

Housework and the Possibilities of Impossible Demands

From the growing literature on the relationship of housework to the needs of modern capitalism and from the actual struggles taking place over housework, it is quite clear that housework is an integral part of the social factory of capitalism. What is not clear is the proper way to struggle against housework. The only major movement with a strategy on this question is the Wages for Housework movement. Their formal demand, however, is not fully understood by many women, including the critics of wages for housework, and therefore, some analysis of this demand would be useful.

Wages for Housework: Stage I

The demand of wages for housework (WFH) in the initial stage is a highly useful one, for consciousness-raising (demythifying false consciousness about the purpose of housework). Furthermore, it serves as a mobilizing device to bring women into a feminist/socialist movement who were never attracted before, for two types of reasons:

Either they never were attracted to the women's movements, seeing them as working for job equality or for abortion legalization, and these women were neither actively looking for jobs or abortions, or they were never attracted by the demands of left-wing movements, not being willing to see the role of capitalism in women's oppression, finding that socialist societies have a 'woman problem' as well.

So the demand of WFH may reach a whole new sector of women, which is quite important. Furthermore, these can be women who are full time houseworkers. Once brought into discussion, they may find that, for the first time, they are the 'experts'-- they are indeed the 'insiders' in this struggle, and can tell other women something about the work they know best. Thus, WFH can be a demand which brings together a whole new circle of women to the movement organized around the work they know the best.

Wages for Housework: Stage II

After the initial conversations and uproar, critical questions emerge:

Who pays this "wage"?

How much is the "wage"?

What, in fact, does this "wage" mean?

The answers to these questions must be precise, because it is around wage mystification that labor struggles are stymied, and can become progressive or reactionary movements. This is clear from the struggles of workers in the union movements and also clear from the struggles of housewives in history. For example, in the U.S. in the early 1900s movements for housewives' wages culminated in the home economics movement, and it became a struggle for a wage "to restore status" to housework. Furthermore, one cannot be mystified about the "wage form" either. The wage can be a weapon against workers when they do not control the value of the wage, i.e., the real purchasing power of this money sum.

In line with these thoughts, what answers can be offered to these questions? First, the wage must not come from the husband, as this reinforces the notion of housework as a personal service. It must come from capital or capital/state to recognize their ultimate demand for these services. The wage must be equal to the value of the work performed. Bourgeois economists have even estimated this as approximating a high white collar wage, in the U.S. around \$14,000. It is not a subsistence or sub-subsistence income supplement. This is crucial, for it is precisely the high value of these housework services which makes the wage for housework an impossible demand.

Wages for Housework: Stage III

This wage being unpayable, one is forced to the conclusion that the current organization of housework is not viable. Women, realizing the serious implication that fair pay for their work is an impossible demand, must then focus around the need to re-organize this work in such a way that it can be viably performed without exploiting women. Thus the focus of the WFH movement shifts to the re-organization of housework on a social basis that is viable. The re-design of this work can then be proposed and demanded by the women themselves, having recognized through the impossibility of the wage demand, the need for a progressive solution.

Bettina Berch
April 11, 1978

To M. R. Dalla Costa:

Greetings - excuse me for writing in English -
We have some mutual interests and I thought I
would finally get in touch with you. Actually, I
research the history of the development of
housework - at the moment in the U.S. (also
teach the history of women's work)

I give you this book since after reading the
Reproduction / Emigration piece you wrote + sent to
Zerowork (I work with Zerowork in NYC) I think
you might enjoy reading this - it's a popular press
current study that gives the point of view on
women / emigration that is generally read in the US

I feel too rushed to talk with you now
about my own research on housework history
but can send you articles at some point if you
are interested.

I can be contacted from June 15 - Dec 78
at this address: Bettina Berch
Apt 10 B
Sudbury House
2100 Washington Ave
Silver Spring Md. 20910
USA

The notes on the back of this I wrote in
response to my perceptions of the current state of WFH. ¹¹
Bettina