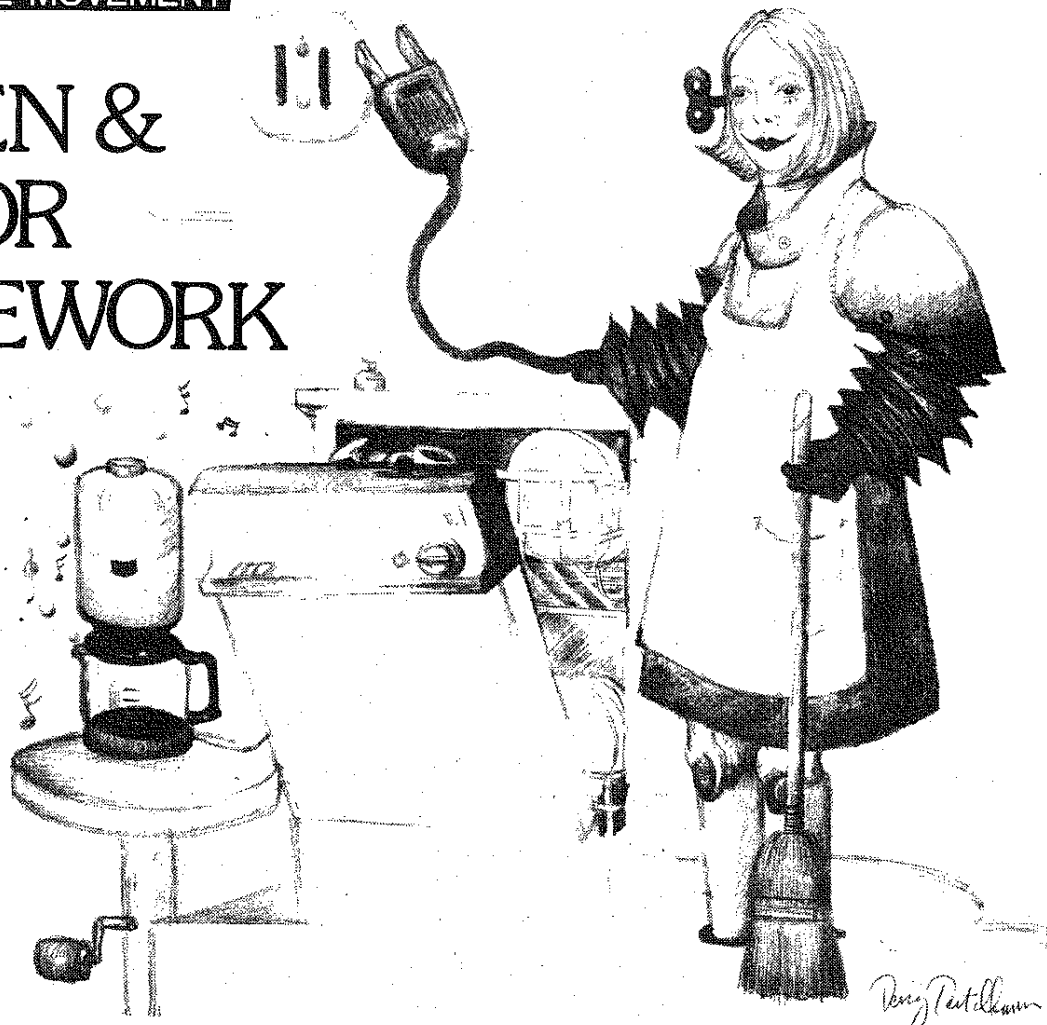


WOMEN & PAY FOR HOUSEWORK

by
Carol
Lopate



Pay for housework is an idea which has been around for some time. Recently it has begun to receive serious consideration among feminist groups here, largely as a result of the publication in February 1973 of the English version of Maria Della Costa's pamphlet, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*. * Dalla Costa's analysis comes out of the Italian women's movement and was first introduced to the American women's movement in her article, "Women and the Subversion of the Community," published in *Radical America* (January/February 1972, Vol. 6, no. 1).

Quite briefly, the pay-for-housework argument goes like this. Traditional analyses of the working class have excluded women because their work has not been considered "productive"—or, more commonly, has not been considered at all. These analyses have called women "oppressed" but not "exploited," because "exploitation" would imply that surplus value is extracted from their labor. In contrast, Dalla Costa and other feminists say that women's work in the home produces use value, rather than exchange value, and is

thus a remnant of a pre-capitalist structure existing within capitalism. But, say these feminists, it is clear that women as housewives produce and reproduce capitalism to at least as great a degree as any other working sector. The work of women in the home forms the basis from which emanates all other labor, from which, in turn, surplus value is extracted. Women help reproduce capitalism both through childbirth and through socialization; they keep capitalism running smoothly by servicing its current (and future) workers with food, clothes and sex. Thus women in the home are part of the working class, but they are not recognized as such because they are unpaid. Producing only use value, they remain part of a pre-capitalist structure. To legitimize women as part of the working class, and to free them financially from men, they must produce exchange value. The subsequent demand proceeds directly from the analysis: pay women for housework.

The attraction of this theory is not difficult to understand. First, in a brief and efficient manner, women are

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analytically integrated into the working class. Second, a platform for concrete action flows directly from the analysis. Moreover, this demand can be readily understood as developing out of a comprehensive theoretical framework, a fact which might attract the large numbers of women who have not as yet been drawn into the women's movement despite the partial successes of the campaigns around such piecemeal feminist demands as abortion and childcare. Finally, given a capitalist society in which personal autonomy as well as status are gained through money, it may well be that women need to be wage-earners in order to achieve the self-reliance and self-esteem which are the first steps toward equality.

But the attraction of "pay for housework" is not unlike the attraction of union demands: better wages, shorter hours, increased benefits. All of these are far easier to conceptualize and communicate to workers than the demand to change the nature of work itself, a goal which, even when packaged as "workers' control," is comparatively utopian and hard for workers to visualize. Just as unions have generally pushed only quantitative demands and have become reformist institutions for integrating workers into the system, feminist concentration on the pay-for-housework demand can only serve further to embed women (and men) in the clutches of capitalism.

Before going further, I want to make it clear that I am not against "reformist" demands as such, i.e., I'm not automatically opposed to demands whose goal is to ameliorate rather than change the basic structure and relations of society. For example, it is irrelevant to me that capitalism may have accepted abortion reform only because *its* need for workers no longer requires such a high birth rate. I support abortion reform because I believe that the right to decide whether or not to have a child *freed* women. In a similar vein, I am not opposed to pay for housework simply because it is a reformist, quantitative demand that the system could one day accept, but because instead of freeing women, it will serve to rigidify the sexual and other forms of oppression that we are already fighting against. In the following pages, I want to present a number of reasons why I am against women spending their energies on the pay-for-housework demand.

1) The women who support pay for housework say, quite rightly, that work outside the home is being glamorized and held out as a false carrot. But I do not believe that there has been a sufficient understanding of the quality of work and life inside the home. The lives and aspirations of most housewives have undergone major changes over the past thirty or so years. As men increasingly commute to work, women's daily lives have become more and more separate from those of their husbands. Moreover, the greatly accelerated geographic mobility among both blue- and white-collar workers has left women also bereft of continuity and community with neighbors and, with the decline of the extended family, without the support of relatives who once provided both friendship and assistance. The decrease in house size and the mechanization of housework has meant that the housewife is potentially left with much greater leisure time; however, she is often kept busy buying, using and repairing the devices and their attachments which are

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theoretically geared toward saving her time. Moreover, the trivial, manufactured tasks which many of these technological "aids" perform are hardly a source of satisfaction for housewives. Finally, schools, nurseries, daycare and television have taken away from mothers much of the responsibility for the socialization of their children; few women can feel that their children's upbringing is really in their hands.

Instead of simply paying women to do increasingly trivialized work, we need to look seriously at the tasks which are "necessary" to keep a house going and to make new evaluations. We need to investigate the time- and labor-saving devices and decide which are useful and which merely cause a further degradation of housework. We need to investigate the isolation of work done in the home and look for new, possibly communal, organizations for doing housework—even when living arrangements may not be communal.

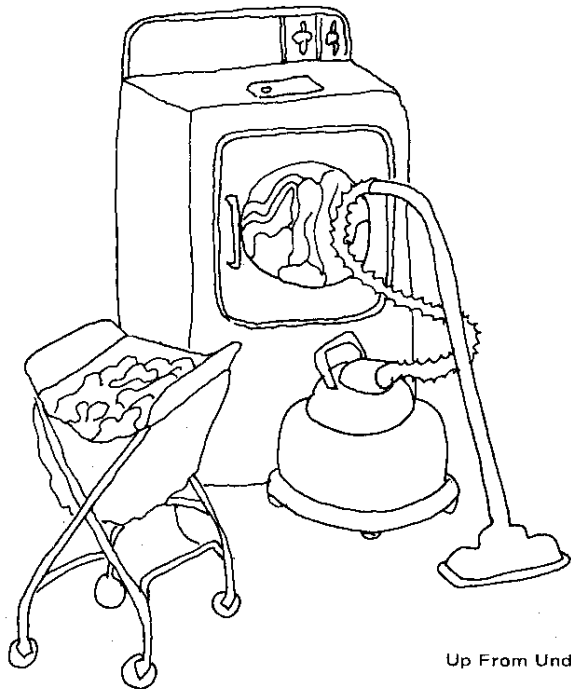
2) The demand to pay for housework comes from Italy, where the overwhelming majority of women in all classes still remain at home. In the United States, over half of all women *do* work. The women who stay at home are predominately the very poor, usually welfare mothers who in a sense are already being paid by the state to work in the home (or stay out of the labor market, however one wishes to conceive of it); and women of the upper-middle class. The wives of blue- and white-collar workers usually do not remain at home, even when they have children. They work. The project of bringing American women into the working class is therefore not merely a question of material conditions, but of ideology. Women who work in America are still seen in terms of their husband's or father's class designation; women themselves remain as if classless, no matter what they do or do not do for a living.

The proposal to pay women for housework does not deal with the fact that the ideological preconditions for working-class solidarity are networks and connections which arise from working together. These preconditions cannot arise out of isolated women working in separate homes, whether they are being paid for their work or not.

3) The financial aspects of payment for housework are highly problematical. Under our present system of corporate capitalism, pay for housework would not lead to any significant redistribution of income or wealth from the rich to the poor. Instead, the money to pay for housework would come from an already over-taxed working class, either through direct taxation or through special corporate taxes which would in turn be passed on to consumers. Moreover, since most men's incomes are at least partially determined on the basis of their being "family incomes," removal of all

women from financial dependence on men would probably lower the income standards for male work. Concentration on the demand for pay for housework without acknowledgment of the effect on other segments of society would have the same devastating effect on any long-range strategy for alliance and solidarity between men and women workers as the demand for compensatory education and social welfare programs for blacks during the 1960s had on white-black relations. Workers knew that they, not the corporations, ended up paying for those programs.

The question of how one would evaluate what houseworkers ought to earn has provoked some almost funny alternatives, if one has a morbid sense of humor. For example, in Canada in the late 1960s, a plan, actually brought before the government, proposed that women be paid according to their educational background; that is, PhD's doing housework would get the highest rate and high-school drop-outs the lowest. The use of this salary scale for creating intra-class solidarity and inter-class antagonisms among women is not difficult to imagine. A second proposal which I have seen suggests that a composite of all the activities included in housework be made up with their respective average salaries (nursery care at X amount, sweepers at Y, dishwashers at Z, etc.), and that a final salary be based on the proportion of time generally spent in each of these activities. Since the only job on the list with any financial status is nursery teacher, houseworkers' wages would be very low. Finally, a third means of allocating payment might be to make housework competitive with what the woman (or man) could make on the outside. Naturally, this would again create a hierarchy of pay among women, with some women able to make \$30 an hour for washing the dishes, while others would do their dishes for the minimum wage. Obviously, men would receive the highest wage for their work at home.



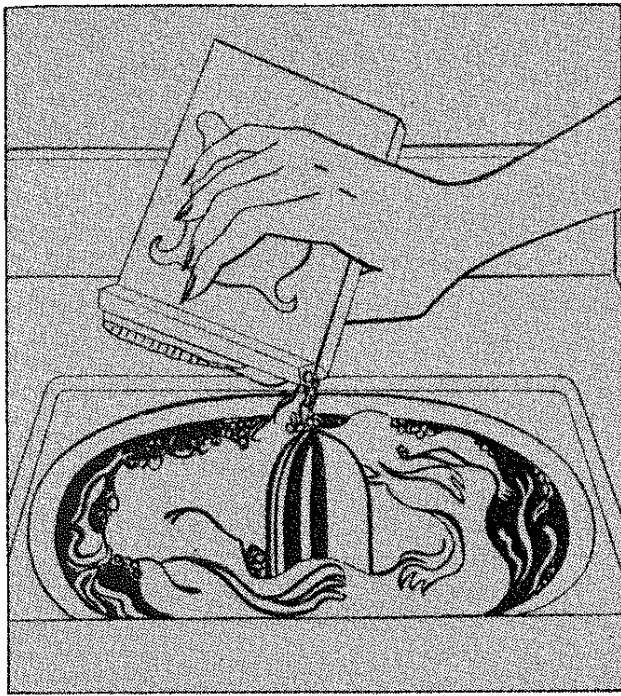
Up From Under

Another question is how houseworkers' work would be judged, and by whom. If the woman (or man) did not sweep behind the couch, would she (or he) be docked? Would there be increases for taking (or demerits for forgetting to take) the kids to the dentist? If the children cleaned their own rooms, would they get paid? Obviously, there would have to be some kind of institutionalized supervisor to investigate the cleanliness of homes and the health of children, since otherwise pay for housework would merely be welfare or a minimum standard income. But the vision of the visiting weekly supervisor smacks of yet another form of welfare investigator or inspector, of yet another arm reaching in from the state.

4) The elimination of the one large area of capitalist life where all transactions do not have exchange value would only serve to obscure from us still further the possibilities of free and unalienated labor. The home and family have traditionally provided the only interstice of capitalist life in which people can possibly serve each other's needs out of love or care, even if it is often also out of fear and domination. Parents take care of children at least partly out of love, and children are nourished by the knowledge that the care they are being given is at least partly on that basis. I even think that this memory lingers on with us as we grow up so that we always retain with us as a kind of utopia the work and caring which come out of love, rather than being based on financial reward. It seems to me that if a child grew up knowing that he cost the state more than his sister because he was a more difficult child, and so took more labor power to raise, that some of our last, ever more flimsy notions of humanity would be blown away like dust in a draught.

There are at least two strong counter-arguments against keeping the family, or whatever living group, in the private sphere: 1) The distinction between public and private should anyway be erased; and 2) This lovely domain of "free giving" that I am calling for has always been at the expense of women. I don't want to go into a long argument in favor of the private sphere. Let me say merely that I believe it is in our private worlds that we keep our souls alive, and that this is so not merely because we live in a capitalist world, but that we will also need private worlds if and when we live under socialism. The problem raised by capitalism is that it is so difficult to keep the private sphere alive when it is being constantly battered down by the commercialization of everyday life and the constant threats to it by the mass media. But we must fight this encroachment, and not simply abandon our last bastion under the guise of liberating women.

Women do not have to transform their labor into a commodity in order to be considered an intrinsic part of the working class or to be part of the struggle for human liberation. The commodity form is an alienated form and women will simply be perpetuating that alienation. The proposition that women must enter the commodity form in order to liberate themselves stems implicitly from a theory which regards capitalism as the inevitable transition stage between feudalism and socialism. Thus women must first be paid for their labor power if they are to move on to the next stage. But I believe there is no such inevitability in these stages. Moreover, to look at housework as a vestige of



Roy Lichtenstein, "Washing Machine," oil on canvas (1961).

feudalism is to see it merely from one side. The separation between use value and exchange value is itself part of the capitalist stage of development. Unfortunately, in fact, attempts to bring underdeveloped sectors into the capitalist sector have done just that. Nothing more. The revolutionary project is quite another matter.

5) I have left for the end what I feel is the most obvious objection to the pay-for-housework demand: it does nothing to solve the sexual division of labor. Because I believe that feminist goals must be integrated into a total theory of revolution, I would not struggle for a feminist goal which sought to undermine the sexual division of labor if it did not at the same time seek to undermine the commodity form. But, conversely, I am not interested in revolutionary projects which do not include a constant attack on the sexual division of labor.

It is highly likely that the institution of pay for housework would solidify the nuclear family. It is difficult to conceive of the mammoth bureaucracy which would be required, whether public or private, allowing pay for communal houseworkers, pay for a man in a homosexual couple, pay for one of two women living together, or even pay for a man and a woman living in a nuclear situation but out of wedlock.

The demand for pay for housework is clearly an easier one to move on than is the call to abolish the sexual division of labor. The latter would involve a total restructuring of private work. Most of us women who have fought in our own lives for such a restructuring have fallen into periodic despair. First, there were the old habits—the men's and ours—to break. Second, there were the real problems of time: many of us have lived with men who work an eight- or ten-hour day, while we have found ourselves preferring or finding less consuming jobs, which have left us more time for housework.

Ask any man how difficult it is for him to arrange part-time hours, or for him to ask for special time schedules so that he can be involved equally in childcare! Finally, as we have argued and struggled with the men we have chosen to live with, we have found ourselves with little other than moral imperatives to bolster our side. I have noticed the relief of women in meetings when talking about the Dalla Costa analysis: it gives scientific validity to our struggle for equality; we need no longer resort to men's being "good" people.

But let us go back to the analysis of housework as production, from which the demand of pay for housework derived. There has been an argument in circles of left or Marxist feminists over whether the importance of woman's role within the family to capitalism lies in her role as producer/reproducer or as consumer. The argument for women as consumers is obvious, given the advertisements and commodities which are structured around the created needs of women. And yet, as most feminist Marxists like to point out, production is a more deeply essential category than consumption. The rhetorical battle goes back and forth, in my experience, with a lot of anger on each side. There is almost an unstated presupposition that if women can be shown to be the unrealized "producers," the spine of capitalism, then they will also be the "vanguard of the revolution."

I do not have my own analysis to propose; nor do I have a concrete, radical platform for feminist-socialist action. But I do have one insight which I hope can become part of a framework for analysis which I and others will do in the future and on which I and other women—and men—will act. This is that we women must stop borrowing categories from the Marxist world. We are not a class, since all individuals of a class have a specific relationship to the means of production, and we vary greatly in this respect. We are not a caste, as a caste is an endogamous (self-reproducing) group, often also characterized by a specific economic niche, and there is no way—as yet—that women can be endogamous. Even if we use sperm banks or other forms of mechanized reproduction, the sperm will come from the outside. Some of us may be doing work that has use value but that does not have exchange value, and many of us, including those who receive exchange value for our labor power, may be suffering from an ideology which still attributes to women the power and status of a second sex. The essential thing to remember is that we are a SEX. That is really the only word as yet developed to describe our commonalities. But what do the differences in our daily lives mean for theory and for practice? What does being female actually mean; what, if any, specific qualities necessarily and for all time adhere to that characteristic? I believe that if, as revolutionary feminists, we want to be clear about where we are going, we must also be clear about the terms we borrow from the Marxist analysis. It is a quick way to legitimate ourselves on the left, but it is not a long-range strategy. What we may, in fact, have to do is to devise our own new terms. We may have to decide that housework is neither production nor consumption. We may have to be hazy in our visions. After all, a total reordering of sex and sexual roles and relationships is not easy to describe. ★