

Symbolic Oppositions;

As They Relate to the Mode of Production

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March 7, 1984
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Women in Euro-canadian society are symbolically opposed to men. Culturally subordinated they are regarded as passive followers while men are considered to be dynamic and aggressive leaders. By examining the basic symbolic oppositions between women and men and by outlining the accepted justifications of womens role it can be shown that this cultural bias serves the purpose of maintaining the status quo. It was necessary for our society to further downgrade women when thier entry into the work force threatened this status quo. The resultant oppression of women can be alternatively explained by questioning societie's underlying assumptions.

Symbolically men and women are divided by nature and culture. Women are equated with nature whereas men supercede it by subjugating it. The roles of wife, mother, and mistress are natural in that they are equated with function. The roles of producer and leader are cultural in that they derive from a condition of society. Appendaged to these roles are characteristics which imply a social worth with women occupying a lower position.

Generally women are considered to be weaker than men, to lack the emotional control of men, and to be passive reactors to the more dominant aggressive male. Hence they are seen as being soft and sweet, a fair sex dependent upon a more competent male patriarch for support and guidance. Leaving aside the obvious mother, wife, mistress roles vs. the father, husband, lover roles and evaluating men and women as they appear as thier single selves a sharp contrast

emerges. The spinster is synonymous with physical dowdiness, rejection, dullness in spite of intellectual success. On the other hand the bachelor occupies a positive pinnacle of elan. He is adventurous. He is more than a husband because he is no woman's slave. His wealth can be used solely for self enhancement. Liberated from the trappings of marriage he is the very symbol of success. Exempted from marriage she is the symbol of failure.

In the Euro-canadian cultural ideology two concepts emerge. The first as defined by ^{the} ~~Judeo-Christian~~ ^{tradition} defines women as subordinate to man, according to God. She is created not in her own right but is derived from a part of an existing whole. Her position is further subordinated by her moral weakness in eating the prohibited fruit. The second concept is that male dominance has a biological basis. Here, the dominance of man over woman is explained by arguing that it was necessary in order to facilitate our evolution. That is, man was dependent upon meat and only males could hunt. (Van Den Berghe, 1975)

These two concepts have gained wide acceptance and are popularly cited as the reason for women's subordinate position. However they do not account for the evidence provided by Leacock, and others, that many aspects of women's roles in classless societies have been overlooked. (Leacock, 1972) Nor do they account for the effect of the mode of production upon the social institutions with the advent of the new industrial society. Since the industrial revolution provided

labour saving devices and freed women to pursue a career and accrue prestige why is she still the weaker and undervalued, and why has she not achieved equal status to men?

To explain womens symbolic and actual devaluation in society it is necessary to outline its historical development, then describe its particular characteristics under capitalism, and finally to provide a brief explanation of how the subjugation of women is perpetuated in the capitalist mode of production.

Societies that predate class formation were egalitarian and lacked forms of social inequalities (Engels, 1972: Leacock, 1972: Sacks: 1974). Production in these societies was based upon the production for use, not exchange. Hence;

People worked for the communal household or clan rather than for individuals. Since all work was for social use and all adults were social producers, all adults were equal members of the group. (Sacks, 1974: p. 209).

Family structures and private property as exists within contemporary society did not exist within these classless societies. In fact, Leacock argues, it was the development of private property that led to the creation of the patriarchal family and the subjugation of women. (Leacock, 1972)

Once a surplus which could be appropriated as wealth became a regular feature of the male sphere, men gained a new economic power over women. Concomitant with the ability to extract a surplus and the change from production for use to production for wealth was a change in the nature of the household. Hence altering the significance of womens work within the household and consequently womens position.

Womens labour henceforth was a necessary but socially subordinated part of producing an exchangable surplus (Sacks, 1974: p. 211)

The capitalist mode of production inherited the patriarchal family "based on male control over the womens productive capacity and over her person." (Rowbotham: 117) Utilizing the relations within the family and the subjugation of women for its own benifits capitalism preserved and maintained the subjugation of women.

The benifits derived by capitalism froms womens subjugation and symbolic devaluation are twofold. Firstly defined culturally as subordinate to men, women can be utilized by capitalists as ascheap and easily accesable reserve labour force. Secondly womens unpaid work in the home benifits capitalism by providing a cheap mechanism for the reproduction of labour power.

It is within the confines of the home that womens symbolic devaluation provides the greatest benifits for capitalism. Symbolically represented as naturally inclined toward looking after others, women in Euro-canadian cultural ideology are directed to become wife and mother. Womens unpaid labour within the home greatly increases the productivity of male workers ataa minimum cost to the capitalist. Thus increasing the amount of surplus value the capitalist is able to extract from the worker.

Though confining women to the domestic sphere, conflicts with the trend toward proletarianization, womens place in the family has historically been to the advantage of capitalism.

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However the extension of women into the work force acts as a destabilizing force on the family , and women's symbolic representation as the dependent sex. In order to combat capitalism's tendency to destroy the family, a consciousness industry has arisen, that continually produces and maintains cultural ideologies that function in the best interests of capitalism (Smythe, 1981).

The consciousness industry (television, radio, magazines, advertisements, etc.) create and maintain cultural mythologies which explain and justify the symbolic devaluation of women as well as other social inequalities. This industry;

legitimizes the idealized, stereotyped roles of women as temptress, wife, mother, and sex object, and portray women as less intelligent and more dependent than men (Komisar, 1971: p. 211).

By perpetuating cultural mythologies based on symbolic oppositions between man and woman, capitalism reproduces a complex of social relations that depend upon the existence of social inequalities in order to maintain itself.

Women in Euro-canadian society are culturally depicted as less competent than men in the real world outside the home. Women are said to be closer to nature and biologically inclined toward childcare. Justified by theories and ideological interpretations that assume male dominance the symbolic representation of women in fact obscures the actual political realities of women's oppression.

Oppressed under the domination of capitalism and the patriarchal family, women will continue to be exploited until the inequality of capitalist society is burst asunder.

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