

## toward a unified theory of class, race, and gender

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Two contradictory missions lie at the heart of anthropological practice. The first is to understand, appreciate, and interpret cultural uniqueness in its own terms, a mission in which ethnographic case studies have been central. The second mission is to generalize, to discover similarities amid diversity, and to develop cross-cultural explanations and theories that proceed in practice from a much more restricted range of Western cultural frameworks. Just as anthropologists grapple with tensions over how much attentiveness to accord sameness and difference, so too marxists and socialist feminists struggle with this same tension in theorizing the interrelations of class, race, and gender. This effort has been in explicit dialogue and struggle with nonfeminist marxism over how to conceptualize class. Do race and gender “reduce” to class? Are they separable and secondary dimensions of being in the context of theorizing social transformation? Like anthropologists, both marxists and socialist feminists rely heavily on case studies and comparisons of attempted social transformations to answer these questions. While anthropology has considerable sophistication in dealing with tensions between specificity and generalization in cross-cultural comparison, it can benefit from feminist scholars’ growing fund of experience in dealing with similar tensions in conceptualizing the interrelations of these three central dimensions of social being in the 20th-century world. This paper reviews those efforts—in dialogue with nonfeminist marxism—to develop such a theoretical framework. There has been an extraordinary florescence of work in this area, much more than can be adequately discussed in a single paper. Consequently, this essay is selective in its focus on the United States, and does not pretend to do justice to the wealth of literature worldwide.

More important, it is also selective in an interpretive sense, in that I want to explore the ways that feminist theories and case studies are, or can be read as sustaining the centrality of class and class struggle as key forces for social transformation. I am seeking both to retain Marx’s notion of class and to modify it very significantly so that it becomes both a gendered and racially specific concept, one that has no race-neutral or gender-neutral “essence.” This may be controversial to some marxists and some feminists, but it seems to be a way to move toward that unified understanding sought by both, of how racial, class, and gender oppression are part of a single, specifiable, and historically created system.

The plan of the paper is as follows: A brief first part suggests that second-wave socialist feminists came to focus so intensely on theorizing women’s domestic and community-based experiences in response to a marxist and labor union practice that almost equated class struggle with shop-floor struggle. One of the most striking differences between the first and second wave of feminist thought is the amount of attention the latter has devoted to analyzing “the private sphere.” Indeed, analysis of women’s unwaged labor in all its diversity has become the center of feminist attempts to understand the links between class and gender analysis.

The second part shows how feminist debates about domestic labor led to theoretical understandings of the ways in which women experienced class differently from men, and led as well

to the beginnings of a theoretical recognition that so too did white and racial/ethnic women. In the American context at least, the working class historically has been created in racially/ethnically specific ways such that one's race was and continues to be a relation to the means of production, with respect to labor and reproduction.

The third part explores both the parallels and the racial diversity of working-class women's experiences and struggles, and the ways in which these shape the directions of an emerging, unified theory. Although class and class struggle are key forces for social transformation, recent feminist case studies considerably modify Marx's vision of class and class struggle in two ways. First, instead of focusing on the wage nexus as that which defines an individual's class membership, they look through working-class women's eyes to focus on class reproduction, the unities of women's work and family lives, and the community of working-class membership. Second, they theorize racial/ethnic and regional working-class diversity stemming both from the funds of experience crystallized in racial/ethnic cultural traditions, and from the political and economic differences in relation to the means of capitalist production.

### **social context of feminism**

The more radical streams of second-wave feminism were born from the milieu of post-World War II grassroots and freedom movements among people of color around the world. These movements challenged socialist and communist practice and theory about the relations of race and class, and the relations of anti-racist struggle to class struggle. Marxist theories as well as less articulated notions about class consciousness and class struggles have come largely from analyses of exemplary cases. In this respect, marxist praxis and "proof" is not that different from anthropological praxis and "proof." In the United States, the Communist party's successes during the 1930s—following on some 40 years of industrial class warfare between 1876 and 1918—in building the CIO and creating powerful industrial trade unions shaped a generation of radical American understandings of the nature of working-class struggle as centered at the "point of production" in heavy industry (Brecher 1972). Shop-floor issues and battles were some of the most dramatic and vital struggles of that era, and subsequently came to be seen as the only ones that had revolutionary potential. Because those shop floors were mainly white and male, both in the United States and in Europe, the class analysis that developed from this practice was race and gender biased: neither people of color nor women were seen as being at the center of the working class, nor were the issues that affected them most directly seen as class issues or as politically central ones—even in cases where black and women workers were thrown out of their unionized wartime jobs.

By the early 1960s, the center of grassroots activism in the United States shifted away from factories partly as a result of earlier union gains and postwar industrial prosperity. In this milieu, it was harder to persuade people that trade union issues were the stuff of real struggle when major changes and mobilization were being made from black, Latino, and Native American community bases around a wide range of issues that in the course of the decade came increasingly clearly to link class and racial oppression. The vitality and successes of these movements' community-based mobilization around housing, voting, welfare, and education issues drew old and young activists to them, and made them new models for popular and working-class movements.<sup>1</sup> In the last decade, work by Sara Evans (1980), Paula Giddings (1984), Jo Ann Robinson (1987), and Ellen Cantarow and Sharon O'Malley (1980), as well as the first conference devoted exclusively to black women's contributions to the civil rights movement (Atlanta, 12–13 October, 1988) have begun to reveal the ways in which the more radical currents of feminism developed from and were fundamentally shaped by the civil rights movement, and more specifically, by black women's centrality in it. Many early feminists got their political education from the women who led the day-to-day work of the local SNCC, CORE, and NAACP chapters.

There were also the national leaders, some deliberately not so visible, like Ella Baker, while others like Daisy Bates, Gloria Richardson, Rosa Parks, and Fanny Lou Hamer were more visible.

As the issues and actors of American grassroots politics shifted in the course of the 1950s and 60s, so too did the ways scholars and activists conceptualize the nature of the social and interpersonal relations that might emerge from their efforts. An older vision of these relationships had been associated with the theory and practice of pre-World War II shop-floor left politics, of working-class uprisings by people of diverse races and genders, but based on their being oppressed in the same way by the same source—a revolution of likes. A newer set of visions was being born from attempts to make sense out of the diverse history of postwar anti-racist and anti-colonialist movements, of the same people rising against a wider range of oppressions faced by all of the people some of the time and some of the people all of the time. The first vision saw racism and sexism as inextricably bound up with race and gender as important aspects of social being. It seemed to imply that race and gender were salient social categories and categories of meaningful cultural existence only to the degree that people were stigmatized on those bases, and that they would therefore wither away as necessary parts of the process of eliminating racism and sexism.

The visions born of the anti-colonial, freedom, and feminist movements were just the opposite. They celebrated race and gender-based cultures, stressing them (albeit variously and selectively) as repositories of strength and resistance as well as providing alternative models for constructing social relationships and social identity. These movements envisioned maintaining their diversities while somehow sharing their strengths more widely. Or, as George C. Wolfe put it, “So yes, America is getting more colored, or maybe we’re beginning to realize just how colored we’ve always been. But let’s not stop there. Let’s get busy coloring it brown and yellow and lots of really interesting off-shades of white. And even if somebody wanted to stop it, it’s too late” (Wolfe 1988:40).

It was this second set of visions that animated marxist-feminists and brought them into conflict with the majority of active marxists, at least through the 1960s. For Marx, and for many on the left who were inspired by the first vision, what defined workers as a class was that each of them individually sold their labor power to capital, and from their similar relationship they developed common interests, perspectives, and interdependence in opposition to capital. It is obvious that the industrial working class once away from the factory floor was not a sack of individual proletarians, each in independent relation to capital. But this was the model developed from Marx’s labor theory of value, and it prevailed as well in a great deal of non-marxist labor politics prevalent through most of the 60s.

The hegemony of the shop-floor perspective meant that post-World War II would-be feminists tended to work within an analytic tradition that went back to Engels, but which was also quite widely shared across the left political spectrum from people like Charlotte Perkins Gilman to Lenin. Its received wisdom was that incorporation into wage labor was key to ending women’s oppression, because only wage labor would give them the necessary class experience from which to develop a working-class consciousness. I do not wish to deny the progressive role this perspective played at particular points in its history. Nevertheless, it did not regard family and domestic relations as class relations. Instead, they were most often seen (flattening the complexities of Marx’s formulations) as somehow natural rather than social, sometimes peripheral, or personal. But in any event “real” class struggle would be both necessary and sufficient conditions for creating egalitarian gender relations. So long as attention focused on “point of production” issues and militance, there was no room to explore the social relations by which the working class made itself a class able to reproduce itself daily and over the generations. Consequently, the social relations of domestic labor remained outside class analysis, as did household, community, racial, and quality-of-life issues.

One consequence of such a perspective was that women had no class identity as women, or as Verena Stolcke so elegantly put it:

If women's subordination is attributed to women's exclusion from production, then equality between men and women will depend on women's incorporation into production. But this reasoning is based on the idea that only by making accessible to women the defining attribute of men within class society, i.e., *their non-involvement in procreation and involvement in so-called productive labour*, only by converting women into men, will equality be achieved. . . . To propose that women have first to become like men in order to become free is almost like suggesting that class exploitation might be ended by making it possible for workers to become capitalists [Stolcke 1981:46].

### **how are gender, class, and racial oppression related?**

When early North American second-wave feminists first claimed "the personal is political," they probably did not realize the theoretical depth and breadth that later theorists would discover in so simple a slogan. Initially, "the personal" meant the politics of experience, of interpersonal and sexual relations with men, but it was not long before it expanded to encompass lesbian sexualities, reproductive rights, heterosexism, "private" violence against women and public complicity in making it an institution, as well as the economic exploitation of women's unwaged labor. Indeed, Maria Mies argues that this sequence of widening awareness is being repeated throughout the Third World as feminist movements spring up on all continents (Mies 1986:6–44). How are we to understand this complex of things that is most commonly referred to as patriarchy or the subordination of women? More specifically, how is it related to capitalism and the class system? Although there are many approaches, I want to focus on debates over the meaning of domestic labor and its relation to class oppression. White socialist feminists have focused on unwaged domestic labor (including childbearing and -rearing) as the defining center of women's subordination. A number of black, Latina, and Asian feminists argued that women of color also have experienced domestic labor as waged labor, and that this has entailed forms of subordination that are at once different from white women's, and that pit them against white women.

In this section I will summarize the major debates about domestic labor by which socialist-feminist theory has developed a historical understanding of the relationship between class and gender, and the beginnings of such an understanding with respect to race. In brief, the dialectics of debate have been as follows: Early recognition of domestic exploitation in capitalism led to arguments that this was a universal and precapitalist condition of social existence and at the root of women's subordination under capitalism ("domestic labor as primary"). Counter arguments suggested that capitalism's organization of waged labor kept women out, and hence was what devalued domestic labor, and hence women as a gender ("capitalism as primary"). Neither of these arguments stood for very long in the face of new anthropological and social historical studies of women's life circumstances.

A second line of argument suggested that women's subordination lay in an interaction of a precapitalist patriarchal mode of production with a capitalist mode of production ("dual systems theory"). Dual systems theorists argued that both capitalism and patriarchy shared responsibility for the particular shape of women's oppression in the contemporary world, and that working-class men joined capital in benefiting from women's domestic subordination even as they suffered from wage exploitation. Dual systems theorists faced critiques that their concept of patriarchy was ahistorical and culture-bound.

A third stream of argument that struggled to relate race to gender and class challenged the notion of domestic labor and problematized its meanings for women and men of color. In the United States black, Asian, and Latina feminists argued that for women of color, domestic labor was often both waged work and unwaged labor. Because domestic labor had different shapes, it was likely to have a different historical significance for domestic relations in the social struc-

tures of minority communities. Some European feminists worked toward theories that stressed the similarities between the racially defined unwaged labor of colonized peoples and the gender-defined unwaged labor of women. These theorists expanded the notion of a potentially revolutionary class to include the unwaged as well as waged workers whose continued existence is crucial to capital.

**women's domestic labor as primary** To conceptualize women's subordination in political and economic terms was the first task early feminist theorists took on. At its center was a gendered reconceptualization of domestic labor under capitalism. By the late 1960s marxist-feminists began to analyze the family as a unit of production, hence as embedding a set of political and economic relations. By doing this, they challenged notions that domestic relations were only about consumption and emotion, and were somehow "natural" rather than political (Mainardi 1970). Juliet Mitchell made the first major effort to develop a marxist-feminist analysis of women's domestic oppression. She distinguished four aspects, or "structures" of oppression: production, reproduction, sexuality, and the socialization of children (1966, 1971).

Margaret Benston (1969) argued that women are defined under capitalism as the group responsible for creating use-values in a domestic setting, that the family is a production unit key to the existence of capitalism, and that women's oppression hangs on their position as uncompensated domestic workers whose free labor benefits capital in two ways: freeing capital from having to pay for the full cost of working-class maintenance and reproduction, and maintaining women as a reserve army of wage laborers, while Rayna Rapp (1978) suggested in turn that family as a concept was the ideology by which domestic units reproduced themselves. In any event, this early theory provided a class analysis in which women were directly exploited by capital through their social responsibility for unwaged domestic labor.

**capitalism as primary** While the dominant current in marxist-feminist analysis was to see women's relations to the means of capitalist production as unwaged laborers, and exploitable primarily in this capacity, a smaller current suggested that its origin lay in capitalism's organization of *waged* work combined with women's precapitalist domestic responsibilities, which made them less exploitable in the waged labor sector, excluded from it, and hence subordinated to men under capitalism (Brenner and Ramas 1984; Sacks 1974; Vogel 1983). In these interpretations, because women were responsible in agrarian culture for raising children, early capitalists could not recruit them to work as long and hard as men, nor persuade them to work for such low wages (because their wages had to support child as well as mother). This made women less reliably and intensively exploitable than men as workers, and therefore less attractive and valuable to capitalists. Economically disadvantaged in wage relations, as these came to be key means to subsistence, women became dependent on men and subordinate to them in the family.

Although I made this argument in 1974, today I think it is wrong because it confuses gender, social status, and kinship. In one or another way, these arguments assume that early capitalists operated in a cultural system in which motherhood and marriage were attributes of the gender woman. In such a cultural system capitalists would not have distinguished single from married women, or actual mothers from childless women or women in pre-childbearing years, would have rejected them all categorically, and simply sought men as reliable and exploitable workers. It is precisely because the cultural systems from which capitalism developed had already made linkages among gender, status, and labor that capitalists did not develop an anti-parent bias rather than a gender bias (and employ *both* single, childless women and men equally). We know that did not happen. The capitalism-as-primary argument presumes that gender was already socially constructed as it came to be constructed in the 19th century, a fundamental and dichotomous division, more so than age, condition of parenthood, or generation. Moreover, it presumes that the essence of defining the gender "woman" is the social status "mother," and

that potential mothers are in the same category as actual ones. We will see later that capitalists in the past and present have had no difficulty in recognizing that youth and lack of socially defined financial responsibility for others make young women ideal workers precisely because these conditions allow them to work for very low wages. Indeed, this is the main attraction for the proliferation of garment and microelectronic plants in Asia and Mexico. Recent case studies show that offshore monopolies specifically target young single women, fire them when they get pregnant, and often refuse to hire mothers, and that reliance on a workforce of young, single women has been characteristic of the garment and textile industries since their beginnings (Frankel 1984; Hall 1987; Lamphere 1987; Nash and Fernandez-Kelly 1983; Ong 1983). This suggests that however incompatible motherhood may be with waged labor, it was not a likely first cause of lower wages for women, nor, following from this, is it likely that capitalist wage relations are first causes of women's domestic oppression under capitalism.

Jane Humphries (1977) took a different tack to explain unequal wages. She saw demands for a male family wage and consequent maintenance of women as nonwaged workers as a historical working-class strategy to limit capital's control over working-class life, both by protecting women and children from wage labor itself, and by freeing women to do the work that preserves a working-class infrastructure to handle child care, welfare, health care, and education free from dependence on capitalists. This followed similar arguments that began to be made in the mid-1970s by social scientists and historians who saw family relations as "cultures of resistance" to capitalist exploitation (Caulfield 1974; MacLean 1982; Tax 1980), and by ethnographic work on domestic and working-class kinship networks as organizations for coping with economic adversity (Eisenstein 1983; Sacks 1984, 1988b; Stack 1974). This point as well as important critiques of this position will be taken up later.

**universal patriarchy and dual systems** Even as some theorists were locating the central dynamic for the perpetuation of race and gender oppression in capitalism, others were discussing the origins of "patriarchy," conceived as a universal system of oppression preceding and coexisting with capitalism (and socialism). Among others, Meillassoux (1981) stressed that male domination and control of women's sexuality in marriage were at the root of women's subordination from the beginning. Edholm, Harris, and Young (1977) and Stolcke (1981) both criticized assumptions that the oppression of women could have been kept going without any historical signs of resistance, that it is a universal pillar on which precapitalist social orders are built, and that it is neither something that needs explaining nor changing.

Other theorists were less concerned with origins of patriarchy than with its persistence as a precapitalist system of domination separate from but in symbiosis with capitalism. They explained the relations between gender and class subordination as a product of two mutually reinforcing systems of domination—capitalism and patriarchy—such that both the capitalists and the working-class men who benefited from women's domestic labor acted in concert to maintain women's subordination (Beneria 1982; Eisenstein 1979; Hartmann 1976; Jaggar 1983). By extension, the concept of "public patriarchy" was developed to describe an alleged shift from individual male control over women to state control via family and reproductive policies of capitalist states (Boris and Bardaglio 1983). Such views were criticized for the lack of historical specificity in the concept of patriarchy (Edholm, Harris, and Young 1977), and for not being able to specify exactly how patriarchy and capitalism were related historically or conceptually (Sargent 1981). Maria Mies argued further that such dual system explanations replicate and reinforce capitalism's separation of public and private by assigning patriarchy to a private sphere: "women's oppression in the private sphere of the family or in 'reproduction' is assigned to 'patriarchy,' patriarchy being seen as part of the superstructure, and their exploitation as workers in the office and factory is assigned to capitalism" (1986:38).

**race, gender, and class** All these theories spoke inadequately or not at all to racial domination, and efforts to comprehend all three systems of domination expanded efforts already

begun mainly by feminists of color to develop voices and theoretical frameworks built from their experiences. One important theoretical strand emerged from black feminist analyses of women's lives in Afro-American culture. Another came from analyses of black, Latina, and Asian women's experiences with domestic labor as waged work (Dill 1979; Glenn 1985, 1986; Palmer 1983, 1984; Rollins 1985; Romero 1987).

Bonnie Dill bridged the two in her study of the ways in which black women domestic workers constructed social identity based on their contributions to their families and communities. Patricia Hill Collins (1989) and Elsa Barkley-Brown (1989) emphasize the complementarity and mutual reinforcement that exists in Afro-American culture between individual identity and expressiveness on the one hand, and group membership and responsibility on the other. This is very different from the opposition between group and individual in dominant white American cultural constructs. Collins argues that Afro-American women—and the Afro-American feminism that derives from their experiences as everyday black women—are central to culture and community-building by virtue of their places in families and churches. Dill, Collins, and Barkley-Brown join Paula Giddings (1984) and Cheryl Gilkes (1980, 1988) in arguing that community and family-based social identity construction, and rejection of occupational bases for status are part of Afro-American patterns of resistance to the negative ways that white society defines black women and men based on the low-status occupations—and hence class position—to which it confines them.

Analyses of black, Latino, and Asian women's experiences of domestic work by feminists of color gives them a distinctly different perspective on and critique of domestic labor from that developed by white feminists. Domestic waged workers have struggled to define their jobs as work with concrete job descriptions, regular, adequate wages and benefits, and, not least, to be allowed to work free of denigrating close supervision. This should be consistent with white feminist efforts, and supported by them, yet the adversaries of domestic workers are the middle-class (usually but not always white) women for whom they work. In perhaps the sharpest analysis, Rollins (1985) argues that the "madams" who act as "matronizing" employers are acting as if domestic laborers were objects of charity (and their employers were dispensers of it), and their maids' work was not real work worthy of real wages. This certainly undercuts feminist efforts. Phyllis Palmer argues that white feminists have a history of "cutting off their nose to spite their face"—in the sense of denying support to black women's struggles that would also benefit white women. She locates this in fear of being identified with black women, who have been stereotyped in the dominant culture as bad women. Rollins argues that madams "matronize" their domestic workers because it enhances the madams' class/race relationship and position at the expense of maids'. Palmer suggests that the feminist movement has historically bought into such stereotypes even though it undermines women's demands for gender equality, largely from fear of confronting the fact that their class/race status is contingent on and mediated by a subordinate domestic relationship to white men.<sup>2</sup>

A number of European feminists have worked to encompass race as well as class by analyzing capitalism as a worldwide imperialist system. Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James (1972) began this line of development by explicitly linking their efforts to black marxist attempts to redefine class in such a way as to make racism and sexism class issues. In a pamphlet that sparked the infamous "productive/unproductive labor" debate that held up Marx's labor theory of value to feminist critique, Dalla Costa and James argued that housework had exchange value, and thus that working-class women could organize on a class basis around demanding wages for housework. I see the force of their argument in insisting—against male marxists—that working-class women's issues were "real," or economic, that they, like black and Third World people of both genders faced specific and particular exploitations beyond factory-centered wage relations that were nevertheless, somehow, class-based. It is striking that the relations between sexism and racism, which are central to Dalla Costa and James, are totally ignored by all the other participants in the domestic labor debate. Their opponents were arguing (variously) that

housewives could not “unite and fight,” or that if they could, it was not a class struggle. The significant question to emerge from that debate was whether class is a relationship of individuals with capital through the wage nexus, or whether it was something more complex, a something which would give women, Third World people, and their struggles working-class standing.

Bennholdt-Thomsen (1981, 1984) and Mies (1986) directly confronted the ideology embedded in the labor theory of value, which, as Bennholdt-Thomsen put it, “starts from an ideological assumption, namely that the separation of subsistence production from social production is something real.” Instead, capitalism continuously creates “non-capitalist forms of production as its surroundings” for its “existence and future development.” It does so indirectly by creating a reserve army of labor, which itself creates nonwaged forms of surviving that involve a variety of forms of subsistence and petty commodity production (Bennholdt-Thomsen 1981:23). It is super-exploitable in that it can be forced to sell its labor power below the cost of its own reproduction. Her description applies to “housewife production” and to peasant workers and peasant/artisan producers of both genders. But whatever the histories of peasant, artisan, or domestic production, once in relation to capital, these cease to be modes of production in the sense of retaining independent dynamics, and become noncapitalist forms of production subordinated to and part of the capitalist mode of production. This model challenged the functionalist fiction that capitalism is a closed, self-reproducing system of workers and capitalists in order to stress similarities between domestic labor and other forms of non-capitalist production, and presents cogent arguments for reformulating the labor theory of value to incorporate them. It also resonates with feminist analyses of the economic centrality of household and community relations to social change processes by suggesting that capitalism’s economic dynamic continually creates and recreates “housewife-like” forms of nonwaged work and petty commodity production upon which the wage system itself depends.

The logic of these arguments is to expand the meaning of working class, and to take seriously domestic relations and issues around which people mobilize. In so doing feminists have raised fundamental questions about the meaning of class: How has the working class reproduced itself both daily and generationally? Certainly not as individuals. And, growing from this question, what do working-class structures for daily maintenance and reproduction suggest about class-based structures for resistance? And what do both tell us about the internal structure of the working class internationally?

## **racial/ethnic and gender diversity**

After a decade of research on women and wage labor, it is becoming clear that capitalism has specifically recruited workers on the basis of race, and of gender and family relations within specific racial-ethnic communities. But this is part of a historical dialectic whose other pole was the age/marital status and gender of those who were “expendable” in a particular culture’s division of labor—as for example, the contrast between male-centered farming systems in Euroamerica with “expendable” farm daughters, and female-centered farming in Africa with “expendable” sons. The “value” of such expendable laborers seems to have been set by an interaction of the social relations and expectations of domestic production with employers’ demands for cheap labor, where sons’ and daughters’ wages were not expected to support them. Recognizing the influence of peasant or agrarian family organization on the age, race, and gender makeup of wage labor forces further highlights continuities among family, community, and workplace for the experience and interpretation of class (Sacks 1984).

The long-term workings out of this dialectic throughout the capitalist world—begun with capitalists’ eternal search for cheap labor and nonproletarian communities’ turning loose only their less “valuable” laborers—has been a major contributor to racial/ethnic segregation of



working-class communities and racial/ethnic and sex segregation. This dialectic operated historically when industrialists sought out specifically white, Yankee daughters in 19th-century New England textiles and 20th-century Southeast Asian daughters in apparel (Dublin 1979; Ong 1983); pre-married African boys and men in colonial East and Southern Africa in domestic work as well as mining (Hansen 1989); white mothers in contemporary front office work, and young black women for back offices (Glenn and Feldberg 1977; Machung 1984); black families in pre-World War II agriculture (Jones 1985); white rural daughters in Appalachian textiles before World War II, and black southerners more recently (Frankel 1984; Hall et al. 1987); European young women as live-in maids and then black women in pre-WWII domestic day work (Katzman 1978; Rollins 1985); teenagers in today's fast food shops; European immigrants in mining and heavy industry, and so on (see Glenn 1985 for a summary of the changing historical patterns of job segregation for black, Latina, and Chinese-American women in the United States).

It is important not to lose sight of women's history of struggles to break through race and gender occupational patterns, but even victories have been eroded through new forms of occupational segregation. Recent work has documented women's gains in the auto industry (Milkman 1987), in the pre-deregulation phone company (Hacker 1982); hospitals (Sacks 1988a); heavy industry during World War II (Anderson 1981; Gluck 1987). However, even when women do win battles, they may still face an "up the down escalator" phenomenon—when women and minorities gain access to a job it is redefined as less skilled, becomes intensely supervised, and, at the same time typed as women's/minority's. Thus Carter and Carter (1981) show that women's recent progress in professions like medicine and law are largely into an emergent second-class track characterized by lower pay, less professional autonomy, and fewer opportunities for advancement. The subtitle of their article, "Women Get a Ticket to Ride After the Gravy Train Has Left the Station" is especially apt for the professions, but Hacker (1982) documents a similar down side for women's victory in access to skilled craft jobs in the Bell phone system—except here those jobs were eliminated by more advanced technology shortly after women entered them. Remy (1984) shows the ways in which company and union in meatpacking have manipulated new technologies and job design to eliminate high-seniority women workers. Sacks (1988a), Glenn (1985), and Glenn and Feldberg (1977) deal with minority women's progress in clerical work in the 1960s, but show them also being simultaneously tracked into an emergent factory-like back office sector.

There has been considerable recent attention devoted to women's work culture in workplaces where women predominate, such as department stores, offices, hospitals, and garment factories (Benson 1978, 1986; Feldberg and Glenn 1983; Glenn and Feldberg 1977; Machung 1984; Sacks 1988a; Westwood 1985). It is becoming clear that occupational segregation results in different experiences and consciousness of class for women and men, racial-ethnic and white workers. The concomitant is that "working class-consciousness" has multiple shapes (Eisenstein 1983; Goldberg 1983; Sacks 1988b). It would also appear that women's ways of expressing class consciousness are as often as not drawn from their community and family-based experiences of being working class. And, because working-class communities in the United States have been segregated, the experience and expressions of class consciousness have also been embedded in ethnically specific forms (Collins 1989; Davis 1981). To some degree, women have used family-based metaphors and values to share these consciousnesses across racial/ethnic lines (see especially Bookman and Morgen 1988; Lamphere 1984; Westwood 1985).

The point of all this is that one should not expect to find any generic worker or essential worker, or for that matter, working-class consciousness; that not only is class experienced in historically specific ways, but it is also experienced in racially specific, gender-specific, and kinship-specific ways.

The big issue is how to go about finding the unities and commonalities of class and class consciousness while being attentive to specificity. Critiques of white feminism by women of color and critiques by socialist feminists of male marxist views of class offer parallel solutions about how to conceptualize unity in diversity. Both criticize implicit and privileged norms against which "others" are measured, and urge instead taking "the other," as the subject in conceptualizing womanhood, and class.

For example, Bell Hooks (1984) urges placing women of color at the center of feminist analysis, while Bettina Aptheker (1982) suggests "pivoting the center." Along with Deborah King (1988) they argue for theory that stems directly from the experiences of women of color—in contrast to theory that is generated from comparisons that interpret those experiences with reference to a norm or modal woman, who, in feminist theory, has been white and middle class. As Bonnie Dill (1979) suggested in indicating the importance of understanding the "dialectics of black womanhood," doing so offers the possibility of a more inclusive sisterhood for all American women. Such statements about how to construct theory underlie the concrete analyses cited earlier about racially specific conceptualizations of domestic labor, women's economic dependence, and the sexual stereotypes. In these analyses commonalities emerged from the process of resolving conflicts. I will return to the issue of commonalities underlying racial and class-specific gender stereotypes later.

We have seen parallel socialist feminist critiques of traditional, white, male-centered notions of class, which have asked how women relate to a wage-based class structure. Socialist feminists have answered that women's unwaged domestic labor is a necessary condition for the existence of waged labor. When working-class women are the subjects and narrative voices of case studies, class membership, gender and kinship organization, class-based mobilization, and class consciousness look very different from the way they have been portrayed in nonfeminist marxist analyses. Feminist theorists, as Martha Acklesberg put it so trenchantly, "talk of the need to unite workplace and community. But women's lives have done that—and do it—on a daily basis, although perhaps without the consciousness that that is what they are about!" (1984:256).

Feminist theory applied to the study of working-class women's lives has birthed questions like: What are the social relations by which the working class sustains and reproduces itself? How do women conceptualize their unwaged labor and community-building activities? How—and where—do working-class women organize to struggle against capital? What are the issues women find worth fighting about? What are we learning about the persistence of unwaged labor and the ways it changes forms? What are the experiential sources and metaphors by which working-class women express class consciousness? How do women's constructions of their sexuality relate to issues of class and kinship?

Embedded in these questions, I would suggest, is a definition of the working class in which membership is not determinable on an individual basis, but rather as *membership in a community that is dependent upon waged labor, but that is unable to subsist or reproduce by such labor alone*. This then is the economic basis of class as a relationship to the means of capitalist production. Following on this, it is not surprising that women of many ethnicities, times, and regions share a broader conception of class struggle than men. In part this results from women's socially assigned responsibility for unwaged domestic labor and their consequent centrality in confrontations with the state over family and community welfare issues (Bookman and Morgen 1988; Hall et al. 1987; Susser 1982; Zavella 1987a). This has led to suggestions that working-class women in general, and women of color in particular are likely to develop the most radical demands for social change (Giddings 1984; Hooks 1984; Kaplan 1982; Kessler-Harris and Sacks 1987).

Many new case studies describe the ways in which women's unwaged work creates community-based and class-based social ties of interdependence that are key to neighborhood and household survival. Many of these build on older understandings that working-class kin net-

works are important resources for coping with economic adversity (Bott 1957; Young and Willmott 1962). Some show women as central economic and political actors in these kinship networks, and suggest that these networks create and carry parts of what tends to be called working-class culture in European literature (Humphries 1977; Scott and Tilly 1978; Tilly 1981; but see Eisenstein 1983 for an early feminist class analysis in the United States); black culture in Afro-American communities (Day 1982; Gilkes 1980; Jones 1985; Reagon 1986; Stack 1974); Chicana or Latina culture (Zavella 1987a, 1987b); Third World (Caulfield 1974); or southern working class among southern whites (Hall et al. 1987). Others show ways women use languages and values of kinship to create unity and community in the waged workplace (Lamphere 1984, 1987; Sacks 1988a, 1988b; Westwood 1985).

Although the bulk of these studies focus on the social history of daily life (Westwood 1985; Zavella 1987a), some show the way these ties become the infrastructure of large-scale class protest, whether classic strikes (Cameron 1985; Frankel 1984; Hall et al. 1987; Milkman 1985; Tax 1980) or community-based movements, which make demands on the state for civil rights, housing, health care, education, or welfare (Bookman and Morgen 1988; Kaplan 1982; West 1981). They analyze women's centrality in organizing and sustaining labor unions, civil rights, and community-based movements (Giddings 1984; Gilkes 1980; MacLean 1982; Robinson 1987; Ruiz 1987).

Two "findings" regarding social structure and working-class culture are embedded in this new literature. One is the contributions made by working-class women through household economies and community-based cultures to notions of social justice and entitlement (Acklesberg 1984; Bookman and Morgen 1988). The other is the prevalence of institutions, networks, and cultures that women generate outside family life, in public space in working-class communities (see Zagarell 1988 for an analysis of "novels of community" as a women's literary genre). In short, this literature does more than counter theories of the workplace as the sole source for generating political mobilization around economic issues. It provides the beginnings of a gender-based construction of class that is somewhat attentive to racial/ethnic diversity.

A third set of "findings" about working-class women's conceptions of womanhood is emerging from some very diverse studies that explore long-hidden histories of (mainly) working-class women's challenges to bourgeois ideals of domesticity, femininity, compulsory heterosexuality, motherhood, and reproduction. For example, Emily Martin's (1987) wonderful exploration of how American women understand menstruation, birth, and menopause shows middle-class women tending to accept the dominant, medicalized views of women as ruled by their reproductive organs, while working-class, especially black working-class women, do not see these as ruling events, nor does the medical view of their bodies have much hegemony in their consciousnesses.

In a similar vein, studies of conflicts between Progressive-era reformers' notions of proper domesticity and those of working-class women (Ehrenreich and English 1978; Kessler-Harris 1982) have shown overt and covert resistance to submissive domesticity on the latter's part. They resonate with theoretical suggestions by Mies (1986) that "housewifization" is historically a relatively new and middle-class-specific organization of women's unwaged labor. Mies argues that the privatization of women's work, and the cult of domesticity surrounding and sustaining it were and are resisted by working-class women (though not by working-class men, who benefited from it), who struggle to keep their work "socialized," or collectively organized. Bennholdt-Thomsen (1988) illustrates one such form this takes in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Mexico, where women sustain a regional marketing and food preparation system with an elaborate division of labor, interdependence among women, and no subordination to men. Similar arguments are implicit in discussions about women's marketing and subsistence production in Africa (Leis 1974; Mbilinyi 1988), and in the economies of taking in boarders, laundry, and so on, widely described for European-American working-class pre-World War II urban neighbor-

hoods, although the power dynamics of gender need to be explored further (Cott and Pleck 1979; Ewen 1985; Kessler-Harris 1982; see also Kessler-Harris and Sacks 1987; Sacks 1984).

We are also beginning to learn some of the ways in which young working-class women, past and present, white and black, have independently appropriated and refashioned some of the conventional images of sexiness to convey the sense of themselves as autonomous, independent, and assertive adult women, and to challenge—often at high risk to themselves—our culture's insistence on submissive femininity for women (Hall 1986; Ladner 1970; Myerowitz 1988; Peiss 1985; Petchesky 1985; Stansell 1986; Westwood 1985; see also Vance 1984 and Snitow, Stansell, and Thompson 1983). Hall's study, "Disorderly Women," is perhaps the most dramatic discussion of how women used their sexuality as a metaphor of class strength and confrontation, how it was understood in that way by other men and women of their working-class Appalachian community, but was seen in conventional "bad women" terms by both employers and outside union representatives.

Just as heterosexuality has been a language of working-class women's resistance to a combined class and gender subordination, so too has lesbian sexual identity and community provided a historically specific tradition of resistance to submissive domesticity. Following Adrienne Rich's (1983) insights on the politics of homophobia and Carol Smith-Rosenberg's work on 19th-century women's worlds of love and ritual (1985), D'Emilio and Freedman (1988), as well as Rapp and Ross (1983) argue that stigmatization of homosexuality and its complement, celebration of companionate marriages (or compulsory heterosexuality), developed about the same time that it became possible for a significant number of women to be able to live on their own earnings, without domestic dependence on men. Davis and Kennedy's (1986) oral history of Buffalo's working-class lesbian community, as well as D'Emilio and Freedman's (1988), Katz's (1976) and D'Emilio's (1983) analyses of the creation of specifically gay and lesbian social identities in the mid-20th century show some of these forms of resistance as well as the creation of alternate institutions, roles, and identities.

## summary

As Martha Acklesberg has noted, when "we take seriously the 'relatedness' that seems to characterize the lives of many women," we also challenge "the assumption central to the Marxist paradigm that the development of a truly radical consciousness requires the transcendence, or abandonment, of all sources of community feeling other than class (in particular, those feelings based in racial, ethnic, national, or—we might add—sexual identity). . . . In fact, rather than acting as a 'drag' on radical consciousness, communities—and the network of relationships that they nurture and on which they are based—have been, and can be, important contexts for politicization" (Acklesberg 1988:306).

This essay has reviewed some of the theoretical consequences of socialist feminist critiques of the political economy of "personal life." Its focus has been on efforts to comprehend class, race, and gender oppression as parts of a unitary system, as opposed to analyses that envision capitalism and patriarchy as separate systems. More specifically, I have interpreted analyses of the relations of waged and unwaged labor, work and family in such a way as to expand the meaning of working class to encompass both waged and unwaged workers who are members of a *community* that is dependent upon waged labor but that is unable to reproduce itself on those wages alone. The implications of such a reading are fairly radical, and each one requires a great deal of further exploration. First and most apparent, it significantly alters conventional *marxist understandings of class and of contemporary social movements*. Second, it does so in such a way as to make visible the centrality of people of color and white working-class women to the direction of world history. Third, for feminist theory, it suggests the fruitfulness of recognizing that women's gender identities are not analytically separable from their racial and class

identities. Fourth, class emerges as a relation to the means of production that is collective rather than individual, a relation of communities to the capitalist state more than of employees to employers. Fifth, this embeds a critique of the ideology of liberal individualism, and links it to the shapes of post-World War II resistance to capitalism, which have generated the pluralistic visions behind efforts to develop a unified feminist theory that encompasses race and class as well as gender and sexuality.

## notes

*Acknowledgments.* Ancestors and earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Conference on Family and Production at Duke University in 1985, the American Ethnological Society meetings in 1985, and the Center for the Study of Women's Faculty Research Seminar at UCLA and the Los Angeles Chapter of Sociologists for Women in Society in 1988. I have benefited greatly from discussions at each of these forums. In addition, I would like to thank Sharon Bays, Kathleen Gough, Patricia Gumpert, Sondra Hale, Nicky Hart, Louise Lamphere, Carol Lasser, Sandra Morgen, Tom Patterson, Rayna Rapp, and "Red Wednesday" for their supportive critiques as this paper evolved.

<sup>1</sup>The issues of political debate, sometimes taking the form of battles between the "old left" and the "new left," sometimes between Stalinism and Eurocommunism, are extremely complex and beyond the scope of this review, but it is important to locate both these debates and second-wave left feminism in the challenges posed by the black freedom movement in the United States, as well as by anti-colonial struggles worldwide. It is also important to recognize that industrial working-class struggle in the United States has always been based in and shaped by ethnic immigrant communities.

<sup>2</sup>This converges with critiques of compulsory heterosexuality and analyses of domesticity (Rich, Rapp, and Ross), which argue that fear of being labeled "bad girls" has made white feminist practice and analysis more of a loyal opposition to patriarchy than a full-blown attack on it.

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submitted 30 September 1988

revised version received 23 February 1989

accepted 17 March 1989