other), we—their crutches, their slaves, their chains—open the process of their liberation. In this sense wages for housework will be much more educational than trying to prove that we can work as well as them, that we can do the same jobs. We leave this worthwhile effort to the “career woman,” the woman who escapes from her oppression not through the power of unity and struggle, but through the power of the master, the power to oppress—usually other women. And we don’t have to prove that we can “break the blue collar barrier.” A lot of us have broken that barrier a long time ago and have discovered that the overall did not give us any more power than the apron—quite often even less, because now we had to wear both and had even less time and energy to struggle against them. The things we have to prove are our capacity to expose what we are already doing as work, what capital is doing to us, and our power to struggle against it.

Unfortunately, many women—particularly single women—are afraid of the perspective of wages for housework because they are afraid of identifying even for a second with the housewife. They know that this is the most powerless position in society and they do not want to realize that they are housewives too. This is precisely our weakness, as our enslavement is maintained and perpetuated through this lack of self-identification. We want and must say that we are all housewives, we are all prostitutes, and we are all gay, because as long as we accept these divisions, and think that we are something better, something different than a housewife, we accept the logic of the master. We are all housewives because, no matter where we are, they can always count on more work from us, more fear on our side to put forward our demands, and less insistence that they should be met, since presumably our minds are directed elsewhere, to that man in our present or our future who will “take care of us.”

And we also delude ourselves that we can escape housework. But how many of us, in spite of working outside the home, have escaped it? And can we really so easily disregard the idea of living with a man? What if we lose our jobs? What about ageing and losing even the minimal amount of power that youth (productivity) and attractiveness (female productivity) afford us today? And what about children? Will we ever regret having chosen not to have them, not having even been able to realistically ask that question? And can we afford gay relations? Are we willing to pay the possible price of isolation and exclusion? But can we really afford relations with men?

The question is: why are these our only alternatives and what kind of struggle will take us beyond them?

Why Sexuality is Work (1975)

Sexuality is the release we are given from the discipline of the work process. It is the necessary complement to the routine and regimentation of the workweek. It is a license to “go natural,” to “let go,” so that we can return more refreshed on Monday to our job. “Saturday night” is the irruption of the “spontaneous,” the irrational in the rationality of the capitalist discipline of our life. It is supposed to be the compensation for work and is ideologically sold to us as the “other” of work: a space of freedom in which we can presumably be our true selves—a possibility for intimate, “genuine” connections in a universe of social relations in which we are constantly forced to repress, defer, postpone, hide, even from ourselves, what we desire.

This being the promise, what we actually get is far from our expectations. As we cannot go back to nature by simply taking off our clothes, so cannot become “ourselves” simply because it is time to make love. Little spontaneity is possible when the timing, conditions, and the amount of energy available for love, are out of our control. After a week of work our bodies and feelings are numb, and we cannot turn them on like machines. But what comes out when we “let go” is more often our repressed frustration and violence than our hidden self ready to be reborn in bed.

Among other things, we are always aware of the falseness of this spontaneity. No matter how many screams, sighs, and erotic exercises we
make in bed, we know that it is a parenthesis and tomorrow both of us will be back in our civilized clothes (we will have coffee together as we get ready for work). The more we know that this is a parenthesis which the rest of the day or the week will deny, the more difficult it becomes for us to try to turn into "savages" and "forget everything." And we cannot avoid feeling ill at ease. It is the same embarrassment that we experience when we undress knowing that we will be making love; the embarrassment of the morning after, when we are already busy reestablishing distances; the embarrassment (finally) of pretending to be completely different from what we are during the rest of the day. This transition is painful particularly for women; men seem to be experts at it, possibly because they have been subjected to a more strict regimentation in their work. Women have always wondered how it was possible that after a nightly display of passion, "he" could get up already in a different world, so distant at times that it would be difficult to reestablish even a physical connection with him. In any case, it is always women who suffer most from the schizophrenic character of sexual relations, not only because we arrive at the end of the day with more work and more worries on our shoulders, but additionally because we have the responsibility of making the sexual experience pleasurable for the man. This is why women are usually less sexually responsive than men. Sex is work for us, it is a duty. The duty to please is so built into our sexuality that we have learned to get pleasure out of giving pleasure, out of getting men aroused and excited.

Since we are expected to provide a release, we inevitably become the object onto which men discharge their repressed violence. We are raped, both in our beds and in the streets, precisely because we have been set up to be the providers of sexual satisfaction, the safety valves for everything that goes wrong in a man's life, and men have always been allowed to turn their anger against us if we do not measure up to the role, particularly when we refuse to perform.

Compartmentalization is only one aspect of the mutilation of our sexuality. The subordination of our sexuality to the reproduction of labor power has meant that heterosexuality has been imposed on us as the only acceptable sexual behavior. In reality, every genuine communication has a sexual component, for our bodies and emotions are indivisible and we communicate at all levels all the time. But sexual contact with women is forbidden because, in bourgeois morality, anything that is unproductive is obscene, unnatural, perverted. This has meant the imposition of a true schizophrenic condition upon us, as early in our lives we must learn to draw a line between the people we can love and the people we just talk to, those to whom we can open our body and those to whom we can only open our "souls," our lovers and our friends. The result is that we are bodiless souls for our female friends, and soulless flesh for our male lovers. And this division separates us not only from other women, but from ourselves as well, in term of what we do or do not accept in our bodies and feelings, the "clean" parts that are there for display, and the "dirty," "secret" parts which can only be disclosed (and thereby become clean) in the conjugal bed, at the point of production.

The same concern for production has demanded that sexuality, especially in women, be confined to certain periods of our lives. Sexuality is repressed in children and adolescent as well as in older women. Thus, the years in which we are allowed to be sexually active are the very years in which we are most burdened with work, when enjoying our sexual encounters becomes a feat.

But the main reason why we cannot enjoy the pleasure that sexuality may provide is that for women sex is work. Giving pleasure to man is an essential part of what is expected of every woman.

Sexual freedom does not help. Certainly it is important that we are not stoned to death if we are "unfaithful," or if it is found that we are not "virgins." But "sexual liberation" has intensified our work. In the past, we were just expected to raise children. Now we are expected to have a waged job, still clean the house and have children and, at the end of a double workday, be ready to hop in bed and be sexually enticing. For women the right to have sex is the duty to have sex and to enjoy it (something which is not expected of most jobs), which is why there have been so many investigations, in recent years, concerning which parts of our body—whether the vagina or the clitoris—are more sexually productive.

But whether in its liberalized or its more repressive form, our sexuality is still under control. The law, medicine, and our economic dependence on men, all guarantee that, although the rules are loosened, spontaneity is ruled out of our sexual life. Sexual repression within the family is a function of that control. In this respect, fathers, brothers, husbands, pimps all have acted as agents of the state, to supervise our sexual work, to ensure that we would provide sexual services according to the established, socially sanctioned productivity norms.

Economic dependence is the ultimate form of control over our sexuality. This is why sexual work is still one of the main occupations for women and prostitution underlines every sexual encounter. Under these conditions there cannot be any spontaneity for us in sex, and this is why pleasure is so ephemeral in our sexual life.

Precisely because of the exchange involved, sexuality for us is always accompanied by anxiety and it is undoubtedly the part of housework
most responsible for our self-hatred. In addition, the commercialization of the female body makes it impossible for us to feel comfortable with our body regardless of its shape or form. No woman can happily undress in front of a man knowing that not only she is being evaluated, but there are standards of performance for female bodies to be reckoned with, that everyone, male or female, is aware of, as they are splashed all around us, on every wall in our cities and TV screen. Knowing that, in some way, we are selling ourselves has destroyed our confidence and our pleasure in our bodies.

This is why, whether we are skinny or plump, long or short nosed, tall or small, we all hate our bodies. We hate it because we are accustomed to looking at it from the outside, with the eyes of the men we meet, and with the body-market in mind. We hate it because we are used to thinking of it as something to sell, something that has become alienated from us and is always on the counter. We hate it because we know that so much depends on it. On how our body looks depends whether we can get a good or bad job (in marriage or out of the home), whether we can gain some social power, some company to defeat the loneliness that awaits us in our old age and often in our youth as well. And we always fear our body may turn against us, we may get fat, get wrinkles, age fast, make people indifferent to us, lose our right to intimacy, lose our chance of being touched or hugged.

In sum, we are too busy performing, too busy pleasing, too afraid of failing, to enjoy making love. The sense of our value is at stake in every sexual relation. If a man says we make love well, we excite him, whether or not we like making love with him, we feel great, it boosts our sense of power, even if we know that afterwards we still have to do the dishes. But we are never allowed to forget the exchange involved, because we never transcend the value-relation in our love relation with a man. "How much?" is the question that always governs our experience of sexuality. Most of our sexual encounters are spent in calculations. We sigh, sob, gasp, pant, jump up and down in bed, but in the meantime our mind keeps calculating "how much"—how much of ourselves can we give before we lose or undersell ourselves, how much will we get in return? If it is our first date, it is how much can we allow him to get: can he go up our skirt, open our blouse, put his fingers under our brassiere? At what point should we tell him "stop"? How strongly should we refuse? How soon can we tell him that we like him before he starts thinking that we are "cheap"?

Keep the price up—that's the rule, at least the one we are taught. If we are already in bed the calculations become even more complicated, because we also have to calculate our chances of getting pregnant, which means that throughout the sighing and gasping and other shows of passion we also have to quickly run down the schedule of our period. But faking excitement during the sexual act, in the absence of an orgasm, is extra work and a hard one, because when you're faking it, you never know how far you should go, and you always end up doing more for fear of not doing enough.

Indeed, it has taken a lot of struggle and a leap of power on our side to finally begin to admit that nothing was happening.
COUNTERPLANNING
FROM THE KITCHEN (1975)
(With Nicole Cox)

[This article was originally written in reply to an article that appeared in the magazine Liberation, entitled “Women and Pay for Housework” by Carol Lopate.1 Our reply was turned down by the editors of the magazine. We publish it now because Lopate articulates with more openness than most the assumptions of the Left and its relation to the international feminist movement at this moment in time. By the publication of this document we are not opening a sterile debate with the Left but closing one.]

Since Marx, it has been clear that capital rules and develops through the wage, that is, that the foundation of capitalist society was the wage laborer and his or her direct exploitation. What has been neither clear nor assumed by the organizations of the working class movement is that precisely through the wage has the exploitation of the non-wage laborer been organized. This exploitation has been even more effective because the lack of a wage hid it . . . where women are concerned, their labor appears to be a personal service outside of capital.2

It is no accident that in the last few months several journals of the Left have published attacks on Wages for Housework. Whenever the women’s movement has taken an autonomous position, the Left has felt threatened. The Left realizes that this perspective has implications that go beyond the “women question” and represents a threat to their politics, past and present, both with respect to women and to the rest of the working class. Indeed, the sectarianism the Left has traditionally shown in relation to women’s struggles is a consequence of their shallow understanding of the way capitalism rules and the direction class struggle must take to break this rule.

In the name of “class struggle” and “the unified interest of the working class,” the Left has always selected certain sectors of the working class as revolutionary subjects and condemned others to a merely supportive role in the struggles these sectors were waging. The Left has thus reproduced in its organizational and strategic objectives the same divisions of the class that characterize the capitalist division of labor. In this respect, despite the variety of tactical positions, the Left has been strategically united. When it comes to the choice of revolutionary subjects, Stalinists, Trotskyites, Anarcho-Libertarians, old and new Left, join hands with the same assumptions and arguments for a common cause.

They Offer Us “Development”

Since the Left has accepted the wage as the dividing line between work and non-work, production and parasitism, potential power and powerlessness, the immense amount of unwaged labor that women perform for capital in the home has escaped their analysis and strategy. From Lenin through Gramsci to Juliet Mitchell, the entire leftist tradition has agreed on the marginality of housework to the reproduction of capital and the marginality of the housewife to revolutionary struggle. According to the Left, as housewives, women are not suffering from capital, but are suffering from the absence of it. Our problem, it seems, is that capital has failed to reach into our kitchens and bedrooms, with the twofold consequence that we presumably remain at a feudal, precapitalist stage, and whatever we do in our kitchens and bedrooms is irrelevant to social change. Obviously, if our kitchens are outside of capital, our struggle to destroy them will never succeed in causing capital to fall.

Why would capital allow so much unprofitable work, so much unproductive labor time to survive is a question the Left never asks, forever confident of capital’s irrationality and inability to plan. Ironically, they have translated their ignorance of the specific relation of women to capital into a theory of women’s political backwardness to be overcome only by our entering the factory gates. Thus, the logic of an analysis that sees women’s oppression as caused by their exclusion from capitalist relations inevitably results in a strategy for us to enter these relations rather than destroy them.

In this sense, there is an immediate connection between the strategy the Left has for women and the strategy it has for the “Third World.” In the same way as they want to bring women to the factories, they want to bring factories to the “Third World.” In both cases they presume that the “underdeveloped”—those of us who are unwaged and work at a lower technological level—are backward with respect to the “real working class” and can catch up only by obtaining a more advanced type of capitalist exploitation, a bigger share of factory work. In both cases, the struggle which the Left offers to the wageless, the “underdeveloped,” is not a struggle against capital, but a struggle for capital, in a more rationalized,
developed, and productive form. In our case, they offer us not only the “right to work” (this they offer to every worker), but the right to work more, the right to be further exploited.

**A New Ground of Struggle**

The political foundation of *Wages for Housework* is the refusal of this capitalist ideology that equates wagelessness and low technological development with political backwardness, lack of power and, ultimately, with a need for capital to organize us as a precondition for our getting organized. It is our refusal to accept that because we are wageless or work at a lower technological level (and these two conditions are deeply connected) our needs must be different from those of the rest of the working class. We refuse to accept that while a male autoworker in Detroit can struggle against the assembly line, starting from our kitchens in the metropolis, or from the kitchens and fields of the “Third World,” our goal must be the factory work that workers all over the world are increasingly refusing. Our rejection of leftist ideology is one and the same as our rejection of capitalist development as a road to liberation or, more specifically, our rejection of capitalism in whatever form it takes. Inherent in this rejection is a redefinition of what capitalism is and who the working class is—that is, a new evaluation of class forces and class needs.

Wages for Housework, then, is not one demand among others, but a political perspective that opens a new ground of struggle, beginning with women but for the entire working class. This must be emphasized, since the extension of Wages for Housework to a demand is a common element in the attacks of the Left upon it, as a way of discrediting it that enables its critics to avoid confronting the political issues it raises.

Lopate’s article, “Women and Pay for Housework,” is exemplary of this trend. Already the title—“Pay for Housework”—misrepresents the issue, for a wage is not just a bit of money, but is the expression of the power relation between capital and the working class. A more subtle way of discrediting Wages for Housework is to claim that this perspective is imported from Italy and bears little relevance to the situation in the United States where women “do work.” Here is another example of misinformation. *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*—the only source Lopate refers to—acknowledges the international dimension of the context in which Wages for Housework originated. In any case, tracing the geographical origin of Wages for Housework is beside the point at the present stage of capital’s international integration. What matters is its political genesis, which is the refusal to see work, exploitation, and the power to revolt against it only in the presence of a wage. In our case, it is the end of the division between women “who do work” and women “who do not work” (they are “just housewives”), which implies that unwaged work is not work, that housework is not work and, paradoxically, that only in the United States do women work and struggle because many hold a second job. But to not see women’s work in the home is to be blind to the work and struggles of the overwhelming majority of the world’s population that is wageless. It is to ignore that American capital was built on slave labor as well as waged labor and, up to this day, it thrives on the unwaged labor of millions of women and men in the fields, kitchens, and prisons of the United States and throughout the world.

**The Hidden Work**

Beginning with ourselves as women, we know that the working day for capital does not necessarily produce a paycheck, it does not begin and end at the factory gates, and we rediscover the nature and extent of housework itself. For as soon as we raise our heads from the socks we mend and the meals we cook and look at the totality of our working day, we see that while it does not result in a wage for ourselves, we nevertheless produce the most precious product to appear on the capitalist market: labor power. Housework is much more than house cleaning. It is servicing the wage earners physically, emotionally, sexually, getting them ready for work day after day. It is taking care of our children—the future workers—assisting them from birth through their school years, ensuring that they too conform in the ways expected of them under capitalism. This means that behind every factory, behind every school, behind every office or mine there is the hidden work of millions of women who have consumed their life, their labor, producing the labor power that works in those factories, schools, offices, or mines.

This is why to this day, both in the “developed” and “underdeveloped” countries, housework and the family are the pillars of capitalist production. The availability of a stable, well-disciplined labor force is an essential condition of production at every stage of capitalist development. The conditions of our work vary from country to country. In some countries we are forced into an intensive production of children, in others we are told not to reproduce, particularly if we are black or on welfare, or tend to reproduce “troublemakers.” In some countries we produce unskilled labor for the fields, in others we produce skilled workers and technicians. But in every country our unwaged work and the function we perform for capital are the same.

Getting a second job has never released us from the first. Two jobs have only meant for women even less time and energy to struggle against
both. Moreover, a woman, working full-time in the home or outside of it as well, married or single, has to put hours of labor into reproducing her own labor power, and women well know the tyranny of this task, for a pretty dress and hairdo are conditions for their getting the job, whether on the marriage market or on the wage labor market.

Thus, we doubt that in the United States, “schools, nurseries, day-care and television have taken away from mothers much of the responsibility for the socialization of their children,” and that “the decrease in house size and the mechanization of housework has meant that the housewife is potentially left with much greater leisure time” and she is just “kept busy buying, using and repairing the devices . . . which are theoretically geared towards saving her time.”

Day care centers and nurseries have never liberated any time for ourselves, but only our time for additional work. As for technology, it is in the United States that we measure the gap between the technology socially available and the technology that trickles down into our kitchens. And in this case too, it is our wageless condition that determines the quantity and quality of the technology we get. For “if you are not paid by the hour, within certain limits, nobody cares how long it takes you to do your work.” If anything, the situation in the United States proves that neither technology nor a second job can liberate women from housework, and that “producing a technician is not a less burdensome alternative to producing an unskilled worker, if between these two fates does not stand the refusal of women to work for free, whatever might be the technological level at which this work is done, the refusal of women to live in order to produce, whatever might be the particular type of child to be produced.”

It remains to be clarified that by saying that the work we perform in the home is capitalist production, we are not expressing a wish to be legitimated as part of the “productive forces,” in other words, it is not a resort to moralism. Only from a capitalist viewpoint being productive is a moral virtue, if not a moral imperative. From the viewpoint of the working class, being productive simply means being exploited. As Marx recognized, “to be a productive laborer is therefore not a piece of luck, but a misfortune.” Thus we derive little “self-esteem” from it. But when we say that housework is a moment of capitalist production we clarify our specific function in the capitalist division of labor and the specific forms that our revolt against it must take. Ultimately, when we say that we produce capital, we say that we can and want to destroy it, rather than engage in a losing battle to move from one form and degree of exploitation to another.

We must also clarify that we are not “borrowing categories from the Marxist world.” Yet, we admit that we are less eager than Lopate to discard Marx’s work, as it has given us an analysis that to this day is indispensable for understanding how we function in capitalist society. We also suspect that Marx’s apparent indifference to housework may be grounded in historical factors. We do not refer only to the dose of male chauvinism that Marx certainly shared with his contemporaries (and not only with them). At the time when Marx was writing, the nuclear family and housework had yet to be fully created. What Marx had before his eyes was the proletarian woman, who was employed along with her husband and children in the factory, and the bourgeois woman who had a maid and, whether or not she also worked, was not producing the commodity labor power. The absence of the nuclear family did not mean that workers did not mate and copulate. It meant, however, that it was impossible to have family relations and housework when each member of the family spent fifteen hours a day in a factory, and neither the time nor the physical space were available for family life.

It was only after epidemics and overwork decimated the workforce and, most important, after waves of proletarian struggles, in the 1830s and 1840s, brought England close to a revolution, that the need for a more stable and disciplined labor force led capital to organize the nuclear family as the center for the reproduction of labor power. Far from being a precapitalist structure, the family, as we know it in the “West,” is a creation of capital for capital, as an institution that is supposed to guarantee the quantity and quality of labor power and its control. Thus, “like the trade union, the family protects the worker but also ensures that he and she will never be anything but workers. And that is why the struggle of the woman of the working class against the family is crucial.”

Our Wagelessness as a Discipline
The family is essentially the institutionalization of our unwaged labor, of our wageless dependence on men and, consequently, the institutionalization of an unequal division of power that has disciplined us as well as men. For our wagelessness and our dependence have kept men tied to their jobs, by ensuring that whenever they wanted to refuse their work they would be faced with the wife and children who depended on their wage. Here is the basis of those “old habits—the men’s and ours” that Lopate has found so difficult to break. It is no accident that it is difficult for a man “to ask for special time schedules so he can be involved equally in childcare.” A reason why men cannot arrange for part-time hours is that the male wage is crucial for the survival of the family, even when the wife brings in a second wage. And if we “found ourselves preferring or finding less consuming jobs, which have left us more time for house care”
it is because we were resisting an intensified exploitation, being consumed in a factory and then being consumed more rapidly at home.15

Our lack of a wage for the work we do in the home has also been the primary cause of our weakness in the wage labor market. Employers know that we are used to work for nothing, and we are so desperate for some money of our own that they can get us at a low price. Since female has become synonymous with housewife, we carry this identity and the "homely skills" we acquire from birth wherever we go. This is why female employment is so often an extension of housework, and our road to the wage often leads us to more house care. The fact that housework is unwaged has given this socially imposed condition an appearance of naturality ("femininity") that affects us whatever we do. Thus we don't need to be told by Lopate that "the essential thing to remember is that we are a 'sex.'" For years capital has told us that we're only good for sex and making babies. This is the sexual division of labor and we refuse to eternalize it, as inevitably happens when we ask: "What does being female actually mean; what, if any, specific qualities necessarily for all time adhere to that characteristic?" To ask this question is to beg for a sexist reply. Who is to say who we are? All we can know now is who we are not, to the degree that through our struggle we gain the power to break with our imposed social identity. It is the ruling class, or those who aspire to rule, who presuppose a natural and eternal human personality—it is to eternalize their power over us.

**Glorification of the Family**

Not surprisingly Lopate's quest for the essence of femaleness leads her to a blatant glorification of unwaged work in the home and unwaged labor in general:

The home and the family have traditionally provided the only interstice of capitalist life in which people can possibly serve each other's needs out of love or care, even if it is often also out of fear and domination. Parents take care of children at least partly out of love... I even think that this memory lingers on with us as we grow up so that we always retain with us as a kind of utopia the work and caring which come out of love, rather than being based on financial reward.16

The literature of the women's movement has shown the devastating effects that this love, care and service have had on women. These are the chains that have tied us to a condition of near slavery. We refuse then to retain with us and elevate to a utopia the misery of our mothers and grandmothers and our own misery as children! When capital or the State does not pay a wage, it is those who are loved, cared for, also wageless and even more powerless, who must pay with their lives.

We also refuse Lopate's suggestion that asking for remuneration for domestic work "would only serve to obscure from us still further the possibilities of free and unalienated labor,"19 which means that the quickest way to "disalienate" work is to do it for free. No doubt President Ford would appreciate this suggestion. The voluntary labor on which the modern State increasingly rests is based on such charitable dispensations of our time. It seems to us, however, that if, instead of relying on love and care, our mothers had had a financial remuneration, they would have been less bitter, less dependent, less blackmailed, and less blackmailing to their children, who were constantly reminded of their sacrifices. Our mothers would have had more time and power to struggle against that work and would have left us at a more advanced stage in that struggle.

It is the essence of capitalist ideology to glorify the family as a "private world," the last frontier where men and women "keep [their] souls alive," and it is no wonder that this ideology is enjoying a renewed popularity with capitalist planners in our present times of "austerity" and "hardship."20 As Russell Baker recently stated in the New York Times, love kept us warm during the Depression and we had better bring it with us on our present excursion into hard times. This ideology that opposes the family (or the community) to the factory, the personal to the social, the private to the public, productive to unproductive work, is functional to our enslavement to the home, which, in the absence of a wage, has always appeared as an act of love. This ideology is deeply rooted in the capitalist division of labor that finds one of its clearest expressions in the organization of the nuclear family.

The way in which the wage relation has mystified the social function of the family is an extension of the way capital has mystified waged labor and the subordination of our social relations to the "cash nexus." We have learned from Marx that the wage hides the unpaid labor that goes into profit. But measuring work by the wage also hides the extent to which our family and social relations have been subordinated to the relations of production—they have become relations of production—so that every moment of our lives functions for the accumulation of capital. The wage and the lack of it have allowed capital to obscure the real length of our working day. Work appears as just one compartment of our lives, taking place only in certain times and spaces. The time we consume in the "social factory," preparing ourselves for work or going to work, restoring...
our "muscles, nerves, bones and brains" with quick snacks, quick sex, movies, all this appears as leisure, free time, individual choice.

Different Labor Markets

Capital's use of the wage also obscures who is the working class and keeps workers divided. Through the wage relation, capital organizes different labor markets (a labor market for blacks, youth, women and white males), and opposes a "working class" to a "non-working" proletariat, supposedly parasitic on the work of the former. Thus, as welfare recipients we are told we live off the taxes of the "working class," as housewives we are pictured as the bottomless pits of our husbands' paychecks.

But ultimately the social weakness of the wageless has been and is the weakness of the entire working class with respect to capital. As the history of the "runaway shop" demonstrates, the availability of unwaged labor, both in the "underdeveloped" countries and in the metropolis, has allowed capital to leave those areas where labor had made itself too expensive, thus undermining the power that workers there had reached. Whenever capital could not run to the "Third World," it opened the gates of the factories to women, blacks, and youth in the metropolis or to migrants from the "Third World." Thus it is no accident that while capitalism is presumably based on waged labor, more than half of the world's population is unwaged. Wagelessness and underdevelopment are essential elements of capitalist planning, nationally and internationally. They are powerful means to make workers compete on the national and international labor market, and make us believe that our interests are different and contradictory.

Here are the roots of sexism, racism and welfarism (contempt for the workers who have succeeded in getting some money from the State), which are the expressions of different labor markets and thus different ways of regulating and dividing the working class. If we ignore this use of capitalist ideology and its roots in the wage relation, we not only end up considering racism, sexism and welfarism as moral diseases, products of "false consciousness," but we are confined to a strategy of "education" that leaves us with nothing but "moral imperatives to bolster our side." As the struggles of black people in the 1960s showed, it was not by good words, but by the organization of their power that they made their needs "understood." In the case of women, trying to educate men has always meant that our struggle was privatized and fought in the solitude of our kitchens and bedrooms. Power educates. First men will fear, then they will learn because capital will fear. For we are not struggling for a more equal redistribution of the same work. We are struggling to put an end to this work and the first step is to put a price tag on it.

Wage Demands

Our power as women begins with the social struggle for the wage, not to be let into the wage relation (for we were never out of it) but to be let out of it, for every sector of the working class to be let out. Here we have to clarify what is the nature of the wage struggle. When the Left maintains that wage demands are "economicist," "union demands," they ignore that the wage, as well as the lack of it, is the direct measure of our exploitation and therefore the direct expression of the power relation between capital and the working class and within the working class. They also ignore that the wage struggle takes many forms and it is not limited to wage raises. Reduction of work-time, obtaining better social services, as well as obtaining more money—all these are wage gains that determine how much labor is taken away from us and how much power we have over our lives. This is why the wage has historically been the main ground of struggle between workers and capital. And as an expression of the class relation the wage has always two sides: the side of capital that uses it to control workers, by ensuring that every wage raise is matched by an increase in productivity; and the side of the workers, who increasingly are fighting for more money, more power, and less work.

As the history of the present capitalist crisis demonstrates, fewer and fewer workers are now willing to sacrifice their lives at the service of capitalist production and to listen to the calls for increased productivity. But when the "fair exchange" between wages and productivity is upset, the struggle over wages becomes a direct attack on capital's profit and its capacity to extract surplus labor from us. Thus the struggle for the wage is at the same time a struggle against the wage, for the power it expresses and against the capitalist relation it embodies. In the case of the wageless, in our case, the struggle for the wage is even more clearly an attack on capital. Wages for Housework means that capital will have to pay for the enormous amount of social services employers now save on our backs. Most important, to demand Wages for Housework is to refuse to accept our work as a biological destiny, which is an indispensable condition to struggle against it. Nothing, in fact, has been so powerful in institutionalizing our work, the family, and our dependence on men, as the fact that not a wage but "love" has always paid for this work. But for us, as for waged workers, the wage is not the price of a productivity deal. In return for a wage we will not work as much or more than before, we will work
less. We want a wage to be able to dispose of our time and our energies, to make a struggle, and not be confined by a second job because of our need for financial independence.

**OUR STRUGGLE FOR THE WAGE OPENS FOR THE WAGED AND THE UNWAGED ALIKE THE QUESTION OF THE REAL LENGTH OF THE WORKING DAY. UP TO NOW THE WORKING CLASS, MALE AND FEMALE, HAD ITS WORKING DAY DEFINED BY CAPITAL—FROM PUNCHING IN TO PUNCHING OUT. THAT DEFINED THE TIME WE BELONGED TO CAPITAL AND THE TIME WE BELONGED TO OURSELVES. BUT WE HAVE NEVER BELONGED TO OURSELVES, WE HAVE ALWAYS BELONGED TO CAPITAL EVERY MOMENT OF OUR LIVES AND IT IS TIME THAT WE MAKE CAPITAL PAY FOR EVERY MOMENT OF IT. IN CLASS TERMS THIS IS TO DEMAND A WAGE FOR EVERY MOMENT WE LIVE AT THE SERVICE OF CAPITAL.**

**Making Capital Pay**

This is the class perspective that has shaped the struggles in the 1960s in the United States and internationally. In the United States the struggles of blacks and welfare mothers—the “Third World” of the metropolis—expressed the revolt of the wageless and their refusal of the only alternative capital offers: more work. These struggles, which had their center of power in the community, were not for development, but for the reappropriation of the social wealth that capital has accumulated from the wageless as well as from the waged. They challenged the capitalist organization of society that imposes work as the only condition for our existence. They also challenged the leftist dogma that only in the factories can the working class organize its power.

But you don’t need to enter a factory to be part of a working class organization. When Lopate argues that “the ideological preconditions for working class solidarity are networks and connections which arise from working together” and “these preconditions cannot arise out of isolated women working in separate homes,” she writes off the struggles these “isolated” women made in the 1960s (rent strikes, welfare struggles etc.). She assumes that we cannot organize ourselves if we are not first organized by capital; and since she denies that capital has already organized us, she denies the existence of our struggle. But to confuse capital’s organization of our work, whether in the kitchens or in the factories, with the organization of our struggle against it is a sure road to defeat. To struggle for work is already a defeat; and we can be sure that every new form of organization of work will try to isolate us even more. For it is an illusion to imagine that capital does not divide us when we are not working in isolation from each other.

In opposition to the divisions typical of the capitalist organization of work, we must organize according to our needs. In this sense, Wages for Housework is as much a refusal of the socialization of the factory as it is a refusal of a possible capitalist “rationalization” of the home, as proposed by Lopate: “We need to look seriously at the tasks which are ‘necessary’ to keep a house going . . . We need to investigate the time and labor saving devices and decide which are useful and which merely cause a further degradation of housework.”

It is not technology per se that degrades us, but the use capital makes of it. Moreover, “self-management” and “workers’ control” have always existed in the home. We always had a choice of Monday or Saturday to do the laundry, or the choice between buying a dishwasher or a vacuum cleaner, provided we could afford either. Thus, we should not ask capitalism to change the nature of our work, but struggle to refuse reproducing ourselves and others as workers, as labor power, as commodities; and a condition for achieving this goal is that this work be recognized as work through a wage. Obviously, as long as the capitalist wage-relation exists, so too does capitalism. Thus we do not say that winning a wage is the revolution. We say that it is a revolutionary strategy because it undermines the role we are assigned in the capitalist division of labor and consequently it changes the power relations within the working class in terms more favorable to us and the unity of the class.

As for the financial aspects of Wages for Housework, they are “highly problematical” only if we take the viewpoint of capital, the viewpoint of the Treasury Department, which always claims poverty when addressing workers. Since we are not the Treasury Department and have no aspiration to be, we cannot imagine planning for them systems of payment, wage differentials and productivity deals. It is not for us to put limits on our power, it is not for us to measure our value. It is only for us to organize a struggle to get what we want, for us all, on our terms. Our aim is to be priceless, to price ourselves out of the market, for housework and factory work and office work to become “uneconomic.”

Similarly, we reject the argument that some other sector of the working class would pay for our eventual gains. According to this logic, we could say that waged workers are now paid with the money that capital does not give us. But this is the way the State talks. In fact, to claim that the demands for social welfare programs made by blacks in the 1960s had a “devastating effect on any long-range strategy . . . on white-black relations” since “workers knew that they, not the corporations, ended
up paying for those programs" is plain racism. If we assume that every struggle must end up in a redistribution of poverty we assume the inevitability of our defeat. Indeed, Lopate’s article is written under the sign of defeatism, which means accepting capitalist institutions as inevitable. Lopate cannot imagine that were capital to lower other workers’ wages to give us a wage, those workers would be able to defend their interest and ours too. She also assumes that “obviously men would receive the highest wages for their work in the home”—in short, she assumes that we can never win.

Finally, Lopate warns us that if we obtained wages for housework, capital would send supervisors to control our work. Since she sees housewives only as victims, incapable of a struggle, she cannot imagine that we could organize collectively to shut out the face of a supervisor if they tried to impose this control. She further assumes that since we don’t have official supervisors then our work is not controlled. But even if being waged meant that the state would try to control more directly our work, this would still be preferable to the present situation; for this attempt would expose who commands our work, and it would be better to know who is our enemy than blaming and hating ourselves because we are compelled to “love or care” “out of fear and domination.”

While it is generally recognized that the dramatic expansion of the female labor force is possibly the most important social phenomenon of the 1970s, uncertainty still prevails among economists as to its origins. Technological advancement in the home, the reduction of family size and the growth of the service sector are offered as likely causes of this trend. Yet, it is also argued that these factors may be an effect of women’s entering the labor force and that looking for a cause would lead us into a vicious circle, a “chicken or egg” problem. This uncertainty among economists stems from their failure to recognize that the dramatic increase of the female labor force in the 1970s reflects women’s refusal to function as unwaged workers in the home, catering to the reproduction of the national workforce. In fact, what goes under the name of “home-making” is (to use Gary Becker’s expression) a “productive consumption” process, producing and reproducing “human capital,” or in the words of