

***Never Intended to be a Theory About  
Everything: Domestic Labour In Neoclassical &  
Marxian Economics***

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Discussion Paper Number 17

August 2001

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# ***Never Intended to be a Theory About Everything: Domestic Labour In Neoclassical & Marxian Economics***

## **Abstract**

This article is a comparative study of the treatment of domestic labor by neoclassical and Marxian economists. Before 1960 mainstream economics concentrated on production for the market, with serious analysis of housework confined to a handful of economists, whose efforts in this regard were marginalized by economics departments but supported by departments of home economics. Later mainstream analyses, first in agricultural economics and then in human capital theory culminated in Gary Becker's "new household economics." Domestic labor was also neglected by Marxist thinkers, who argued that housework was being socialized under capitalism and would disappear altogether under socialism, but it was rediscovered by Marxist-feminists in the late 1960s. Housework continues, however, to pose serious analytical difficulties for both neoclassical and Marxian economists.

An ardent lover may decline a business interview in order to keep an appointment with his lady-love, but there will be a point at which its estimated bearing upon his prospects of an early settlement will make him break his appointment with the lady in favour of the business interview. A man of leisure with a taste for literature and a taste for gardening will have to apportion time, money, and attention between them, and consciously or unconsciously will balance against each other the differential significances involved. All these, therefore, are making selections and choosing between alternatives on precisely the same principle and under precisely the same law as those which dominate the transactions of the housewife in the market, or the management of a great factory or ironworks, or the business of a bill-broker. (Philip H. Wicksteed 1914 [1970]: 11)

Marxism has very little of interest to say about the virtues of Icelandic cuisine in contrast to Bulgarian. Why should it? It is not some sort of cosmic philosophy along the lines of Rosicrucianism. It has had fairly little of interest to say about feminism either, partly because much of it has been conventionally patriarchal, but also because it is a restricted narrative which was never intended to be a Theory of Everything. (Terry Eagleton 1996: 111)

## **INTRODUCTION**

Housework or domestic labor amounted to 58% of all work performed in Australia in 1992 (Duncan Ironmonger 1996: 43) and if incorporated into the annual accounts would have raised gross domestic product by between 48 and 64 per cent. Studies for other countries have valued household production at between 31 and 60 per cent of gross domestic product, approximately two-thirds of which is carried out by women (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1994: 2, 20). Despite its evident importance, domestic labor was neglected by orthodox and Marxian economists alike until, in the 1960s, it was rediscovered as a topic worthy of serious analysis (Gary Becker (1965); Margaret Benston (1969)).

## **HOUSEWORK AND THE NEOCLASSICAL ECONOMISTS**

It is uncontroversial to state that little in classical economic thought focused directly upon the economic role of domestic labor. For Adam Smith and David Ricardo it appears as part of the institutional structure that provides the context for their discussions of other economic issues (Smith 1776 [1970]: 109-26; Ricardo 1817 [1891]: 24). John Stuart Mill does make brief references to the role of domestic labor in the discussion of productive consumption in his Principles of Political Economy (Mill 1848 [1965]: 41-53). In The Subjection of Women (Mill and Mill 1869 [1970]: 123-242) he also refers to the institutional and legal framework that serves to restrict women's choices of occupation, echoing many of the views expressed by Harriet Taylor Mill in Enfranchisement of Women (Mill and Mill 1869 [1970]: 89-122). Both articles also deal with the economic advantages to be gained by allowing women to

compete for all jobs they are capable of performing. On the specific subject of the economic role of domestic labor, they have relatively little to say, their main focus being to outline the advantages of less discriminatory approaches to employment and access to economic resources.

The rise of the marginal utility school beginning in the 1870s further reduced interest in the study of domestic labor. Exchange value came increasingly to define the subject matter of economics, and this contributed to the prolonged isolation of household production from mainstream economics, which now focused upon market transactions. The ascendancy of marginal utility theory shifted attention from the method by which goods were produced to the way in which they were allocated via the market. Thus Leon Walras (1870 [1977]: 211-26), for example, generally ignores the role of household work; even in his discussion of labor and labor services he tends to refer only to paid labor. William Stanley Jevons's (1871 [1970]: 188-216) analysis does not specifically exclude household labor, though he largely ignores its existence. Philip H. Wicksteed (1910 [1967]: 18-94) acknowledges it through quaint examples of housewives distributing cream and milk between family members and choosing which meals to prepare. As illustrated in our opening quotation, Wicksteed absorbs many other choices into the constrained optimization approach adopted by neoclassical economists, but he does not seriously analyze the economic significance of unpaid household labor.

In addition to the apparent inappropriateness of a market-based model for the discussion of household labor, another (possibly related) factor may also be seen as significant for the continuing omission of any formal treatment of household

production in mainstream economics. This factor was the perception that society was divided into a “private” and a “public” sphere. The public sphere included market activity, such as waged work, and was seen as the male domain. The private sphere was that of non-market household activity, generally carried out by women (Michèle Pujol 1992). This approach became increasingly institutionalized through the categorization of individuals as “breadwinners” and “dependants” in official statistics. The work of men was now identified with “the economy,” while households played a purely supportive or auxiliary role:

Thus by 1900 the notion that married women without paying jobs outside the home were “dependants” had acquired the status of scientific fact...The new terminology made it difficult to explain how a married man benefited from his wife’s household labor or how the larger economy benefited from non-market work. (Nancy Folbre 1991: 482-3)

The first explicit step in excluding the productive activities of household labor from the subject matter of economics may be attributed to Alfred Marshall and his designation of “exact money measurement” as the distinguishing feature of economic activity. This, he claimed, enabled the subject to “far outrun every other branch of the study of man” (Marshall 1920 [1977]: 12). The ability to measure activities in terms of a money, or exchange, value obscured the economic role of activities that were not subject to market transactions. This line of reasoning culminated in Arthur Cecil Pigou’s definition of the national income as the value of the production of all goods and services that “can be brought directly or indirectly into relation with the measuring rod of money.” He interpreted this as including “everything that people can

buy with money income, together with the services that a man obtains from a house owned and inhabited by himself” (Pigou 1932 [1978]: 32). The logic of this definition, as famously noted by Pigou himself, was that if a man marries his housekeeper the national income is reduced. At this point, it appeared as though neoclassical economics had defined domestic labor as entirely outside its scope.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s work defied this exclusionary trend, and while her analysis did not readily sit within the tradition of neoclassical economics, she discussed in detail many themes pursued in later studies of household production, identifying the economic implications of its unpaid nature. Such implications include reduced productivity, the production of externalities and the possibility of valuing household output by reference to its opportunity cost (Gilman 1898 [1966]). As with J.S. Mill and H.T. Mill, Gilman emphasised the efficiency gains that could be achieved by allowing women to pursue any work of which they were capable and argued that improvements in productivity would accrue from the increasing provision of household goods and services by the market sector. There was, however, and continues to be, some reluctance to view Gilman’s work as “economics,” and this is reflected in the limited impact that it had on either mainstream or Marxian analysis (Mary Ann Dimand 1995).

Research into household production did continue in two specific areas of economics: the development of national accounting frameworks and the sub-discipline of home economics.

## **The development of national accounting frameworks**

Some economists involved in the early attempts to estimate national income, particularly in Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States, specifically recognized the productive nature of households. Erik Lindahl, Einar Dahlgren and Karin Kock, for example, argued that household production was a significant component of national income, estimating its value for Sweden in 1929 as approximately 32 per cent of GNP (Erik Lindahl, Einar Dahlgren and Karin Kock 1937). In the United States, much of the early work on national accounting was carried out by Simon Kuznets at the National Bureau of Economic Research. Kuznets stressed the subjective nature of national income estimates, which he regarded as a system of “appraisal” rather than simply one of measurement; that is to say, the estimates necessarily involve judgements as to what is worthy of inclusion. He recognized the serious limitations of national accounts that exclude household production:

Exclusion of the products of the family economy, characteristic of virtually all national income estimates, seriously limits their validity as measures of all scarce and disposable goods...Over longer periods distinct secular shifts occur in the relative contributions of the business and family economy to the total of economic goods, most broadly defined. One must, therefore, guard against the common tendency to consider national income totals as all inclusive summaries of scarce and disposable sources of satisfaction produced by the nation. Such summaries would become practicable only if the data improved



substantially or if the family disappeared entirely as a producer of goods.

(Kuznets 1941: 11)

Kuznets's work followed other early efforts in the United States that aimed to quantify national income and had encountered similar difficulties (Wesley Mitchell, Willford King, Frederick Macauley and Oswald Knauth, 1921). Kuznets tentatively estimated the value of household production in the United States in 1929 to be 35 per cent of GNP. Colin Clark, a pioneer of national income accounting in both the United Kingdom and Australia, also expressed misgivings about the omission of household production from national income accounts (Clark 1932 [1965]). In 1958 he argued that the continued omission of household production was no longer defensible, and estimated the value of household production for the United Kingdom in 1956 at 27 per cent of GNP (Clark 1958).

Efforts to quantify the value of household production have gained in sophistication over the last three decades. Economists working in this field have little doubt about the impact of household production upon people's economic well-being, and there is now an extensive literature on the various methods which may be used to estimate the value of household production (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1994; Duncan Ironmonger 1996; see Oli Hawrylyshyn 1976 for a summary of early estimates). The collection of time-use data upon which to base the estimates has also provided evidence on the division of labor and changes in the pattern of household production (Michael Bitman 1995). The estimates have, however, remained largely separate from attempts to develop a *theory* of the relationship between households and the productivity of other sectors of the economy. Although, this is now being

examined more closely, particularly with respect to human capital and the proposition that forgone earnings may be an appropriate measure of the value of household production (Ironmonger 1996; Iulie Aslaksen and Charlotte Koren 1996; Iulie Aslaksen, Trude Fagerli and Hanne A. Gravningsmyhr 1996; Kathleen Cloud and Nancy Garrett 1996; Marga Bruyn-Hundt 1996). Perhaps the most significant contribution of the national income accountants has been to highlight, at a time when it was ignored by neoclassical theorists, the monetary value of the household work carried out predominantly by women and the need to integrate household production with other aspects of economic analysis. In addition, while estimates of the economic value of household production have served to make it more visible, it remains an area which is relatively marginalized and receives only limited attention at a policy level (Marilyn Waring 1988).

### **The home economics connection**

The pedigree of what became known as the “new home economics” at the University of Chicago can be traced to early work by Hazel Kyrk, Margaret Reid and Elizabeth Hoyt (Kyrk 1923; Reid 1934; Hoyt 1938). Kyrk was at the University of Chicago from 1925 to 1957 and, being aware of work by Wesley Mitchell and his associates, encouraged her students to examine possible methods for measuring the contribution of household production to the economy (Yun-Ae Yi 1996; Jack Hirschfeld 1997). She also taught consumption economics in the home economics department. Kyrk supervised Reid’s dissertation, completed in 1931 and later published as Economics of Household Production (Reid 1934).

After being awarded her Ph.D., Reid was appointed to Iowa State College to teach consumption economics in both the economics and home economics departments. Here she met Hoyt, who had been appointed to the economics faculty in 1925, and Theodore W. Schultz, later the head of the economics and sociology department, who also arrived at Iowa State in 1930. Hoyt's appointment strengthened consumption economics in the curriculum at Iowa State, but its growth as a field was encouraged not by the economists but by Anna E. Richardson, Dean of home economics. Alison Comish Thorne, a student of Reid's, Hoyt's and Kyrk's, notes that the relationship with home economics was important for providing teaching opportunities in home economics and recognition for women interested in expanding the conventional focus of economics to include the consumption and provisioning roles undertaken within households. Kyrk, Hoyt and Reid were the only women economists in their respective faculties at that time, and consumption economics was not easily accommodated within mainstream economics departments (Yi 1996: 19). The home economics connection also provided the opportunity for developing courses in consumption economics. Hoyt had extended the usual definition of economics from "the use of scarce resources with alternative uses for attaining given ends" to include the role of "the ultimate consumer," and "named time and energy as resources" in addition to a consumer's monetary purchasing power (Thorne 1995: 60-1).

The importance of the expansion of consumption economics to encompass more than the examination of market purchasing power is that it allowed these economists to include a wide range of activities, including self-provisioning, in the determination of living standards. Decades before Becker's theory of the allocation of time, Kyrk, Hoyt and Reid had all recognized the importance of time in household

production and consumption (Kyrk 1923: 86-87; Reid 1934: 242; Hoyt 1938: 381; Thorne 1995: 63). Before the formal development of the “household production function” they had examined, in detail, the inter-relationship between purchasing goods in the market and the role of the household in producing goods and services for consumption.

The theoretical context of these studies is, however, somewhat ambivalent. Hoyt seems tentatively to place her work within the dominant framework of marginal utility analysis:

Marginal analysis in a deeper sense, however, is at the heart of consumption... In order that the greatest sum total of satisfaction may be secured we must study potential satisfactions of all sorts and their relationships to one another; we must know the relative costs to us of securing satisfactions in order that not only our money but our time and energy may be most economically bestowed. (Hoyt 1938: 381)

Kyrk was slightly more critical of marginal utility theory and recognized its limitations when applied to household decision-making processes, not least because of the role marketing strategies and advertising play in guiding consumer preferences. For their part, “the marginal utility theorists will not pursue the study of consumption further than they consider needful to enable them to formulate the laws of price” (Kyrk 1923: 17).

Reid made a substantial contribution to a wide range of areas which would later become fundamental to neoclassical economic theory (Evelyn Forget 1996; Yi 1996). Her definition of household production continues to influence many researchers in their efforts to value household work. While generally placing her analysis within mainstream neoclassical theory, Reid did not hesitate to argue for public policy intervention when she felt this was required to aid the operation of markets, particularly with respect to the education of consumers, the adequate labelling of commodities and the use of efficient techniques in household production.

All three women frequently highlight instances where markets fail, and all discuss the need for consumer education and government regulation. In contrast to much later work on household production, they address social issues such as the distribution of income, the status of women, the concept of value in economics and the regrettable tendency for standards of living to be viewed in terms of purchased goods and services alone. Their examination of the role of households is not confined to a particular application of marginal utility theory, but places households and their economic role within a broader social context. Yi notes that the close interaction of Kyrk, Hoyt and Reid permitted research in consumption economics to flourish during the 1930s and 1940s, and that they were instrumental in bringing about substantial changes in the home economics curriculum at many American universities.

### **Theodore W. Schultz and agricultural economics**

In the transition from household production as an important research focus for a small number of women economists to the development of the “new home economics” and its myriad of (male) researchers, Theodore W. Schultz emerges as a significant link. Schultz came to economics via agriculture:

Most of the people of the world are poor, so if we knew the economics of being poor, we would know much of the economics that really matters. Most of the world’s poor people earn their living from agriculture, so if we knew the economics of agriculture, we would know much of the economics of being poor. (Theodore Schultz 1979 [1992]: 382)

Economists have failed in this task, Schultz claims, because they have exaggerated the importance of land as a factor of production and underrated the significance of labor, in particular population quality. It is at this point that several links to the issue of household production become apparent. Population quality depends upon nutrition, health, child-care and education. In poor communities many of these elements are provided through self-provisioning, that is, through household production. Schultz explains how increases in productivity flow from investment in so-called “welfare expenditures,” such as education and health, which he argues are really investments in population quality, or “human capital.”

### **The “new home economics”**

From this background, Schultz became an early contributor to the literature on human capital (Theodore Schultz, 1960, 1961). It was, however, Becker’s 1965

article, “A Theory of the Allocation of Time,” which allowed household production to be formally integrated for the first time into neoclassical theory:

In recent years economists increasingly recognise that a household is truly a “small factory.” It combines capital goods, raw materials and labor to clean, feed, procreate and otherwise produce useful commodities. Undoubtedly the fundamental reason for the traditional separation is that firms are usually given control over working time in exchange for market goods, while “discretionary” control over market goods and consumption time is retained by households as they create their own utility. (Becker 1965: 496)

It followed that time cannot be simply divided into “work” and “leisure,” where leisure is defined as time not spent in paid work. In Becker’s theory, households allocate time and market goods to an array of activities, using them in different combinations to produce commodities that directly enter their utility functions. In this formulation, households are both producing units and utility maximizers. They combine time and market goods via their production function to produce commodities which are chosen to maximize their utility function (Becker 1965: 495).

The influence of Becker’s paper was evident by 1972 and 1973, when two conferences were held under the auspices of the National Bureau of Economic Research and the Population Council on “New Economic Approaches to Fertility.” This attention to household activity is striking when compared to the lack of recognition afforded households only a decade before. Formal analysis was extended to household decisions to raise children, invest in human capital and allocate time to

household activities and paid work. The economics of the household became one of the major research programs of mainstream economics, and the 1972 conference dealt with many problems that had been of continuing interest to Schultz. In particular, it offered the opportunity for factors previously considered to be exogenous in mainstream neoclassical economic theory to be treated as endogenous. In his introduction to the conference proceedings, Schultz outlined the principal characteristics of what he now termed the “new home economics”:

There are four developments in economic analysis that are relevant here: the investment in human capital; the theory to treat a heretofore neglected basic attribute in the allocation of human time [a reference to Becker’s theory, which examined the allocation of time to market and non-market activities]; the household production function; and a view of the family that encompasses both consumer choice and household production decisions, including the bearing and rearing of children. (Theodore Schultz 1973: s5)

While Schultz explained the increasing interest afforded to the household by advances in economic analysis, there is little doubt that this also coincided with major social changes, particularly regarding the role and status of women. As Susan Himmelweit (1995) points out, the increasing participation of married women in the paid workforce brought the comparison of their paid and unpaid activities into sharper relief, an issue exemplified quite early on by Jacob Mincer’s (1962) work. In fact Shoshana Grossbard-Shechtman (2001) suggests that Mincer's approach to household economics was more flexible than that entailed by Becker's rigidly neoclassical analysis, since it was consistent with feminist and other heterodox perspectives. Mincer also influenced the work of the future Nobel laureate James Heckman. After a



century of neglect by mainstream economists, household production had become the focus of a large and growing research effort.

### **What was so new?**

As we have seen, many issues relating to the economic role of households had been examined in earlier decades. While “the idea that education and training may be treated as capital is at least as old as the Wealth of Nations” (Melvin Reder 1982: 212), most aspects of household production had been previously discussed by Kyrk, Hoyt and Reid. Reid was a participant in the 1972 conference, and Schultz acknowledged her role in his introductory address (Schultz 1973: s6).

Most of the early exponents of the new home economics were men, and the “new” analysis amounted to little more than a reformatting of existing concepts in a framework that lent itself to the orthodox method of constrained optimization analysis. The significance of this repackaging should not, however, be underestimated. Several conference participants, including Schultz and Reid, were by this time faculty members of the University of Chicago. The Chicago economics department is recognized as having a strong tendency to “resist explanations of behaviour that do not run in terms of utility maximization by individual decision makers coordinated by market clearing prices” (Reder 1987: 416). Human capital theory and the theory of the allocation of time allowed household production to be examined from this perspective, providing mainstream economists with a base from which to analyze a wide range of issues that would have been previously considered outside their jurisdiction. That is, constrained optimization techniques were able to

bring questions regarding domestic labor within the domain of economics as defined by the mainstream. Becker, most notably, has used this framework to examine the economics of issues traditionally reserved for sociologists, such as marriage, crime and drug use, in addition to his work in the area of household production, and has become the best-known of all the “economics imperialists” (Gary Becker 1968; 1974; 1992; George Stigler 1984; Gary Becker and Kevin Murphy 1988; Ben Fine 1997).

In addition to legitimizing the work of economists with a longstanding interest in the area of household production, the new paradigm also encouraged the growth of further work in this area. As Schultz put it:

the stage is set for analyzing the economic attributes of marriage, of procreation and children. The research opportunities are abundant and the prospects are good that real contributions can be made. As of now, however, the dialogue between data and theory has just begun. (Schultz 1973: s13)

The size and scope of research into household production can be seen from the dozens of papers presented at the two conferences organized by Schultz and his associates in 1972 and 1973 (Schultz 1973; 1974).

The new home economics is an example of the “multi-generational linkage in intellectual tradition” that has been cited as one of the major reasons for the success of the Chicago school of economics more generally (Reder 1987: 414). The lineage from Kyrk and Hoyt, to Reid and Schultz, and from there to an ever-expanding number of younger economists, shows a gradual building upon past work and support from peers

and colleagues, despite the lack of acknowledgment Reid received from her successors. There is, for example, no reference to Reid's early work in Becker's theory of the allocation of time, and she received little acknowledgment for her early work on the permanent income hypothesis (Yi 1996: 25-6). However, she explicitly sided with the new home economics treatment of household production, rather than supporting those critical of the narrow focus of neoclassical models (Reid 1977; cf. Marianne Ferber and Bonnie Birnbaum 1977).

## **DOMESTIC LABOR AND THE MARXIAN ECONOMISTS**

Terry Eagleton's disclaimer notwithstanding, there are four good reasons why Marxian political economists might have been expected to take domestic labor very seriously indeed. First, Marxians emphasize the historical specificity of relations of production, rather than universalizing the particular exchange relations of capitalism as neoclassical theorists do. They should therefore have taken a strong interest in the different ways in which domestic labor is performed in distinct modes of production. The second reason is provided by the privileged status of production in Marxian economic theory and the special significance of human labor. This is in sharp contrast with mainstream theory, for which exchange rather than production is fundamental and for which labor is only one factor of production, enjoying no more than equal status with land, capital and (perhaps) entrepreneurship (see, however, Theodore Schultz 1979 [1992]). The third reason is the peculiar importance attached to reproduction in Marxian economics. Much of volume II of Capital, for example, is devoted to the material and social conditions under which a mode of production is able to ensure its own survival, for which the domestic labor required to maintain and

reproduce the species is obviously essential. Finally, there is the uniquely important role of human labor power in the Marxian analysis of capitalism. The capacity to work is the only commodity capable of producing more value than is required to produce it and is hence the only source of surplus value and profit. The distinctive circumstances under which labor power is produced and reproduced are therefore crucial for an understanding of capitalism itself. Domestic labor, to repeat, is essential for the production and reproduction of labor power.

### **Marx, Engels, Bebel**

It is therefore surprising that Karl Marx himself had so little to say about domestic labour. “Feminism is clearly compatible with the spirit of justice, egalitarianism and personal fulfilment that is to be found in the alienation theory of the young Marx.” (Michele Barrett 1991: 190; cf. Josephine Donovan 1993: 73; Lise Vogel 1996: 140, 144-5). If Marx can be accused of gender blindness, or worse, this is not the case for Friedrich Engels, whose The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State (1884)[1971] dealt with “the woman question” in considerable detail. Five years earlier, the German socialist leader August Bebel had published a much longer and more comprehensive study of Woman Under Socialism. Bebel’s book went through many editions. It was greatly enlarged after the publication of Engels’s Origin but, so far as we are aware, without any significant changes to the little that he had written about domestic labor. In fact the most striking characteristic of Bebel’s text is how little of it is devoted to housework: some six pages out of 379. This is not because of any obvious masculinist bias in his thinking. On the contrary, his book is in many ways a very radical one, and some modern socialist feminists consider Bebel

to be much more advanced than Engels (Nancy Folbre 1993; see Jane Humphries 1987 for an alternative interpretation). “The point,” he insists, “is to seek to establish a social condition in which the full equality of all without distinction of sex shall be the norm of conduct.” Bebel argues that this “is feasible – the moment all the means of production become the property of society,” and he scornfully dismisses “the twaddle about the ‘natural calling’ of women...assigning her to domestic duties and the family” (August Bebel (1879)[1917]: 181-2; original stress deleted). For Bebel there is nothing “natural” about the sexual division of labor, which is historically, socially and geographically contingent:

Only a few decades ago, and it was a matter of course in every citizen’s or peasant’s house not only that woman sewed, knitted and washed – although even this has now extensively gone out of fashion – but she also baked the bread, spun, wove, bleached, brewed beer, boiled soap, made candles.

These activities were now ‘being attended to better, more expeditiously and cheaper than the housewife could’ (ibid: 183-4), while in the United States central kitchens were being supplemented by central laundry facilities and by central heating and air conditioning systems. Even in Germany domestic labor was becoming “as superfluous as handicraft has been rendered by machinery and modern technique.”

These developments were as inescapable as they were entirely welcome: “...the whole trend of society is to lead women out of the narrow sphere of strictly domestic life to a full participation in the public life of the people – a designation that will not then cover the male sex only – and in the task of human civilization” (ibid: 187).

Housework, for Bebel, was backward and wasteful and was therefore doomed. Within capitalism it was already being squeezed by increasing commodification. The material conditions for women’s emancipation were being produced by the development of

capitalism itself and would reach their culmination with the achievement of socialism, when domestic labor would finally disappear.

On this conclusion, at least, Engels agreed with Bebel. References to domestic labor are even sparser in the Origins than in Woman Under Socialism (though in fairness it should be remembered that Engels was trying to explain the origins of private property and the state in his 150 pages, as well as the subjugation of women, and he ranged over the whole of human history in the process). He described how the oppression of women grew with the emergence of the monogamous, patriarchal family and its confinement of women to (private) domestic labor and consequent exclusion from (public) economic life. Engels drew particular attention to the way in which, in Euripides, the wife is denoted by the neuter term oikurema, which literally means “a thing for housekeeping” (Friedrich Engels (1884)[1972]: 64). He suggests a dramatic analogy: “The first class antagonism which appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression with that of the female sex by the male” (ibid: 64). Both forms of oppression will be overcome – perhaps, can only be overcome – in socialism: “With the passage of the means of production into common property, the individual family ceases to be the economic unit of society. Private housekeeping is transformed into a social industry. The care and education of the children becomes a public matter” (ibid: 76).

Feminists have criticized Engels, with some justice, for “naturalizing” the sexual division of labor and for exaggerating the degree to which participation in the public economy (that is, working for wages outside the household) had already emancipated proletarian women (see Moira Maconachie 1987; Vogel 1996). Certainly

there is no recognition in the Origin of the “double shift” of the wage-working woman. There was, however, a good reason for this: Engels, like Bebel, believed that the working-class family was being broken down by the development of capitalism, that housework was increasingly being socialized within capitalist society, and that it would cease altogether to be a domestic concern with the attainment of socialism. In this they reflected the views of earlier, Utopian, socialists, whose visionary ideas became fashionable again in the 1890s under the influence of popularizers like Edward Bellamy. In Bellamy’s Looking Backward (1888), “the man [sic] of the year A.D. 2000, replying to a question about housework, replies: ‘There is none to do’” (Richard Stites 1978: 265).

### **The Avelings, Zetkin, Luxemburg**

In 1887 some of the arguments of Bebel and Engels became available to an English audience when Marx’s daughter Eleanor and her husband Edward Aveling published a pamphlet on “The Woman Question.” They set out the analogy between class and gender oppression in a very stark manner:

The truth, not fully recognised even by those anxious to do good to woman, is that she, like the labour-classes, is in an oppressed condition; that her position, like theirs, is one of merciless degradation. Women are the creatures of an organised tyranny of men, as the workers are the creatures of an organised tyranny of idlers. (Eleanor Marx-Aveling and Edward Aveling 1887[1987]: 14)

This was due to “the economic position of dependency upon man. Women, once more like the labourers, have been expropriated as to their rights as human beings, just as the labourers were expropriated as to their rights as producers” (ibid: 17). Marx and Aveling offer very little detailed analysis of the causes of this economic dependency, nor are they very clear on how it might be overcome. They do, however, explicitly deny that the sexual division of labor is in any way natural (ibid: 15) and refer briefly to “the dread rerum angustarum domi” (dread of the narrow confines of domestic life) (ibid: 18). Thus the life of a married woman is “more arduous and irksome” than that of her husband: “The man, worn out as he may be by labour, has the evening in which to do nothing. The woman is occupied until bedtime comes. Often, with young children her toil goes far into, or all through, the night” (ibid: 19).

Marx and Aveling insist that “[b]oth the oppressed classes, women and the immediate producers must understand that their emancipation will come from themselves.” Women will find that some men are their allies, just as the workers are attracting some intellectual support. “But the one has nothing to hope from man as a whole, and the other has nothing to hope from the middle class as a whole” (ibid: 15). The material implications of this statement are, however, not explored, and the majority of the pamphlet is instead devoted to the emotional and sexual ramifications of women’s liberation.

Clara Zetkin, in contrast, took an explicitly materialist position, arguing that “[t]he question of women’s emancipation” was “in the final analysis...the question of women’s work” (Clara Zetkin 1889 [1984]: 45). Two years after the publication of the Marx-Aveling pamphlet, Zetkin made a speech, entitled “For the Liberation of



Women,” at an international workers’ congress in Paris. Here she regretted the continuing influence within the socialist movement of the reactionary idea that paid work for women should be abolished. In the first place, the decline in men’s wages had destroyed the economic independence of the proletarian male, so that “[a] married male worker must, by necessity, count upon the salary of his wife” (ibid: 47).

Secondly, the viability of domestic production was increasingly tenuous:

Machine production has killed the economic activities of women within their families...As a consequence, productive activity within the family became economic nonsense and a waste of time and effort...Large-scale industry has rendered the production of goods within the home unnecessary and has made the domestic activity of women meaningless. (ibid: 46-7; cf. Gilman 1898)

Thus the future for women, Zetkin argued, lay outside the household in the capitalist labor market, and there should accordingly be no legal or customary restrictions on women’s work. Note that the household production to which Zetkin refers is not housework but production of commodities for the market, using handicraft technology. Her argument, while it is not inconsistent with Bebel’s analysis of the increasing futility of domestic labor, is therefore quite different. Significantly, there is no reference to housework in any of the nineteen later texts reprinted as her Selected Writings (Clara Zetkin 1984).

One of the greatest of all Marxian economic theorists, Rosa Luxemburg, took relatively little interest in women’s issues. In her one significant contribution to the

subject, a speech on women's suffrage at the second Social Democratic Women's Rally in Stuttgart in May 1912, Luxemburg endorsed Charles Fourier's claim that "In any society, the degree of female emancipation is the natural measure of the general emancipation" (Rosa Luxemburg 1912 [1971]: 222). She took a very hard line on the unproductiveness of household labor. Unlike bourgeois women, who were "parasites of the parasites of the social body" (ibid : 220), women wage-earners

are economically independent. They are productive for society like the men. By this I do not mean their bringing up children or their housework which helps men support their families on scanty wages. This kind of work is not productive in the sense of the present capitalist economy no matter how enormous an achievement the sacrifices and energy spent, the thousand little efforts add up to. This is but the private affair of the worker, his happiness and blessing, and for this reason nonexistent for our present society. As long as capitalism and the wage system rule, only that kind of work is considered productive which produces surplus value, which creates capitalist profit. (ibid: 220-1)

Nonetheless, Luxemburg continues, proletarian women's claim to political equality is "anchored in firm economic ground," that is in their waged work, which creates profit for capitalist employers:

They are therefore productive in the strictest scientific sense of our present society. Every day enlarges the hosts of women exploited by capitalism. Every new progress in industry or technology creates new places for women in the machinery of capitalist profiteering...Likewise, unions and Social Democracy

have today lifted the women of the proletariat out of their stuffy, narrow existence, out of the miserable and petty mindlessness of household managing. (ibid: 221)

### **Lenin and after**

Bolshevik writers regarded housework as the major obstacle to the full emancipation of women in the fledgling Soviet Union. Thus Vladimir Lenin wrote that despite “all the laws emancipating woman, she continues to be a domestic slave, because petty housework crushes, strangles, stultifies and degrades her, chains her to the kitchen and the nursery, and she wastes her labor on barbarously unproductive, petty, nerve-racking, stultifying and crushing drudgery” (Cited in Vogel 1983: 120-1). The same passage is quoted by Stites (1978: 378) who, like Vogel, suggests that Lenin drew parallels between women’s domestic labor and the no less backward and degrading position of the peasantry. The most prominent of the Bolshevik feminists, Alexandra Kollontai, took the same line and may well have contributed to the formation of Lenin’s ideas. The Eighth Party Congress of 1919 voted for the replacement of the individual household by communal facilities for housework and child care.

Kollontai’s subsequent support for the New Economic Policy owed much to her belief that it would generate the resources necessary for the implementation of this commitment. In practice, of course, the collectivization of housework never materialized, and as early as 1926 Alexandra Kollontai’s ideas were regarded as something of an embarrassment, with Soviet women increasingly called upon to perform the double shift of paid employment and unpaid domestic chores (Beatrice Farnsworth 1978: 189, 193, 198, 200; Stites 1978: 355-6, 378-9, 409-10; see also Cathy Porter 1980).

As a sort of epitaph for the treatment of domestic labor in mainstream Marxian political economy, we can cite Oskar Lange's repetitive and ponderous, but undoubtedly authoritative, text on Political Economy, published in Poland in 1959 and translated into English in 1963 (Lange's significance is stressed by Tadeusz Kowalik 1994). He draws a very sharp distinction between "natural economy" and "commodity-money economy": "Before the development of commodity production and commodity-money exchange, or when such production and exchange have not yet developed fully, production and distribution are devoted to the direct satisfaction of needs," and the aims of economic activity are "established by custom and morality, approved by religion, and sometimes also sanctioned by legislation" (Oskar Lange 1963: 150-1). The development of commodity production leads to "the severance of the direct connection between economic activity and the satisfaction of needs." For the first time it becomes possible to distinguish "two separate kinds of activity : gainful activity and household activity" (ibid:155; original stress). While in the household "the aims of activity are still directly dictated by needs....in a commodity-money economy, both the end and the means of gainful activity break with tradition. Gainful activity becomes an activity based on reasoning, a rational activity" (ibid: 155-7).

Lange is quite emphatic on this point: contrary to the claims of Austrian theorists like Ludwig von Mises, human action is not always and necessarily rational. It is not the case that "the term 'rational action' is therefore pleonastic and must be rejected as such" (ibid: 158n). In fact,

[t]he whole process of production and distribution becomes a rational economic activity, and traditionalism in economic activity is restricted to domestic economy (although even here advertising and other methods of capitalistic enterprise break through). In production and distribution the traditional activities linger on only in peasant economy, where even under capitalism natural economy persists on a considerable scale. (ibid:159)

Like Zetlin, Lange makes no explicit reference to housework, but his use of “domestic economy” is confined to non-commodity production and therefore excludes women’s handicraft production for the market. His mention of “peasant economy” is very revealing, for the “agrarian question” caused Marxists every bit as much trouble as the “woman question,” and for much the same reasons (Athar Hussain and Keith Tribe 1981; Adrian Jones 1997). Like housework, peasant subsistence production was supposedly doomed - in Karl Kautsky’s memorable phrase, “like a train runs over a handcart.” Its failure to disappear as scheduled proved a great embarrassment to orthodox Marxists, just like the survival of something as archaic, irrational and meaningless as women’s domestic labor.

## **THE PROBLEM OF DOMESTIC LABOR IN MARXIST FEMINISM**

The beginnings of the ‘domestic labor debate’ in modern Marxist feminism can be dated precisely (at least in the English-language literature) to the 1969 appearance in the independent U.S. Marxist journal Monthly Review of a short article, “The Political Economy of Women’s Liberation” by Margaret Benston. Perhaps significantly, Benston gave her address as the Chemistry Department at Simon Fraser

University in Vancouver. Benston criticized Juliet Mitchell, who in an article reprinted in her book Women's Estate had attacked Engels's discussion of the family as "overly economist" (Juliet Mitchell 1971: 80). Engels, Mitchell objected, "effectively reduces the problem of woman to her capacity to work" (ibid: 79). Against Mitchell, Benston argues that "the roots of the secondary status of women are in fact economic...that women as a group do indeed have a definite relation to the means of production and that this is different from that of men" (Margaret Benston 1969: 13). This is because household labor is "pre-capitalist in a very real sense" (ibid: 15), since it produces simple use-values rather than commodities.

Women work outside the money economy, Benston continues, so that "[t]heir work is not worth money, is therefore valueless, is therefore not even real work...In structural terms, the closest thing to the condition of women is the condition of others who are or were also outside of commodity production, i.e., serfs and peasants" (ibid: 16). Thus the household, which "should be seen primarily as a production unit for housework and child-rearing" (ibid: 20), is also "a pre-industrial entity," unaffected by the rationalization of production methods that was achieved in the course of capitalist industrialization (ibid: 18). Benston identifies two prerequisites for the liberation of women: equal access with men to paid jobs outside the home and the transformation of housework into work performed in the public economy via the assumption of social responsibility for child-rearing and the provision of communal eating-places and laundries (ibid: 21-2). This was unlikely to occur under capitalism, Benston concluded, both because women's unpaid domestic labor was very profitable for the owners of the means of production and because the public economy could not expand rapidly enough to provide paid employment for all women (ibid: 23).

Benston's analysis was very much in the tradition of the orthodox Marxian theorists but with a quite different conclusion: domestic labor would not, after all, disappear under capitalism. Her brief, unpretentious article was enough to provoke a ferocious debate, characterized – as one of the participants subsequently admitted – by “sectarian insularity” (Wally Seccombe 1986: 195). Apart from a very short reply to Benston by Mickey Rowntree and John Rowntree (1970), who simply asserted the significance of women's waged labor and reaffirmed the classical position that capitalism itself was progressively abolishing housework, the debate took place outside the columns of Monthly Review, in a variety of mainly peripheral and small-circulation feminist periodicals. Rather more accessible, there were several special issues of the Review of Radical Political Economics on domestic labor, a number of articles in its U.K. equivalent Capital and Class (formerly the Bulletin of the Conference of Socialist Economists) and a series of polemical pieces in New Left Review. Seccombe (1986: 467-9) provides a reasonably comprehensive bibliography.

By the end of the 1970s most of the important questions had been posed, if not answered, and anthologies of relevant articles began to appear (Annette Kuhn and Anne Marie Wolpe 1978; Bonnie Fox 1980; Roberta Hamilton and Michele Barrett 1986; for brief surveys, see also Vogel 1983: 17-25, 151-75, Himmelweit 1987, and Donovan 1993: 79-80). Although the Marxian influence on feminist thinking seems to have decreased in the 1980s and early 1990s, many of the issues raised in the debates of the previous decade continue to worry feminist and Marxist economists alike (see, for example, Julie Matthaei 1992; Humphries 1992). Four of these issues are especially important.

First, in what sense (if any) is housework “productive”? This apparently innocent question caused more controversy than any of the others, partly for political reasons. The Marxist-feminist Wages For Housework campaign was based on the claim that domestic labor was just like paid work under capitalism, producing surplus value for capital, and should therefore be waged (Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, 1975). In denying this claim, its feminist opponents were also resisting any implication that women’s oppression in domestic labor could be reduced to its unpaid status alone. At the analytical level, attributing ‘productive’ status to housework threatened the theoretical integrity of the crucial Marxian (and classical) distinction between productive and unproductive labor. Since women’s domestic labor is not paid for, does not result in the production of goods and services for the market, and does not constitute a source of profit for any capitalist, a strong case can be made for classing it as unproductive. It is necessary, perhaps, but nevertheless unproductive, according to Marx’s deliberately cynical use of the term, since it produces neither value nor surplus value (Margaret Coulson, Branka Magas and Hilary Wainwright 1975). But this classification, surely, is to devalue women’s work (the pun is almost inescapable), and therefore reflects the irredeemably masculinist prejudice of mainstream Marxist thinking, which is part of the problem for women, not part of the solution. Possibly, then, housework should be seen as indirectly productive, since it provides essential inputs into the process of production and reproduction of the quintessential capitalist commodity, human labor power (Secombe 1974). But this poses serious problems for the broader question of the definition of productive and unproductive labor, with implications for the related distinction between production



and circulation and the treatment of state employees (Ian Gough 1972; Michael Howard and John King 1985: 128-32).

The second question arises directly out of the first: does the Marxian law of value apply to housework? In this context, the “law of value” refers simply to the powerful tendency for producers to adopt the most efficient (least-cost) method of production, under pain of elimination from an intensely competitive market. How, one may wonder, can the law of value apply to housework when what the housewife produces never enters the marketplace, when the housewife herself administers and regulates her domestic labor, and when neither the profit motive nor the relentless pressure of competition is even remotely relevant? (Coulston, Magas and Wainwright 1975; Jean Gardiner 1975; Paul Smith 1978). How, though, can it fail to apply, when domestic labor produces goods and services that are also available (or are close substitutes for what is available) from the market, and when women – and men – face financial and time constraints that require them to be as efficient in domestic production as they are in market work? (Seccombe 1986: 200). In other words, does a coherent Marxian approach to domestic labor entail the neoclassical assumption of a utility-maximizing (or effort-minimizing) household?

Third, what components of exploitation are involved in housework, and how can they be analyzed? Do housewives perform surplus labor, and if so who benefits from it? Is it capitalists, who are able to pay lower wages than would be the case if their (male) labor force were unable to rely on women’s unpaid provision of meals, cleaning, laundry and childcare? Or is it these same male workers, whose standard of living would be reduced if their wives’ domestic labor were adequately rewarded?

(See Nancy Folbre 1982 for a formal neo-Sraffian analysis of the exploitative nature of domestic labor). Possibly Engels was right to describe the relations between men and women as analogous to those between capitalists and proletarians. Perhaps patriarchy needs to be identified as a system of exploitation and oppression that preceded, and continues to coexist with, the capitalist mode of production (Susan Himmelweit and Simon Mohun 1977; Roisin McDonough and Rachel Harrison 1978; Lydia Sargent 1981; Himmelweit 1984). If so, what remains of the classical Marxian slogan that the workers of the world (both men and women) have nothing to lose but their chains, since male workers stand additionally to lose the surplus labor of their wives? The implications of this question are qualitatively similar to those posed by unequal exchange between high-wage workers in the “North” and low-wage workers in the “South” (Howard and King 1992: ch. 10); quantitatively the implications may be very much greater.

The fourth question, frequently discussed but never resolved during the 1970s (or subsequently), concerns the dynamics of the relationship between capitalism and domestic labor. Thus on the one hand, women’s unpaid housework reduces the value of male labor power since it provides essential inputs free or greatly below cost, and thereby increases profits, giving capitalists a direct interest in its preservation just as in, for example, apartheid-era South Africa, goldmining companies had a strong material interest in the preservation of peasant farming in the Bantustans (cf. Harold Wolpe 1972; Gardiner 1975; Veronica Beechey 1977; Maria Mies 1986). On the other hand, women who are trapped in domestic drudgery, supplying at very low levels of productivity goods and services that could be provided much more efficiently by the market, are not available for exploitation as wage laborers, and this

is the basis of the classic Marxian position that capitalism will tend to commodify housework as rapidly as possible. Perhaps all that can be said is that domestic labor occupies a contradictory position in relation to the capitalist mode of production (Coulson, Magas and Wainwright 1975; Beechey 1977; Emily Blumenfeld and Susan Mann 1980). Institutionalists might well regard it as constituting an important example of the 'impurity principle', which asserts that no mode of production can operate without elements left over from previous modes of production (Geoffrey Hodgson 1999).

## **THE LIMITATIONS OF THE NEW HOME ECONOMICS**

Neoclassical economics has also encountered problems in dealing with household production, and several aspects of the new home economics research program have been strongly criticized. Indeed, the "Becker approach" is seen by many feminist economists as illustrating the fundamental philosophical gulf between neoclassical economics and feminism (Prue Hyman 1994). While feminists have not been alone in criticizing the application of the neoclassical framework to household production, on this specific subject they have provided a comprehensive critique.

First, they argue that the mainstream assumption of rationality involves circularity, particularly when rational choice is based upon stable, exogenously determined preferences. Becker inadvertently illustrates the problem in claiming that, when

an apparently profitable opportunity to a firm, worker, or household is not exploited, the economic approach does not take refuge in assertions about irrationality, contentment with wealth already acquired, or convenient ad hoc shifts in values (preferences). Rather it postulates the existence of costs, monetary or psychic, of taking advantage of these opportunities that eliminate their profitability - costs that may not be easily “seen” by outside observers.

(Gary Becker 1976: 7)

But such costs may impose severe restrictions upon individual choice, and rationality may involve no more than accepting the only option available. For example, feminists discuss socialization into gender roles and institutional limitations, such as affordable child care, as barriers to real choices regarding participation in the formal economy. While Becker emphasizes choice, feminists might emphasize constraints.

The application of ostensibly value-free economic models to household production reinforces institutional arrangements that are detrimental to the interests of women. Becker’s conclusions about the efficiency benefits from women's specialization in household production are often cited as an example of this. If neoclassical theorists argue that women’s lower incomes and restricted access to economic resources are a result of their choice to pursue activities that offer non-economic returns, feminists object that this is apologetic. “Those who see outcomes largely as the consequences of choice and individual responsibility, rather than constraints and systems, will be able to justify to themselves the resulting

inequalities” (Diana Strassman 1993; Hyman 1994: 54; cf. Barbara Bergmann 1995; Simon Duncan and Rosalind Edwards, 1997).

The nature of the decision-making unit is also problematic. It may be a particular individual who effectively makes decisions or choices, it could be the household as a cooperative unit, or it might be someone outside the household, such as another family member. Becker addressed this issue by assuming the existence of an altruistic household decision maker with the ultimate power to distribute household resources. Others have utilized transaction cost analysis (Robert Pollak 1985) and varying forms of both cooperative and noncooperative bargaining models (for example Marilyn Manser and Murray Brown 1980; Marjorie McElroy and Mary Jean Horney 1981; Shelly Lundberg and Robert Pollak 1993; Ravi Kanbur and Lawrence Haddad 1994).

However, some feminists consider that the neoclassical framework remains inadequate in its treatment of conflict and interdependence in household decision-making, particularly with respect to the significance of social and legal institutions in determining the bargaining power of household members (Bina Agarwal 1997; Elizabeth Katz 1997; Myra H. Strober and Agnes Miling Kaneko Chan 1998). It is argued that this body of theory has developed in response to socially conditioned perceptions of how households should or may operate:

Feminists argue that many of economics’ core beliefs and policy recommendations are out of date, products of the peculiarities and politics and the periods in which they were developed and products of sexism in the

Western World during the past two centuries... what one chooses to work on and how one formulates theory and recommendations are dependent upon one's culture, one's position in society and one's life experiences. (Myra Strober 1994: 143; cf. Hyman 1994).

Further criticisms relate to the fact that the predictions of the neoclassical approach only hold if the household is operating at an optimal level of output (Richard Berk and Sarah F. Berk 1983), and that there are serious measurement problems involved in testing the theories (Yoram Ben-Porath 1982; Elizabeth Katz 1997). Moreover, the new home economics has failed to address many of the questions formerly discussed by Kyrk, Reid and Hoyt. Market failure, the need for government programs to educate consumers and counterbalance the influence of advertizing, and the importance of income distribution are some of the significant areas that remain excluded from the neoclassical focus on optimization.

An even more intractable problem is posed by the failure of neoclassical theories to capture the distinctive nature of household work, particularly with respect to its role in providing caring labor. As we have seen, this also continues to pose problems for Marxian political economy. A minority of Marxist-feminists have adopted a position very close to that of the neoclassical theory of domestic production. Seccombe, for example, emphasizes the pressures under which working-class households live, requiring from them "careful budgeting, comparative shopping and diligent housework." He writes approvingly of the "powerful insights which have been developed within the [neoclassical] paradigm. We make an analogous statement in asserting that proletarian households strive to maximise the aggregate exchange

value of their labor power on the market and its use value in unpaid household production.” There is, he concludes, “a great deal to be gained in this regard, by extracting and reworking insights from ‘malestream’ sociology and neoclassical economics” (Seccombe 1986: 199, 207).

Francis Green (1988) draws very similar conclusions from the apparent convergence of orthodox and radical labor economics, while Ben Fine (1997) points to a continuing revolution in mainstream theory that threatens to obliterate the distinctive characteristics of Marxian economics. Even Himmelweit, a severe critic of both schools, notes the parallels in their post-1960 rediscovery of unpaid work, which she attributes to “tendencies within the economy itself, which have put paid and unpaid work into much closer and obvious comparison with each other” (Himmelweit 1995: 6). The growth of women’s paid employment, she suggests, has greatly increased the opportunity cost of domestic labor and thereby contributed to the inexorable commodification of housework, so that an ever-increasing proportion of human needs are satisfied through the market.

Himmelweit concludes that there is more to domestic labor than either the neoclassicals or the Marxists have been prepared to admit, since “caring and self-fulfilling activities” transcend the conventional dichotomy between work and non-work (Himmelweit 1995: 15). Many feminists agree that women’s unpaid labor cannot easily be analyzed with the standard Marxian or neoclassical tools. Thus Chris Beasley, for example, stresses the non-material aspects of housework, which involve emotional commitment, altruism and love in addition to the production of surrogate commodities. Folbre, while recognizing some of the insights offered by both neoclassical and Marxian theory, also attacks their inability to capture many salient

features of an economy of caring labor, or to encompass the combination of individual and group interests that apply in the household economy (Folbre 1994).

As Beasley puts it:

In this complex intertwining of the creation of services/goods with the expression of love/affection/care one sees the formulation of an emotional economy which cannot be reduced either to Marx's narrow definitions of labour as (a) "production" of food and objects, or (b) "production" of commodities under capitalism, or even to (c) his broader definition of all activities necessary to human survival, since "activities" still tend to be described with little reference to, for example, invisible, emotional and psychic aspects of labour. (Beasley 1994: 13)

Nor can this emotional economy (Ronnie J. Steinberg and Deborah Figart 1999) be reduced to the traditional neoclassical assumptions of (a) optimization by autonomous individuals, (b) exogenously determined institutions and preferences, and (c) voluntary membership of a group to pursue individual interests. This is particularly so because "the concept of work least easily assimilated by the view of work as a commodity is that of work as self-fulfilment" (John Dupre and Regenia Gagnier 1996: 559).

## **CONCLUSION**

During the 1960s and 70s, mainstream and Marxian economists became interested in domestic labor for broadly similar reasons. Changes in contemporary



capitalism made the issue increasingly difficult to ignore: the growing commodification of consumption and the inexorable rise in the labor force participation of women (especially married women) cried out for analysis. As far as the Marxians were concerned, the re-emergence of feminism presented a fundamental challenge, both to their everyday political practice and at the intellectual level. However, for mainstream economists new theoretical directions, particularly those pursued by Becker, made households and unpaid domestic labor part of the territory that was ripe for conquest.

As we have seen, neither the neoclassicals nor their Marxian opponents were able to deal satisfactorily with the theoretical problems domestic labor posed. Serious objections have been raised to the treatment of unpaid work – and particularly “caring work” – in mainstream economic literature. The need to address these deficiencies provided one source of impetus for the questioning of assumptions behind rational choice theory and the validity of “rational economic man” (Amartya Sen 1977; Marianne Ferber and Julie Nelson (eds) 1993). The Marxians found it no easier to incorporate housework into their analysis of value and surplus value, which were concepts originally designed to elucidate class relations in the context of commodity production.

Recent work by some feminist economists has addressed these issues through critiques of existing theory and exploration of innovative methods and theories. As efforts continue to develop new concepts that can deal effectively with household labor, it is apparent that an adequate treatment of domestic labor would require substantial concessions from both schools of thought. Mainstream economists would

have to concede the need for a new theory of the household, based on a conception of economic agency radically different from that employed in standard neoclassical models. The Marxians would have to agree with the institutionalists that neither capitalist rationality nor the neoclassical analysis of rational decision-making necessarily apply to domestic labor.

### **Acknowledgements**

We gratefully acknowledge valuable comments from James Doughney, Mike Howard, Phil O'Hara and Gillian Hewitson, and three anonymous referees. None of them is in any way responsible for errors of fact or opinion.

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