, mortal and suffer wear and tear; every individual eventually dies. Some process that meets the ongoing personal needs of the bearers of labor power is therefore a condition of social reproduction, as is some process that replaces

them over time. These processes of daily maintenance and long—run replacement are conflated in the term reproduction of labor power.

20. In class—divided societies, dominant classes somehow harness labor power's ability to produce use—values for their own benefit. For clarity I therefore restricted the concept of reproduction of labor power to the processes that maintain and replace labor power capable of producing a surplus for an appropriating class.^v In the remainder of this section I look very briefly at several characteristics of the reproduction of such labor power: the processes involved, the role of biological procreation, and certain inherent contradictions. This prepares the way for the next section's discussion of reproduction of labor power in capitalist societies.

21. Marx considered the reproduction of labor power to be central to social reproduction, but he never provided a thoroughgoing exposition of just what it entailed. At times he focused on renewal of the individual laborer; elsewhere, he underscored the importance of maintaining and replacing non—working members of the working class. For clarity, again, I therefore distinguished three kinds of processes that make up the reproduction of labor power in class societies. First, a variety of daily activities restore the energies of direct producers and enable them to return to work. Second, similar activities maintain non—laboring members of subordinate classes—those who are too young, old, or sick, or who themselves are involved in maintenance activities or out of the workforce for other reasons. And third, replacement processes renew the labor force by replacing members of the subordinate classes who have died or no longer work.

22. With these three kinds of processes disentangled, the concept of reproduction of labor power can be freed from normative assumptions concerning biological procreation in heterosexual family contexts. Although the reproduction of labor power in actual societies

has usually involved child—rearing within kin—based settings called families, it can in principle be organized in other ways, at least for a period of time. The present set of laborers could be housed in dormitories, maintained collectively, worked to death, and then replaced by new workers, brought from outside. This harsh regime has actually been approximated many times through history. Gold mines in Roman Egypt, rubber plantations in French Indochina, and Nazi *Arbeitslager* all come to mind. More commonly, an existing labor force is replenished in two ways. First, by processes of what I term “generational replacement,” whereby workers bear children who grow up to become workers themselves. And second, by the entry of new workers into the labor force. For example, individuals who had not previously participated at all may become involved in wage labor, as when wives entered the U.S. labor market in the 1950s. People may enter the work force sporadically, at harvest, for instance, or during economic crises. Immigrants can cross national boundaries to enter a society's labor force. Persons may also be forcibly kidnapped, transported far from home, and coerced into a new workforce, as was done for New World slave plantations.

23. From the theoretical point of view, in other words, the reproduction of labor power is not invariably associated with private kin—based households, as the domestic labor debate commonly assumed. In particular, it does not necessarily entail any or all of the following: heterosexuality, biological procreation, family forms, or generational replacement.

Nonetheless, most class societies have institutionalized daily maintenance and generational replacement processes in a system of heterosexual family forms. That such arrangements are empirically so common probably reflects their advantages—contested and constantly renegotiated—over the alternatives.

24. Class societies that rely on biological procreation for the reproduction of labor power

encounter several contradictions. While pregnant and for a short time thereafter, subordinate— class women experience at least a brief period of somewhat reduced ability to work and/or to engage in the activities of daily maintenance. During such periods of lower activity, the women must themselves be maintained. In this way, childbearing can diminish the contribution subordinate— class women make as direct producers and as participants in maintenance activities.^{vi} From the perspective of dominant classes, such childbearing is therefore potentially costly, for pregnant women's labor and that which provides for them might otherwise have formed part of surplus labor. At the same time, subordinate— class childbearing replenishes the work force and thereby benefits dominant classes. There is a latent contradiction, then, between dominant classes' need to appropriate surplus labor and their requirements for labor power to perform it.

25. >From the perspective of subordinate classes, other contradictions may emerge. Arrangements for the reproduction of labor power usually take advantage of relationships between women and men based on sexuality and kinship. Other individuals, frequently the biological father and his kin group or the kin of the childbearing woman herself, have the responsibility for making sure women are provided for during periods of diminished activity associated with childbearing. Although in principle women's and men's differential roles need only last during those childbearing months, most societies assign them to the variety of social structures known as families, which become sites for the performance of daily maintenance as well as generational replacement activities. The arrangements are ordinarily legitimated by male domination backed up by institutionalized structures of female oppression.

26. How these various contradictions manifest and are confronted in actual class societies cannot be directly derived from their existence

at this very general level. This discussion simply shows that subordinate— class women's childbearing capacity positions them differently from men with respect to the processes of surplus appropriation and reproduction of labor power. While they may also be workers, it is subordinate— class women's differential role in the maintenance and replacement of labor power that marks their particular situation.^{vii}

III. CAPITALISM AND DOMESTIC LABOR

27. The previous section considered elements of the reproduction of labor power in the case of societies divided by class. In this section I look at the reproduction of labor power in that distinctive kind of class society known as capitalism. On this topic Marx had a fair amount to say but, as the domestic labor literature showed, it was nonetheless not enough.^{viii}

28. In capitalist societies, according to Marx, labor power takes the specific form of a commodity, that is, a thing that has not only use— value but also exchange— value. Borne by persons, this commodity has certain peculiarities. Its use— value is its capacity, when put to work in a capitalist production process, to be the source of more value than it itself is worth. Its exchange— value— what it costs to buy the labor power on the market— is “the value of the means of subsistence necessary for the maintenance of the laborer” (Marx, [1867]/1971, 167), an amount that is established historically and socially in a given society at a particular moment.

29. To explore the relationship between labor power's value and capital's interest in surplus appropriation, Marx used an abstraction: the working day of a single workingman, expressed in hours. (For Marx, the worker was always male, of course.) He defined “necessary labor” as the portion of a day's labor that enables the worker to purchase the means of subsistence. And he defined “surplus labor” as the

remainder of the day's labor, which the capitalist appropriates.^{ix} To put it another way, the worker works part of the time for himself and the rest of the time for the boss. The first, the worker's necessary labor, corresponds to his wages; the second, his surplus labor, constitutes surplus value at the disposal of the boss.

30. For Marx, capitalist accumulation creates a constantly changing profit—driven system. If capitalists must seek more and more profits, it is in their interest to seek reductions of necessary labor. Marx discussed methods (other than cheating) they can use to achieve such reduction. On the one hand, they can lengthen working hours or intensify the pace of work without changing the value of labor power. More hours or more intense work means the worker expends more labor power for the same wage. That is, his labor power is cheapened. Marx called this kind of reduction of necessary labor “absolute surplus value.” On the other hand, capitalists can reduce necessary labor by making the production process more productive. Greater productivity means the worker needs fewer working hours to complete necessary labor and more surplus value goes to the boss. Within limits, a wage increase could even be granted. Marx called this kind of reduction of necessary labor “relative surplus value.”

31. Marx's discussion of the relationship between necessary and surplus labor within the working day is wonderfully clear. At the same time, its focus on a single individual laborer perforce excludes consideration of all the additional labor that secures not only the workingman's maintenance and replacement but also that of his kin and community and of the workforce overall.^x That these various processes can be omitted from Marx's account, at least at this point, is an effect of capitalism's particular social organization. As in no other mode of production, daily maintenance and generational replacement tasks are spatially, temporally, and institutionally isolated from the sphere of production. In his concept of “

individual consumption,” Marx recognized that capitalism gives life off the job a radically distinct character from wage labor. Individual consumption happens when “the laborer turns the money paid to him for his labor—power into means of subsistence” (Marx, [1867]/1971, 536). Marx's main interest here is to contrast the worker's individual consumption of means of subsistence with his “productive consumption” of means of production while on the job. But he said little about the actual work involved in individual consumption. Here was a realm of economic activity essential to capitalist production yet missing from Marx's exposition.

32. The domestic labor literature sought, in various ways, to make visible the workings of the reproduction of labor power in capitalist societies. From my perspective, this meant reconceptualizing necessary labor to incorporate the processes of reproduction of labor power. Necessary labor has, I argued, two components. The first, discussed by Marx, is the necessary labor that produces value equivalent to wages. This component, which I called the social component of necessary labor, is indissolubly bound with surplus labor in the capitalist production process. The second component of necessary labor, deeply veiled in Marx's account, is the unwaged work that contributes to the daily and long—term renewal of bearers of the commodity labor power and of the working class as a whole.^{xi} I called this the domestic component of necessary labor, or domestic labor.

33. Defined this way, domestic labor became a concept specific to capitalism and without fixed gender assignment. This freed it from several common—sense assumptions that haunted the domestic labor debate, most especially the notion that domestic labor is universal and that it is necessarily women's work.

34. The social and domestic components of necessary labor are not directly comparable, for the latter does not have value.^{xii} This means that the highly visible and very valuable social

component of necessary labor is accompanied by a shadowy, unquantifiable, and (technically) valueless domestic labor component. Although only one component appears on the market and can be seen clearly, the reproduction of labor power entails both. Wages may enable workers to purchase commodities, but additional labor— domestic labor— must generally be performed as well. Food commodities are prepared and clothes maintained and cleaned. Children are not only cared for but also taught the skills they need to become competent working— class adults. Working— class individuals who are sick, disabled, or enfeebled are attended to. These various tasks are at least partly undertaken by domestic labor.

35. In other words, I argued that necessary labor is a more complicated conceptual category than previously thought. It has two components, one with value and the other without. Domestic labor, the previously missing second component, is sharply different from the social component yet similarly indispensable to capitalist social reproduction. It lacks value but nonetheless plays a key role in the process of surplus value appropriation. Locked together in the performance of necessary labor, social labor and its newfound mate, domestic labor, form an odd couple never before encountered in Marxist theory.^{xiii}

36. Capitalists' interest in reducing necessary labor may extend to its domestic as well as its social component. If some people devote much of their energies to domestic labor— hauling water from the well, cooking on a hearth, washing clothes by boiling them, teaching children the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic, and so forth— then they are less available for work in production. By contrast, when domestic labor is reduced, additional labor power is potentially released into the labor market. Reduction of domestic labor has been an ongoing process in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By the early 1900s, food preparation was less time— consuming, laundry was in some ways less onerous, and

schools had taken over most of the task of teaching skills. More recently, frozen food, microwaves, laundromats, and the increased availability of day care, nursery, kindergarten, and after— school programs have decreased domestic labor even further.^{chftn} Reduction of domestic labor through technological and non— technological means does not inevitably make households send more of their members' labor power onto the market. It does, however, create a greater possibility that they might do so.

37. In short, capitalists as a class are caught between a number of conflicting pressures, including: their long— term need for a labor force, their short— term demands for different categories of workers and consumers, their profit requirements, and their desire to maintain hegemony over a divided working class. In the abstract of my theoretical construction, these contradictory pressures generate tendencies, of course, not preordained inevitabilities. Such tendencies do not necessarily produce outcomes favorable to dominant classes, as functionalist interpretations would have it. Rather, the processes of reproduction of labor power constitute an embattled terrain. In actual societies, capitalists adopt a variety of strategies, some of which involve manipulating domestic labor in ways that can be analyzed as creating absolute or relative surplus value. At the same time, working people strive to win the best conditions for their own renewal, which may include a particular level and type of domestic labor. Because both capital and labor are ordinarily fragmented into distinct sectors, the results are not uniform across layers.

38. A contradictory tendential dynamic thus threads through historical struggles over the conditions for the reproduction of the commodity labor power. Particular outcomes have included the family wage for certain groups, protective legislation covering female and child industrial workers, sex— and race— segregation in the labor market, migrant labor housed in barracks, and so forth.^{xiv}

39. To this point I have discussed the reproduction of the commodity labor power as an economic phenomenon.^{xv} There is, however, a key political phenomenon that also pertains, a tendency towards equality. Marx argued that this fundamental political feature of capitalist societies has a basis in the articulation of production and circulation.^{xvi} In production, a great range of concrete useful labor is rendered equivalent as human labor in the abstract, or value. In circulation, commodities can be exchanged on the market when they embody comparable amounts of that value. Labor power is of course also a commodity, bought and sold on the market. Workers and capitalists thus meet in the marketplace as owners seeking to exchange their commodities. For transactions to take place, capitalists must offer wages that are equivalent to the value of workers' labor power. Contrary to notions of capitalism as a cheating system, this is an equal exchange. Equality in the market goes hand and hand with exploitation in production.

40. Equality of persons is not, then, an abstract principle or false ideology but a complex tendency with roots in the articulation of the spheres of production and circulation. Lack of equality, I argue, represents a specific feature of women's (and other groups') oppression in capitalist societies. Only subordinate— class women perform domestic labor, as discussed above, but all women suffer from lack of equality in capitalist societies.

41. Efforts to expand equality's scope make radical challenges on at least two fronts. First, they tend to reduce divisions within and among subordinate layers and sectors, by moving all persons towards a more equal footing. Second, they can reveal the fundamentally exploitative character of capitalism, for the further rights are extended, the more capitalism's economic and social character is exposed. Far from exercises in fruitless reformism or supposedly divisive identity politics, struggles for equality can contribute to building strategic alliances and even point beyond capitalism.

42. To sum up the theoretical scenario I offered, in all its abstractness: In the capitalist mode of production, the logic of accumulation and the articulation between the spheres of production and circulation doubly mark women's position. On the one hand, subordinate— class women and men are differentially located with respect to important economic aspects of social reproduction. On the other, all women are denied equal rights. In actual societies, the dynamics of women's subordination respond to this dual positioning, among other factors.

IV. AUDIENCES AND PARADIGMS

43. Efforts to theorize domestic labor addressed two distinct audiences in the 1970s— feminists, especially socialist feminists, and the Left. Most feminists eventually rejected the domestic labor literature as a misguided effort to apply inappropriate Marxist categories. Most Marxists simply disregarded the debate, neither following nor participating in it. Neither potential audience fully grasped the ways that socialist feminists were suggesting, implicitly or explicitly, that Marxist theory had to be revised.

44. One factor that ultimately limited the feminist audience was the domestic labor debate's approach to theory. As discussed earlier, many feminists had difficulty with the epistemological perspective that underlay much of the domestic labor literature. Not only was it extremely abstract, it also considered the scope of theory to be severely limited. In particular, questions of subjectivity and agency fell outside theory of this sort. They belonged, rather, to the difficult and messy realm of concrete historical investigation and analysis. Most feminists came to reject this view of theory and sought instead to found theory on detailed empirical description. A powerful but generally unacknowledged difference of theoretical paradigm thus separated the two perspectives. As is far more apparent to me now than it was years ago, the holders of one could not

communicate effectively with those partial to the other. Even the task of reading each other's work, not to mention that! of usefully critiquing it, encountered the obstacle of paradigm incompatibility.^{xvii}

45. Through the 1970s, the Left was mostly hostile to the notion of developing a feminist socialism, much less that of revising Marxist theory. In many camps, feminism was considered inherently bourgeois as well as a threat to class unity. U.S. Marxist theorists, mostly male, generally ignored the domestic labor literature. In part, the problem here was again a paradigm incompatibility, this time of a different sort. From a traditional Marxist perspective, the dynamics of capitalism had ultimately to do with class exploitation. Other issues—for example, gender, race, or national oppression— might be important concerns for socialists, but they lay outside what was understood to be the realm of Marxist theory.

46. The audiences for domestic labor theorizing dramatically contracted in the 1980s. 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 flourish, but with far fewer links than earlier to women's movement activism. Surviving on college and university campuses, it 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 liberation movement rooted in the upheavals of the 1960s. Not surprisingly, confidence in the relevance of socialist thought to feminist theory diminished.

47. The 1980s and '90s did not, to the surprise of some, witness the demise of domestic labor theorizing. Rather, a certain level of interest has persisted. Where there are relatively strong traditions of Marxist theory for one reason or another, as in England and Canada, small communities of economists, sociologists, and historians, male as well as female, continue to

address questions descended from those posed in the early domestic labor literature.^{xviii}

48. In these years in the United States, however, relatively fewer researchers have been involved with the issues posed in the domestic labor debate. Feminists who continue to use the terminology often do so in a manner more metaphorical than analytical. Domestic labor, for example, is still taken to mean something whose site and workers are obvious (the private household, women) and whose content is self-evident (usually, housework, or housework and childcare). Reproduction, a term with meanings within several distinct intellectual traditions that were at first the subject of much discussion, has also acquired a generic meaning.^{xix} Along with a new phrase, “reproductive labor,” it now often covers a wide range of activities contributing to the renewal of people, including emotional and intellectual as well as manual labor, and waged as well as unwaged work. Reviewing the literature, Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1992, 4) observes that:

49. The term *social reproduction* has come to be more broadly conceived...to refer to the creation and recreation of people as cultural and social, as well as physical, beings. Thus it involves mental, emotional, and manual labor. This labor can be organized in myriad ways—in and out of the household, as paid or unpaid work, creating exchange value or only use value....[For example, food production] can be done by a family member as unwaged work in the household, by a servant as waged work in the household, or by a short— order cook in a fast— food restaurant as waged work that generates profit.

50. U.S. Marxist theorists in the 1980s and '90s have continued to be mostly male and generally inattentive to several decades of socialist— feminist scholarship and commentary. Many take feminism to be an instance of a so— called identity politics that can only balkanize the Left. They worry as well about the unity of Marxist theory. At the same time, they seem not

to be aware of the range of current debates and discussions that address these very problems. A handful have begun, however, to enter the dialogue. Some cover ground already well travelled in the domestic labor debate, even reinventing analyses first proposed by feminists in the 1970s. Others interpret the issues surrounding female oppression as matters of language, psychology, or sexuality. In so doing, they construct women's subordination as wholly external to the processes of surplus appropriation and capitalist social reproduction and therefore not the subject of Marxist political economy.

51. Early domestic labor theorists sought to put women's lives at the heart of the workings of capitalism. They were among the first to intuit the coming crisis of Marxism and to begin exploring the limitations of Marxist theory. Their challenge to feminist theory and to the tradition of Marxist political economy remains, in my view, an unfinished project.

V. DOMESTIC LABOR IN THE 21ST CENTURY

52. The domestic labor literature insisted that women's oppression is central to overall social reproduction. Despite all its problems, this insight remains valid. Capital still demands reliable sources of exploitable labor power and appropriately configured consumers of commodities—demands that are perennially the object of struggle and not always met. With global restructuring, the processes through which labor power is maintained and replaced are undergoing radical transformation and domestic labor remains key to these changes. The forms of domestic labor proliferate, moving ever further from the male—breadwinner/female—dependent nuclear family norm. Most households contribute increasing amounts of time to wage labor, generally reducing the amount and quality of domestic labor their members perform. Other households are caught in persistent joblessness,

intensifying marginality, and an impoverished level and kind of domestic labor. Here, it could be argued, the reproduction of a sector of labor power is in question.^{xx} The processes of labor power renewal also disperse geographically, frequently moving across national boundaries. Migration becomes more widespread, dividing families and producing new kinds of non—kin as well as kin—based sites of domestic labor. Meanwhile, the expanded scope and availability of rights—based equality to traditionally marginalized groups, beneficial in many ways, creates unanticipated hazards (see, *e.g.*, Vogel, 1995).

53. At the turn of the 21st century, heavy burdens fall on women, alongside undeniably empowering changes. These burdens include, among others, the double day, absent husbands, isolation from kin, and single motherhood without adequate social support. In short, women's experience still points to the question of theorizing domestic labor and its role in capitalist social reproduction.

VI. REFERENCES

- Althusser, Louis. 1971. "Preface to *Capital* Volume One (*March 1969*)." Pp. 71—101 in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- _____. 1993. *The Future Lasts Forever*. New York: The New Press.
- Beechey, Veronica. 1979. "On Patriarchy." *Feminist Review*, 3, 66—82.
- Bottomore, Tom, ed. 1983. *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Brenner, Johanna, and Nancy Holmstrom. 1983. "Women's Self—Organization: Theory and Strategy," *Monthly Review*, 34, (April), 34—46.
- Duplessis, Rachel Blau and Ann Snitow, eds. 1990. *The Feminist Memoir Project: Voices from Women's Liberation*. (New York: Three Rivers Press.
- Echols, Alice. 1989. *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967—1975*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Edholm, Felicity, Harris, Olivia, and Young, Kate. 1977. "Conceptualising Women." *Critique of Anthropology*, 9—10, 101—130.
- Firestone, Shulamith. 1970. *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*. New York: Morrow.
- Fraser, Nancy. 1998? "Heterosexism, Misrecognition and Capitalism: A Response to Judith Butler." *New Left Review*, 22? (month?), 140—149.
- Gardiner, Jean. 1997. *Gender, Care and Economics*. London: Macmillan Press.
- Gimenez, Martha. 1990. "The Dialectics of Waged and Unwaged Work: Waged Work, Domestic Labor and Household Survival in the United States." Pp. 25—45 in *Work without Wages: Domestic Labor and Self—Employment within Capitalism*, ed. Jane L. Collins and Martha E. Gimenez. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Glazer, Nona Y. 1987. "Servants to Capital: Unpaid Domestic Labor and Paid Work." Pp. 236—255 in *Families and Work*, ed. Naomi Gerstel and Harriet Engel Gross. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Glenn, Evelyn Nakano. 1992. "From Servitude to Service Work: Historical Continuities in the Racial Division of Paid Reproductive Labor." *Signs*, 19 (Autumn), 1—43.
- Glucksmann, Miriam. 1990. *Women Assemble: Women Workers and the New Industries in Inter—War Britain*. London: Routledge
- Hamilton, Roberta, and Michele Barrett, eds. 1986. *The Politics of Diversity*. London: Verso.
- Hansen, Karen V., and Philipson, Ilene J., eds. 1990. *Women, Class, and the Feminist Imagination: A Socialist—Feminist Reader*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Himmelweit, Sue. 1983a. "Domestic Labour." In Bottomore.
- _____. 1983b. "Reproduction." In Bottomore.
- _____. 1983c. "Value of Labour Power." In Bottomore.
- Hindess, Barry and Paul Hirst. 1975. *Pre—Capitalist Modes of Production*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Kuhn, Thomas. 1962. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Marx, Karl. (1857)/1973. "Introduction." Pp. 81—111 in *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- _____. (1867)/1971. *Capital*, vol. 1. Moscow: Progress Publishers.
- Millett, Kate. 1970. *Sexual Politics*. New York: Doubleday.
- Molyneux, Maxine. 1979. "Beyond the Domestic Labour Debate." *New Left Review*, 116 (July—August), 3—27.
- Nicholson, Linda. *Gender and History: The Limits of Social Theory in the Age of the Family*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Quick, Paddy. 1977. "The Class Nature of Women's Oppression." *Review of Radical Political Economics*, 9 (Fall), 42—53.

Sacks, Karen Brodtkin. 1989. "Toward a Unified Theory of Class, Race, and Gender," *American Ethnologist* 16, 534—550.

Sargent, Lydia, ed. 1981. *Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism*. Boston: South End Press.

Sassen, Saskia. 1998. *Globalization and Its Discontents*. New York: The New Press.

Smith, Paul. 1978. "Domestic Labour and Marx's Theory of Value." Pp. 198—219 in *Feminism and Materialism: Women and Modes of Production*, ed. Annette Kuhn and Annemarie Wolpe. Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Vogel, Lise. 1983. *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

_____. "Socialist Feminism." 1998. Pp. 757—760 in *Encyclopedia of the American Left*, 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press.

_____. 1986. "Feminist Scholarship: The Impact of Marxism." Pp. 1—34 in *The Left Academy*, ed. Bertell Ollman and Edward Vernoff, vol. 3. New York: Praeger.

_____. 1995. "Beyond Equality: Some Feminist Questions." In *Woman Questions: Essays for a Materialist Feminism*, New York: Routledge.

Willer, David and Willer, Judith. 1973. *Systematic Empiricism: Critique of a Pseudoscience*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice—Hall.

* This paper originated as a presentation at the July 1994 meetings of the Conference of Socialist Economists in Leeds, England. My thanks to Filio Diamante for inviting me and to my co—panelists and audience for lively discussion. In preparing this text for publication I benefited from the very helpful comments of

Christine Di Stefano and a number of anonymous reviewers on both sides of the Atlantic. I owe a special debt of gratitude to my colleague James Dickinson, whose detailed observations and probing questions were, as always, invaluable.

ⁱ It is not possible to separate a socialist from a Marxist feminism as they were practiced in the 1970s; I therefore use the term socialist feminism inclusively. In this paper I generally follow contemporary U.S. usages of terms. From the late 1960s to the mid—1970s, the term women's liberation was current, intended to demarcate the younger and presumably more radical branches of the women's movement from the so—called bourgeois feminism of the National Organization for Women. Within the women's liberation movement socialist feminists formed a distinctive tendency. By the late 1970s, the term women's liberation was being replaced by the term feminism. That feminism was now a broader term than it had been earlier perhaps reflected the declining importance of distinguishing branches within the women's movement.

ⁱⁱ For descriptions of the excitement with which feminists confronted Marxist theory in the 1960s and '70s, see Echols, 1989; Vogel, 1998; and the personal accounts in Duplessis and Snitow, 1998.

ⁱⁱⁱ For fine (and very short) overviews of the domestic labor debate, see Himmelweit, 1983a and 1983c. For a survey of the literature, see Vogel, 1986. See also the essays in Sargent, 1981, and in Hansen and Philipson, 1990.

^{iv} See, for example, Brenner and Holmstrom, 1983; Molyneux, 1979; or, in its own way, Nicholson, 1986.

^v The concept of reproduction of labor power thus becomes pertinent, strictly speaking, only to subordinate classes. This is not to say that dominant—class women do not experience gender subordination. Rather, their situation is associated with their roles in the maintenance and replacement of property—owning classes and requires its own analysis.

^{vi} Paddy Quick (1977) argues that the core material basis for women's subordination in class societies is not the sexual division of labor or gender difference *per se* but the need to maintain subordinate—class women during childbearing.

^{vii} Likewise, dominant—class women have a special but quite different role in the maintenance and replacement of their class.

^{viii} The following three paragraphs radically compress Marx's lengthy discussions of aspects of the reproduction of labor power. Marx discussed the material at great length and with ample empirical illustration.

^{ix} Strictly speaking, a portion of the value created by the worker's labor goes to constant capital.

^x Elsewhere, Marx recognized that such labor was a condition for overall social reproduction.

^{xi} At this level of abstraction, I use the term working—class to indicate all those who are propertyless in the sense of not owning the means of production. The majority of the population in the United States today, as elsewhere, is in this sense working class, making it necessary in less abstract contexts to consider the stratification of households by occupation, education, income, and so forth.

^{xii} The question of whether or not domestic labor has value in the Marxist sense triggered its own mini— debate within the women's liberationist literature. In my view, it does not. For an exposition of why, see Smith, 1978.

^{xiii} This analysis, which clarifies but does not alter my earlier argument (Vogel, 1983), now seems to me less persuasive. What is clear, however, is that whether domestic labor is conceptualized as a component of necessary labor or not, the bottom line is that some way to theorize it within Marxist political economy must be found.

^{xiv} This analysis of domestic labor as a key component of the reproduction of labor power has an empirical counterpart in the way studies of the working class have changed over the past three decades. Rather than focus just on workers and their unions, numerous researchers look more broadly at working— class households and communities as bearers, maintainers, and replacers of labor power. See also Sacks, 1989, and Glucksmann, 1990.

^{xv} I agree with Nancy Fraser (1998) that most of what can loosely be termed gender relations is not in the economic sphere. My claim here is that there is nonetheless some piece that *is* economic, that it plays a role in the dynamics of capitalist accumulation, and that its theorization belongs to political economy. This distinctive economic aspect of women's oppression in capitalism is surely one of the factors that marks its specificity as opposed to, for example, racial or class subordination

^{xvi} Here again, I radically compress a lengthier account in Marx.

^{xvii} Thomas Kuhn (1962) describes the many ways theoretical paradigms remain invisible while powerfully framing their users' thinking. With respect to the theoretical framework under discussion, Althusser (1993, 185— 186) also comments on the phenomenon: “ From the outset we had insisted on drawing a structural distinction between a *combinatory* (abstract) and a *combination* (concrete), which created the major problem. But did anyone acknowledge it? No one took any notice of the distinction....No one was interested in [my approach to] theory. Only a few individuals understood my reasons and objectives.”

^{xviii} For England, see the bibliography in Jean Gardiner, 1997, and the journal *Capital & Class*. For Canada, see Hamilton and Barrett, 1990, and the journal *Studies in Political Economy*.

^{xix} For 1970s considerations of the meanings of the concept of reproduction, see Edholm, Harris, and Young, 1977; and Beechey, 1979. See also Himmelweit, 1983b.

^{xx} Gimenez (1990, 37) suggests that such households “ simply reproduce people; and [the labor power of] people...without marketable skills, [has] no value under capitalist conditions.” For a different interpretation, see Sassen, 1998.