

Greetings from Montreal! This is a contribution to our discussion on our relationship with the Left, an attempt to put their attacks in perspective.

THE PRODUCTIVITY OF DOMESTIC LABOUR: A FALSE DEBATE

The polemic against the wages for housework perspective often takes the form of a theoretical discussion of the productivity of domestic labour. Marx defined productive labour as labour that directly adds to capital; therefore, productive workers have social power since capital can continue to exist only with their cooperation. Their social power lies in the threat to capital of the potential withdrawal of their labour. Unproductive workers, they argue, cannot destroy capital by withdrawing their labour, since their labour does not produce capital in the first place.

Arguments about the productivity of domestic labour are really questions of social power: what sectors have social power? where does the struggle against capital take place? For various reasons, the traditional Left continues to argue that domestic labour is unproductive labour, i.e. that housewives have no social power, and therefore, real political organization must take place at the point of industrial production, in the factories, where real social power lies.

It is insufficient to answer these attacks with our own quotes from Marx. WFH is an attack on the Leninist concept of party organization and therefore threatens the hegemony of Left parties in the anti-capitalist struggle. It is in this context that we must reply. However, I supply one short quote from Marx on the question of domestic labour:

"It remains true however that the commodity appears as past, objectivised labour, and that therefore, if it does not appear in the form of a thing, it can only appear in the form of labour power itself...Productive labour would therefore be such labour as produces commodities or directly produces, trains, develops, maintains or reproduces labour-power itself."

Even the most sophisticated Left attack, Wally Secombe's article "The Housewife and Her Labour Under Capitalism" (New Left Review #83), is merely a more elaborate attempt to relegate women to a secondary, auxiliary role in revolutionary struggle, raising "Women's ~~ix~~ issues" in a purely agitational, shit-disturbing attack on capital. "Mobilizations of housewives raising demands for the socialization of housework, demands against the state, demands for price-watch committees, etc.--such ~~x~~ actions can make a tremendous contribution to the advancement of the class struggle particularly if they are combined with simultaneous proletarian initiatives." (emphasis in original)

Lise Vogel ("The Earthly Family", Radical America, Fall 1973) thinks that Marx didn't discuss domestic labour because "Marx, like his contemporaries, was imprisoned with a male perspective that ultimately distorted his understanding of the family and of women's productive activity in general." In spite of this, Vogel sticks to Marx's (earlier) definition of productive labour as being labour that is necessarily waged and produces capital to conclude: "Dallacosta...confuses being necessary to the system with being 'productive' in the strict sense." This kind of reasoning--that Marx was limited by sexism, and didn't discuss housework, but using his definition anyway to ~~x~~ discredit Dallacosta's analysis--is an example of an awkward attempt to advance theory (equated with going "beyond Marx", i.e. criticizing him) while falling back on the old orthodoxies and century-old definitions to deal with the first real theoretical advance of the women's movement over the outmoded trade-unionist strategies of the Left.

Theories of Surplus Value Part I (Progress Publishers, Moscow) contains a large section on ~~ix~~ theories of productive and unproductive labour in which Marx mentions prior definitions of productive labour and criticizes them for their historical short-sightedness. Before the industrial revolution, the Physiocrats stepped forward to claim that only agricultural labour was productive, the ideological reflection of the dominant form of economic organization at the time: agriculture. "Though wrong in thinking that only agricultural labour is productive, the Physiocrats put forward the correct view that from the capitalist standpoint, only that labour is productive which creates a surplus value; labour which produces a net product, not for itself, but for the landowner." (TSV p 153)

When merchant capital dominated England's economy, the Mercantilists claimed that trade, not agriculture, was the source of all value: "The basis of their (the Mercantilists) theory was the idea that labour is only productive in those branches of production whose products, when sent abroad, bring back more money than they have cost (or than had to be exported in ~~x~~ exchange for them)... (TSV p 203)

In 1819, David Ricardo promoted the interests of industrial capital by claiming that the labour of landowners was unproductive. And Adam Smith (Wealth of Nations, 1776) was among the first to advance the notion of productive labour as the production of ~~x~~ commodities, labour which is directly exchanged with capital and produces value greater than the cost of its own subsistence.

Marx saw quite clearly ~~the~~ his own role in the historical evolution of a definition of productive labour. He drew from the Physiocrats their concept of surplus product, from Adam Smith the commodity, and formulated his own definition linked to the development of industrial capitalism in the mid-nineteenth century.

"Productive labour, in its ^{meaning} ~~essence~~ for capitalist production, is wage labour, which, exchanged against the variable part of capital (the part of capital that is spent on wages), reproduces not only this part of the capital (or the value of its own labour power), but in addition produces surplus value for the capitalist. It is only thereby that commodity or money is transformed into capital, is produced as capital...only that labour power is productive which produces a value greater than its own." (TSV p 152)

The single most important advance that Marx made over all pre-existing theories of productive labour was the productivity is determined by the social relations within which the labour takes place, as opposed to the Physiocrats, for example, who claimed that all value comes from the land, and could see value only in real physical production (eg. vegetables).

"These definitions are therefore not derived from the material characteristics of labour (neither from the nature of its product nor from the particular character of the labour as concrete labour), but from the definite social form, the social relations of production, within which the labour is realised. An actor, for example, or even a clown, according to this definition, is a productive laborer is he works in the service of a capitalist (an entrepreneur), to whom he returns more labour than he receives from him in the form of wages." (TSV, p 157)

Marx's theory of productive labour is no less historically determined than those of the Physiocrats, Mercantilists, Ricardo or Smith. The social relations and economic organization of mid-nineteenth century capitalism, specifically, the factory ~~as~~ as the basic unit of industrial production, impose their ~~own~~ own limits on the actual content of his discussion of productive labour. The fact that Marx did not discuss housework as it presently exists, as women's work in the home, may be due to the fact that the concept of "domestic science" did not develop until the latter part of the nineteenth century among the middle and upper classes. (Research into this question is obviously something we need to do-- how was domestic labour organized, the role of women in the industrial labour force, women in the home, women who worked as domestic servants for the middle and upper classes, etc.)

An analysis of the nature of domestic labour, and the social power it commands, must then proceed from two basic assumptions:

- 1) That the productivity of labour is a function of the social relations within which it takes place, and
- 2) That the development of capitalism in the past century has progressed from the factory as the basic unit of social industrial production to the social factory, the total capitalisation of all social sectors, particularly the home.

From that basis, the debate about the productivity of labour with reference to Marx's definitions is placed in perspective: these discussions are thinly veiled ideological (not theoretical) attacks on our attempts to construct an autonomous women's movement, disguised as "scientific" research. We reject the Left's static view of social power as given, and replace it with a perspective of wages for housework that ~~changes~~ changes the social relations themselves, and bring the struggle against capital into the community, where the reproduction of labour power takes place.

Responses are requested:

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