

**IN DEFENCE OF THE HOUSEHOLD:
MARX, GENDER AND THE UTILITARIAN IMPASSE**

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1. INTRODUCTION: IN DEFENCE OF THE HOUSEHOLD

Anthropologists have long indicted the tendency in Western thought to impose on the entire world a model of a universal nuclear family household tailored to its own normative image, a model which does not well describe the diversity of domestic groups anywhere. Recent feminist work, in economics and sociology as well as in anthropology, has extended and deepened this critique, emphasising that the consensual structure of patriarchal authority normatively assumed in the nuclear family model abstracts from systematic tensions based on gender and generational differences within households.

On the basis of this critique, economists and anthropologists have proposed that collective models of intrahousehold bargaining provide a workable analytical alternative to the old unitary models. There is now a large body of new work exploring the methodological demands of collective models. Others, while skeptical about the practical usefulness of such modelling, nonetheless apply the analytical language of allocational theory to explore issues of gender in domestic groups. Here I take another tack, arguing that the household can be an analytically useful, historically appropriate concept for understanding differences in social well-being. Its analytical usefulness depends, however, both on recognising the limitations that feminist theory has exposed, and, just as importantly, challenging underlying utilitarian assumptions in contemporary social theory and neo-classical economics with which some feminist scholars have been content to live.

To argue that the household is a useful analytical construct, one must answer the question 'Useful for what?' My project is an explicitly modernist one. I am interested in understanding variation in the quality of life of different social groups - in time, in space and within populations - in order to assess both the basis and impact of political intervention aimed at an egalitarian improvement of the quality of life¹. I assume neither that this political intervention is by the state, nor that it is imposed from without.

¹ In asking for conceptual and methodological tools that allow us to compare variation in the quality of life, I am setting aside for the moment a number of relevant questions in social theory which return to impose themselves in the household debates. Can we compare the quality of life or is this subjectively determined and thus inherently relative? If we can compare the quality of life, then what are we comparing - levels of everyday subsistence as expressed in some common currency, certain capabilities which may include such things as the capability to determine one's own sexual life? If we settle on something we can compare, what will be our unit of comparison, since we conceive of society not as a collection of individuals but as a meaningful construction of social relations? The rich exchange of positions in the collection edited by Nussbaum and Sen [1993] is a good introduction to these questions, although I think that the participation of anthropologists might have corrected an occasionally ethnocentric invention of the other in some contributions.

This essay explores a methodological conundrum in my own history as a social researcher. My training and first research on the lives of rural people in Africa was based on classical extended ethnographic fieldwork in a small community. I explicitly avoided imposing any model of either domestic organisation or household production on the reality I was studying. Yet later, doing collective applied research in Mozambique, I used household surveys. I was at first dubious, knowing that we were taking as given units that were in reality much more complex. Yet as our research progressed, I came to see these surveys as essential for any policy-oriented study, an important complement to intensive small-scale studies, and sometimes a rough but appropriate substitute. This essay is an attempt to explain why.

2. THE CRITIQUE OF THE HOUSEHOLD².

Although there may be practitioners of household surveys (and consumers of household survey data) who do think that societies are made of atomistic units of individuals grouped together in families and living in households, most would recognise that comparing households cross-culturally requires some assumptions about the underlying social relations that define them. Feminist criticism of household studies has exposed three interrelated premises underlying the definition of households:

- There is a domestic domain within which relatively enduring groups are defined by activities concerned with everyday biological reproduction - residing together, preparing and eating food, sleeping, having sex, having children, caring for the dependent.

² In this paper, I will use household as a synonym for the more generic term, 'domestic group.' This violates anthropological canon, which distinguishes between families and households. A family refers to a kin-based, genealogically defined, hence potentially open group; a household is a closed localised group of people who live together and share some kinds of resources and/or activities. Yet household, with its connotations of co-residence, spatial enclosure and common property, is an Anglo-Saxon concept; many languages do not sharply differentiate households and families. Although the household/family distinction is conceptually clear, in reality it is often fuzzy. The boundaries of kinship are culturally and socially defined, so no family is in fact an open biologically defined group. Since living together and sharing resources are important components of this social and cultural bounding of kinship, and since people who live together and share resources are often genealogically related, the distinction between family and household does not necessarily hold. Yanagisako's [1979] review of this literature remains the best contemporary discussion of the anthropological debates, but even well-read and careful ethnographers such as Skinner [1997: 85 n.3] have decided that the distinction is not always analytically useful.

- This private and intimate domestic domain is sharply divided from the public political domain.
- Within the domestic domain there is such a strong degree of interdependence, pooling of resources and commonality of interest that we can ascribe agency to the groups formed there.

Each of these assumptions has been subjected to intense feminist critique by anthropologists, sociologists and economists working in both industrialised and agrarian societies, western and non-western, of the north and of the south. There is now a very large and rich corpus of work, much of which is explicitly interdisciplinary, which has brought this critique to the heart of development studies. In the following section I review feminist criticism³ of each of these assumptions at a conceptual level with illustrations of their relevance to development issues and household survey methods.

2.1 The domestic domain

The first assumption is that there is a domestic domain - a cluster of activities that have to do with everyday biological reproduction - residing together, preparing and eating food, sleeping, having sex, parenting children, caring for the dependent.

Since this cluster of activities links subsistence to sex and child-bearing, it tends to correspond to a genealogically defined group of kin - a family. In agrarian, pre-capitalist or 'traditional' societies, this domain integrates a good part of everyday work, with farming, for example organised by household groups. Within the household group, the division of labour is based on biological differences of sex and age. The assumption of this clustered domain of activities lies behind a broad range of work exploring the dynamics of household groups. Feminist criticism of the definition of a domestic domain has both disputed the idea of a biological core and shown that the activities said to cluster are often carried out by different social groupings rather than a single unit.

Assumptions that the biological processes of reproduction are at the core of domestic activities tend to naturalise and hence universalise the nuclear family, making it the basic building block out of which broader social groups are constructed and allowing for the cross-cultural definition of domestic units. One of the most accepted contributions of

³ I concentrate on the work of anthropologists and economists whose disciplinary interests have made them particularly influential in development research.

feminist theory to contemporary social theory is the sex/gender distinction which emphasises that the biological differences of sex only exist insofar as they are culturally and socially defined by historically specific relations of gender. There is thus no 'natural' core of biologically defined behaviour.

Within anthropology, the most extreme version of this 'constructivist' position was developed by Yanagisako [1979] and further elaborated in her work with Collier [Yanagisako and Collier 1987], extending the debate over the cultural shaping of kinship in anthropology to the field of gender⁴:

Both gender and kinship studies, we suggest, have foundered on the unquestioned assumption that the biologically given difference in the roles of men and women in sexual reproduction lies at the core of the cultural organization of gender, even as it constitutes the genealogical grid at the core of kinship studies. Only by calling this assumption into question can we begin to ask how other cultures might understand the difference between women and men, and simultaneously make possible studies of how our own culture comes to focus on coitus and parturition as the moments constituting masculinity and femininity [Yanagisako and Collier 1987: 49].

Thus there exist neither biological core nor necessary biological markers through which we can delimit a domestic domain.

An alternative to the notion of a biological core is to begin with a functional definition of reproductive or domestic activities which are assumed to cluster in a single group - the household. In many household studies it is assumed that such a cluster exists - a domestic domain. The limitations of a standard functional definition of the domestic group in Africa have been particularly well discussed. It is now over ten years since the publication of the landmark issue of *Development and Change*, edited by Jane Guyer and Pauline Peters [1987], which masterfully summarised and interpreted a wealth of research on household organisation in Africa criticizing unitary household models⁵. Guyer and Peters [Ibid.] observed that, particularly in rural Africa residence, consumption and production groups are often not the same, that the boundaries of domestic groups are constantly shifting, and that they do not fit always into neat hierarchical structures.

Problems in locating a domestic domain are not, however, limited to Africa, as contributors to Saradamoni's [1992] volume on 'finding the household' in Asia demon-

⁴ In developing her position, Yanagisako was influenced by the work of David Schneider who earlier rejected the notion that there is a biological core to kinship. Not only are there less radically constructivist positions within feminist theory; there are, of course, also essentialist positions that find a biological core in sexual identity but do not construe it in the same way as does socio-biology.

⁵ See O'Laughlin [1995] for a more detailed critical discussion of this literature.

strate. Thorner and Ranadive [1992: 148-149], for example, working in urban India (Bombay) had problems determining the composition of household groups. The standard census definition as a group of persons sleeping under the same roof and eating from a common kitchen was not sufficiently flexible. There were many people who ate together very regularly but did not sleep under the same roof. Working-class women ran boarding houses for men living without their families in the city. Hart [1995: 41] also emphasises that in the rapidly industrializing economies of contemporary Asia “Far from a natural unit, the household is a complex, culturally varied, and dynamic set of institutional arrangements.”

More generally, Guyers and Peters noted a reductionist tendency to focus on economic issues alone in functional definitions of a domestic domain:

The major shortcoming of structural-functional and economic approaches to the household is the neglect of the role of ideology. The socially specific units that approximate 'households' are best typified not merely as clusters of task-oriented activities that are organized in variable ways, not merely as places to live/eat/work/reproduce, but as sources of identity and social markers. They are located in structures of cultural meaning and differential power [Guyer and Peters 1987: 209].

If there is no biological core to domestic groups, nor functionally defined domestic domain, the analytical validity of many concepts commonly used in household studies is called into question. The familiar distinction between nuclear family households and extended family households, for example, depends on the assumption that the former, based in relations of reproduction, constitutes the basic and natural element out of which more complex forms are articulated. Without such naturalistic assumptions, the nuclear family has no analytical priority at all.

Probably even more importantly, the concept of the developmental cycle of domestic groups must be contested since it links the changing form and organisation of households to the demographic processes of birth, ageing and death. This concept has been one of the analytically most powerful household concepts in development studies because of the insight it provided into processes of rural social differentiation. It was powerfully developed by Chayanov [1966] in his study of land and labour use in Russian peasant households, applied by Fortes [1958] to understanding cyclical rupture in West African multi-generation households, and used by Southern African scholars in their analysis of the process through which a household headed by a woman at one point in time is headed by

a man at another under migrant labour systems⁶.

The mapping of social process on biological processes is, however, based on the idea that kinship is at the core of domestic groups. Abandoning the idea that there is a standard domain of activities clustered around kinship carried out by households diminishes the analytical power of the concept of the developmental cycle of the household. In fact studies of the Russian peasantry, of West African households, and rural households in labour reserve areas in Southern Africa have all shown that the orderly march through a developmental cycle is rather a highly contingent process, shaped by relations of class and politics and never achieved by many domestic groups. In Southern Africa, for example, there are many men who never return to rural households, and women remain heads of their own households throughout their lives.

The problematisation of the domestic domain poses major methodological issues for household surveys. First, how do we define a standard survey unit? Many surveys begin by looking for parent/child groupings and then extending outwards in line with the conceptual distinction between nuclear family and extended family households. This is not valid if kinship is not the core of the domestic group. Other surveys focus on co-residence and food-sharing, but there is considerable evidence that these do not necessarily coincide.

Second, how do we define household membership once we recognise that domestic groups are not clearly bounded, relatively stable, fixed and discrete groups? Russell [1993] has been particularly scathing in her criticism of the notion that everywhere in the world people belong to one and only one well defined household. She argues [Ibid:780-81] that in Swaziland, for example, the census overestimated relative rural poverty because it imposed household boundaries on groups of people who in fact shared resources across the rural-urban divide.

The shifting composition of households makes it particularly difficult for surveys to trace the changing fortunes of the same households through time. Intuitively it seems evident that if household surveys are to capture differences in levels of poverty, the measure should be *per capita* income rather than general household income, but in such a situation of shifting membership *per capita* income is difficult to establish. In South Africa, for example, it is common to find children living in urban hostels at one time of the

⁶ See Murray [1987] for a detailed and insightful review of the strengths and weaknesses of the concept of the developmental cycle in dealing with household organisation in rural areas of Southern Africa.

year, and living with kin in rural areas at another moment [Ramphela 1993, Jones 1993].

Third, how can the resources of the domestic group be measured, if they are in fact controlled by different overlapping groups? One of the common ways of controlling for under-reporting of household income, for example, is to check it against consumption and expenditure data from the same household. But expenditures of people in a particular household group, however defined, may be higher because people customarily eat with many different domestic groups besides their own, without having any control over the income earned by these groups. This is an important issue since one of the functions of households surveys has been to assist in planning poverty alleviation programmes and monitoring their effects. In Botswana, for example, one important policy debate is whether or not households headed by women in rural areas are poorer than those headed by men. Those who argue that they are not necessarily so point out that many households headed by women are embedded in broader networks of solidarity and cooperation that protect their members from destitution [cf. O'Laughlin 1998].

Fourth, the implicit focus in household surveys on issues viewed as belonging to the domestic domain restricts the kinds of questions that are asked of economic and demographic variables. Yet as Berry [1984, 1993] has long emphasised for Africa, these variables may reflect the political, social and even cultural resources held by members of the domestic group.

2.2 The domestic/public divide

A second assumption in many household studies is that there is a sharp divide between the domestic domain, which is private and intimate, and the political domain of public life. Early work on the roots of sexual oppression in anthropology found its basis in the domestic/public divide [*cf.* Rosaldo 1974]. The corresponding political agenda located women's emancipation in breaking down the barriers between the domestic and public domains. Thus a great deal of importance was given to women earning their own money, and moving into wage labour, the professions and public employment. On the left, there was celebration of the broad range of employment that women took on in socialist countries where they early on became doctors, crane-operators, farm brigade leaders. In development projects, this strategy lay behind WID (Women in Development), which focussed both on improving the conditions of women's domestic work - with fuel-wood planting, or introduction of new stoves, or digging wells - and on income-generating

projects for women.

Such policy solutions proved to be naive, and feminist work itself led to thoughtful reconsideration of this divide [Rosaldo 1980]. Molyneux's [1981] review of the position of women under socialism pointed out both that the movement of women to new forms of employment generally added to their greater labour burden, as they continued to be responsible for most work in the home, and that they were not equally represented in positions of political power. Similarly studies of income generating projects for women showed that they often ended by increasing the labour-time of women while the income was appropriated by men. Policies that do not address the political, ideological and economic relations that cross cut home, market and polity cannot lead to the transformation of the positions of women and men.

The domestic/public opposition is unquestioned in the methodology of many household surveys, which are used to answer questions that extend beyond their remit. We look for indicators of poverty within households, but not at the health post, the school, the organisation of retail food trading, the state of the roads, all of which have great impact on the relative social well-being of different households.

2.3 The homogeneity of households

The third assumption underlying many household studies is that within the domestic domain there is such a strong degree of interdependence, pooling of resources and commonality of interest that we can ascribe agency to the groups formed there. It is common in development studies to talk about the interests, activities and strategies of households - to assign them agency. It is assumed that there is a natural division of labour by sex and age within domestic groups such that the structure of authority within domestic groups makes it possible for the head of the household to know and represent the interests of the whole.

The critique of assumed homogeneity of the household has been in some ways the most easily heard point of the feminist critique of the household. There is now a broad literature from many parts of the world showing that spouses sometimes keep separate purses, and that even when they do not they are not necessarily pooling all their resources. Once the gender barrier was crossed, it became easier to see that generational authority is also contingent - that children neither always do what their parents want nor share in all their parents have.

Within economics, there is a strong feminist critique of the premises of the New Household Economics, which, following the work of Becker and Schultz, has extended the analytical apparatus of micro-economics beyond the boundaries of the firm and monetised markets. Though such work began as the theorisation of domestic life in Western industrialised economies where the nuclear family household model works better than in much of the developing world, many of the central analytical insights of the NHE have been very powerful in development studies, through their application in the analysis of peasant production [cf. Ellis 1988] and in work on farming systems. Work such as Low's [1986] analysis of the relationship between labour market participation, agricultural investment and migrant labour in Swaziland applied to great effect the need to understand the interdependence of market and non-market production in household groups.

Yet these applications of NHE are hinged on the concept of a joint production function within the household. Certainly most household economists clearly recognise that labour within the household is not in fact homogeneous, but since they regard the division of labour by sex and age as natural, hence more or less fixed, rules of elegance allow one to assume a common production function. Evans [1989] challenges this assumption in Becker's work, and applies her critique to a dissection of Low's study. She points out that Low assumes that the division of labour within the household determines that men migrate and women stay at home, and that women's labour is of less value than that of men. Historical material on migration in Southern Africa shows that neither assumption is necessarily true [cf. Bozzoli 1991].

This critique of household homogeneity immediately calls into question the ideological basis of concepts such as household strategy. Wolf [1990: 62 ff] pointed out that particularly in peasant studies discussions of household strategies reflected a romanticized view of inevitable solidarity between members of poor families. Cohesion and coherence rather than conflict were assumed to be the basis of intra-household relationships. There was a tendency to ignore the everyday acts of resistance such as income-retention, non-compliance and conflict that she so commonly saw in the relations between migrant daughters working in factories and their parents. There is now a long series of studies showing the importance of recognising the contingent nature of patriarchal authority within households. Studies show that development projects have failed because they depended on women doing work for which the rewards would be appropriated or controlled by men [Whitehead 1991, Carney and Watts 1990].

Most household surveys identify one person, usually the senior male, as the head of the household, and define the relationship of all other members to this person. They also assume that the household head will be the most knowledgeable person to ask about the activities and attitudes of the group as a whole. Questioning the homogeneity of the household has called into question the accuracy of data collected on this basis. Some patterns of expenditure, such as, for example, men's spending on drink and cigarettes, may contribute very little to the overall well-being of the household. Correspondingly, women may keep men ignorant of income earned from activities like brewing or vending. Many surveys, though quantitative, count information about attitudes: "How many children would you like to have?", "Is the household able to get all the water it needs for normal household purposes?" The gender critique makes it clear that men and women may not have the same answers to these questions.

3. METHODOLOGICAL ALTERNATIVES

The power of the feminist critique of the household has led to the construction of analytical alternatives, each with with different methodological implications for empirical research. Here I distinguish three positions: radical relationism, radical utilitarianism, and overarching allocational theory.

3.1 Radical relationism

One response to the feminist critique of the household is to banish all assumptions about what domestic groups are and how they are organised. This is the alternative proposed by Russell [1993:756]

...the time has come to abandon the assumption, for too long unquestioned, that all populations are necessarily composed of households of some sort or another. This assumption has simplified the task of collecting census and survey data but at the cost of blunting our awareness both of the diversity and complexity of domestic arrangements in many places, and of the ephemerality and transience of many social arrangements for the sharing of roofs, space and meals.

Thus the word household may be used as a descriptive concept [Guyer and Peters 1987], or as an odd-job word [Yanagisako 1979], but analytically we must build up what exists from the relations that define it. Thus for Guyer and Peters [210], p. 210 "...the more useful questions are not where is the household, but what are the units and processes of production, consumption and distribution." This recalls Lofgren's [1984] earlier suggestion that one should start with a contextual study of household organization by ignoring the

household units and focusing on other types of social and economic units.

For anthropologists and social historians dealing with small universes, such methodological advice is easy to handle; it corresponds to the strengths of long-term participatory observation. In two years of fieldwork in a rural village in Chad, I was able both to register how people thought about and described different overlapping groups involving activities we think of as domestic - the hearth group, the fence-group, the granary group, the patrilineage segment linking the living and the dead, the ward, and even the village - and to observe how people moved through these groups in everyday life. I could never, however, have followed this procedure during the short one-month field studies I did with large groups of students in rural villages in Mozambique. There we were concerned with finding out quickly what the consequences of the government's strategy of rural socialisation were for different groups of rural people. Moreover the 'build up from reality' approach will not yield large sets of comparable survey data that can be used to help us determine statistically whether a pattern we think we have observed could be due to chance, to our own misplaced assumptions, or to the arguments of a particularly persuasive 'informant'. If we are interested in quantitative confirmation of qualitatively observed pattern, it is not so simple to dismiss the search for a common comparative unit.

3.2 Radical utilitarianism

One way to construct comparative data sets is to make the individual the unit of analysis, and to treat the household as the contingent outcome of processes of bargaining, exchange and maximisation of utility among individuals. Such work applies the mathematical modelling of game theory in micro-economics to the conceptualisation of intra-household bargaining. The prisoner's dilemma, or the Samaritan's solution, for example, can be used to explain cooperation as well as conflict within households [Sen 1984, 1990a, 1990b]. There is now a burgeoning literature looking at intra-household decision-making and allocation [cf. Haddad and Alderman 1997, Deaton 1998]. Collective household models handle cooperation as well as conflict and can refer to gendered hierarchical political processes that cross-cut households, limit information and set the contractual rules for exit options and bargaining 'voice' [Carter and Katz 1997: 97]⁷.

⁷ See Hart [1995] for a critical but highly informative review of the move from unitary towards collective household models.

There are some problems with this approach, however. The first has to do with the need for simplifying assumptions. Sen's [op cit] description of mapping vectors into matrices gives some idea of the complexity of such an approach and its demanding data requirements, even assuming a given household boundary⁸. It remains methodologically unclear how far to disaggregate and what kinds of resources will be measured. One may begin by disaggregating by gender and generation, but relative age or seniority can also be very important as Warner et al [1997] point out in their discussion of the different food exchange patterns of senior and junior wives in polygynous households in Ghana. If one disaggregates at the level of the individual, then how does one reaggregate, i.e. how are domestic groups defined and hence counted if we wish to compare intrahousehold allocation within them? As Hart [1995: 41] points out, collective modelers argue that the application of a particular household model is determined empirically through looking at the data, but the data they use have been collected with implicit assumptions about household boundaries and intrahousehold and interhousehold relations.

Most economists and sociologists working with survey data have in fact left the household in place; they focus almost entirely on removing the homogeneity/pooling assumption, but do not try to address the failings of the other two household premises. This leaves economists concerned with issues of gender and distributive justice uncomfortable with the limitations of such approaches. Sen [1990b] pointed out, for example, that the bargaining approach gives no role to problems of perception of interest and legitimacy. Responding to household modelling contributions by Ott [1995] and Polachek [1995] in a collection on feminist perspectives in economics, Julie Nelson [1995] suggested that whereas bargaining approaches are useful, bargaining models are not very helpful because too many things have to be excluded to make them work. Her particular concern is with the analytical inclusion of agency and affiliation in the process of individual choice [cf. Nelson 1995, 1996].

Even those anthropologists who are committed to working with economists in im-

⁸ Bruce's [1989] suggestion that one reason people cling to the unitary model is the fear that the demanding methodology of disaggregation will not significantly increase explanatory power probably remains true today. Results have been significant but often predictable. Hoddinot and Haddad [1995], for example, found that using a non-cooperative model of household expenditures with Ivory Coast data, they could show that raising wives' share of cash income increased the budget share of food and reduced that of alcohol/cigarettes. They concluded that households were better modeled as collective than as unitary entities, but noted that attempts to increase wives' cash income share generally leads to changes in the rules of control of income. Results would thus appear short-run or relatively trivial if extra-household relations are excluded from the models.

proving collective models show a certain lack of ease with the results. Gittelsohn and Mookherji [1997: 178] note that anthropologists have not been successful in modelling intrahousehold behavior for the purpose of predicting patterns of allocation or in incorporating qualitative data directly into these models. In the same volume, Guyer [1997:120-121] explains why it is hard to model the creation, nature and management of assets in household models: small-scale assets are multi-faceted in nature, assets are formed by processes which are both exogenous and endogenous to the household; and the processes of asset creation are likely to be locally and historically specific.

From a strictly neo-classical point of view, abstracting from these complications by rules of elegance is not problematic, if the models do work⁹. One does not have to show that the process of bargaining actually takes place in real families or households. It is enough to show that the models can predict outcomes that do happen. As Lawson [1997: 9] has observed, such individual choice models are actually highly deterministic. Given the pattern of constraints, distribution of resources and maximisation assumptions, people do what they are supposed to do to a high level of statistical probability. But neither feminist institutional economists nor anthropologists are satisfied with this position; they think that theoretical models should capture real social processes.

3.3 Overarching allocational theory

The middle-ground, uniting many feminist economists and anthropologists, is to do what Nelson [op cit] suggests, maintain a bargaining framework, but not be too constricted by the demands of modelling. This is the approach adopted by Folbre [1994], who suggests that families be treated like markets or states as 'sites' where coercion, production, exchange, and coordination take place. This is also in practice the position of Amartya Sen who devotes his analytical attention not to household modelling but to conceptualising the ways in which economic resources interact with political, social and cultural forces in the shaping of social choice.

The adherence by both anthropologists and institutionalist economists to transaction approaches that recognise structures of cultural and political constraint has created the basis for interdisciplinary work of great importance in development studies. Thus Guyer and Peters [1987] suggest that models of exchange, transaction and bargaining are more appropriate for understanding these processes than are models based on assumptions of intra-household cooperation. Kandiyoti [1988] used the bargaining framework as a way

of capturing the contingent nature of patriarchal authority. Kabeer [1994: 109] criticises the voluntaristic assumptions of many bargaining models, but concludes that "... an inclusion of allocative rules, aside from those of the market would considerably improve our understanding of household processes and outcomes [Ibid: 134].

Henrietta Moore [1994: 101] similarly finds that overarching allocational theory, with echoes of Durkheim and Polanyi, provides a solution to the household problem. Like Nelson, she is also concerned that such approaches allow for the social construction of identity or agency:

...it is the mechanisms of redistribution in society, rather than the processes of production and reproduction, which are crucial to understanding the relationship between households and larger-scale economic and social processes and institutions. A further assumption is that social identities are integral to the system of redistribution and that they structure the nature and direction of resources flows within the household and beyond.

For Moore [1994: 101], the priority to be given to distribution over production is based in the division of labour within the domestic domain: "The sexual division of labour, whereby different productive and reproductive tasks are assigned to women and men, always creates the necessity for redistribution both within the domestic domain and within the social collectivity as a whole." By this reasoning, the division of labour itself constitutes individuals as agents of exchange.

Recently Guyer [1997] has criticised the focus on intrahousehold thinking on the units and processes of decision making about material needs. Influenced by Sen's work on endowments, she suggests [Ibid: 112-3] that a new convergence is emerging in economics and anthropology around the nature and use of assets, particularly by the poor. She argues that this approach would gain from a stronger connection to the literatures on the anthropology of wealth and the economics of saving and insurance. Like Berry [1984, 1993], Guyer urges that the concept of capital be extended to include investment in 'social capital'.

The allocationist synthesis thus employs the analytical language of neo-classical economics (choice, decision, bargaining, transaction, exchange, assets) in a broad way that allows collective modelers to get on with their work and more qualitatively oriented researchers to get on with ours in ways that may be ultimately complementary. Hart [1995: 61] argues that although ethnographic methods entail a different conceptual and methodological orientation than large-scale survey data collection, they can inform collective modelling and survey data collection in a number of ways:

- by illuminating the dynamics of household formation and dissolution, they could help to specify salient categories for survey data collection;
- as a source of theoretical insight;
- as a new angle of vision on issues of policy and practice.

3.4 The unstable alliance and a defence of the household

The allocationist synthesis has been very influential in part because it has allowed us to problematise intrahousehold relations, thus opening up new areas of research with important policy implications. It brings ethnographic and historical texture to an area of economics marked by formal dryness and reductionist overgeneralisation. I am nevertheless less sanguine than Hart about the sustainability of the allocationist synthesis. The alliance between collective modelers and feminist researchers is, I think, methodologically, theoretically and politically unstable.

As noted above, most collective modellers focus on suspending the homogeneity assumption, responding less well to other feminist criticisms. They take household boundaries as given and attend principally to the allocation of material resources. If the modellers take on the further issues raised by institutionalists such as Guyer or Sen, they confront a methodological nightmare - an endless sequence of data collection on every person's bundle of assets, material and non-material, extending from family and household outwards. Institutional approaches which describe the structuring of constraints on patterns of intrahousehold allocation, as does Sen's work on entitlements, do not really resolve the issue, because the shaping of constraint is not described theoretically but discovered by the researcher⁹. When this process of discovery is based on careful reading and intimate knowledge of context, as in Sen's study of famine in Bengal, the analysis can be very convincing. In other cases it is not.

This methodological instability is a reflection of underlying theoretical incoherence. The convergence in anthropology and economics around a bargaining/exchange/allocation approach toward intrahousehold resource control ultimately the alliance hinges on acceptance of the utilitarian and individualistic premises of neo-classical

⁹ Fine [1997:640] discusses the limits of Sen's maintenance of the theoretical apparatus of micro-economics suggesting that "The entitlement approach, with its micro roots in individual endowments, is in tension with causal relations and dynamics at a macro level which tend to undermine the microeconomic analytical framework."

economics: individuals with certain assets and desires meet and exchange on a universal terrain. Most feminist anthropologists and economists are not at ease with this analytical language. They challenged the assumption that domestic groups are the domain of cooperation, intimacy and affection, and many find the notion of bargaining positions conceptually useful in the description of gender relations within households, but they are also critical of the voluntaristic assumptions of utilitarian theory.

Evans [1989: 17], for example, points out that notions of power, inequality, sharing and reciprocity are virtually meaningless in utilitarian economic models. Thus despite her cogent critique of Low's [op cit.] use of household models, she is reluctant to completely scrap the household concept:

If the household concept or model is this problematic, then what is going to replace it? What is the most relevant unit of analysis? If instead we adopt the individual as our analytical unit, we end up turning full circle into the realms of orthodox neoclassical theory, which has always privileged the status of the individual over all other economic agents. And, even if adopting an individualist approach allows for a more explicit analysis of the separate interests and preferences of women and men in the economy it also misrepresents the degree of interdependence between them....[Ibid. 16].

Feminist lack of ease with the utilitarian premises of collective models reveals the political instability of the allocationist synthesis. In a remarkable critique of her own work, Kandiyoti [1998] points out that the bargaining framework allows very little analytical room for the ways in which women's agency shapes and transforms the rules of the game - choice becomes an illusion circumscribed by rule-bound marriage systems of gendered difference and inequality.

Each theoretical system has its strengths and weaknesses; it is possible to conceptualise all social life as a series of transactions. Yet it seems both ironic and futile that so much rich critical feminist thought has led to a focus on rather banal bargaining approaches and the intriguing but arcane methodological problems entailed in their mathematical modelling. Bargaining may in fact describe the dynamics of household life in particular societies or at particular moments or for particular social groups. Some middle class families in the United States, for example, put their children on contract systems for household work or for marks (or at least television sitcoms tell us that they do). But such social models should not be presumed to be universal. Bargaining just does not describe, even metaphorically, what binds a woman to the care of an ill child, or why battering of women and children is so common, or how it is that a pot moulded by a woman-potter emerges fired and unbroken from a kiln built and fuelled by a man. The feminist critique

of romanticisation of the domestic domain as a cooperative caring refuge from the brutality of the market and public life is correct and important, but our theoretical approach to domestic life should be able to capture cooperation as well as competition, relations of power, exploitation and resistance, as well as those of exchange.

Why should there be such an enormous gap between this edge of critical feminist theory and the experience of everyday life? How can the feminist deconstruction of the household end up with unreconstructed methodological individualism? Or to return to Evans' [*op cit.*] question, "If the household concept or model is this problematic, then what is going to replace it?" The answer I will give, like that of Evans herself¹⁰, is that we do not replace it; it is a useful though limited analytical concept. To keep it, however, means extracting it from atomistic utilitarian theories that treat either households or individuals as basic units of society.

3.5 Marx, gender and the utilitarian impasse

The analytical impasse in which the household critique finds itself results from the silencing, or at least muffling, of an important critical voice within feminist theory, the constitution of an ideological divide between modernist and post-modernist thought and the assignment of Marxism to the outmoded modernist side. Many of the leading feminist theorists of the allocationist synthesis explicitly or implicitly reject Marxist distinctions between production, distribution and exchange and the primacy given to relations of production in Marxist thought. Moore [*op cit.*] emphasises the priority of redistribution, charging that Marxist-feminist work on gender and household overvalued and overestimated production in relation to reproduction. Folbre in her work with Hartmann [1988] criticised both Marxist and neo-classical economists for idealising the family, emphasising class exploitation and failing to analyse exploitation within the family. Guyer's [1997] emphasis on wealth and assets (as Sen's concepts of entitlement, endowments, and capabilities) effaces analytically the difference between means of production and consumption.

This hostility to Marxism in part reflects important critical flaws in Marxist work on gender and class [*cf.* Folbre and Hartmann: *op cit.*], but I agree with Ebert [1996] that

¹⁰ Other thoughtful critics of the concept of the household also either recommend its cautious use [Harris 1981; Whitehead 1991, Kabeer 1994], or do in practice use it [*cf.* Moore 1994].

the dismissal of Marxism in the post-modern moment is principally ideological and entails the rejection of much powerful Marxist-feminist work. As Barbara Harriss-White [1997: 194] points out, it is probably not historical coincidence that the development of theoretical models of the internal economic and power relations of households has accompanied the increased importance given to targeting individuals (and concurrent cuts in budgets for state welfare) in public policy discourse. In other words, the dislocation of structural analysis by utilitarian models describing processes of exchange and bargaining among individuals may be a reflection of political rather than analytical power.

Marxism is not a body of dogmatically defined knowledge but a critical tradition of politically engaged analysis, with flaws, silences, divisions between its practitioners, unfinished debates but also great insights whose power and contribution to understanding the important issues of contemporary social life have not been exhausted. In particular, Marxism provides analytical alternatives to three central flaws in Western social thought which have compromised the power of the feminist critique of the household: the nature/culture opposition, methodological individualism and the universalisation of capitalism¹¹.

3.6 The relationship between the biological and the social

All contemporary social theory posits a relationship between the biological and the social or the natural and the cultural in human social life, but how to think this relationship is at issue. For some, loosely the socio-biologists, the biological constitutes a kind of core, setting the range of possibilities out of which culture and social life shape variation. The comparative observation of social practice in closely related species of apes or in other social animals should thus help us to determine what this biological core is. For others, the distinctive character of human social life is the power of culture and society to transcend biological difference to such an extent that there can never be any significant relationship between social variation and biological difference, and there is certainly no inner core of biologically determined behaviour which we share with apes. Much of the history

¹¹ Reviewing the relevance of Marxism for the issues at hand is conjuncturally particularly difficult because of the polarisation in development studies between those who have given Marxism serious reading, whether or not they agree with it, and those who are mainly acquainted with the post-modern critiques of it rather than the corpus of work itself. For the first group, I may appear to be needlessly elaborating the obvious, for others using cryptic and dogmatic jargon.

of anthropology has enshrined the exception that allows us to trim down to size or completely deconstruct this biological core, thus diminishing yet reaffirming its existence through its negation. So the existence of the Israeli kibbutz, or polyandry among Nayars of the warrior caste, are important social facts, for example, because they tell us that a certain family form is not after all 'natural'.

In feminist theory, the latter position is dominant, for socio-biology would allow for the naturalisation of patriarchy, making women's subordination to a greater or lesser degree inevitable. Hence we depend on the importance of the distinction between sex and gender, which recognises the biological determination of sex, but argues that gender differences are culturally and socially shaped. Gender is thus a sociological category similar to race; both refer to biological differences but are not determined by them. In this second position, as well as in socio-biology, however, biology is given a certain autonomy, i.e. sex is biologically defined, though this definition is not an important determinant of gendered human experience.

This position does not sit entirely satisfactorily with everyday experience. It is fairly easy to see that there is no particular human behaviour that can be derived from the colour of one's skin or the shape of one's eye, but, the monthly experience of menstruation and the possibility/reality of pregnancy, for example, seem to be important parts of women's lives that men do not share. This discomfort lies at the root of the debate between constructivist and essentialist positions within feminism. The broader range of this debate between socio-biology at one pole and symbolic interactionists at another, currently defines deep tensions in academic anthropology.

Marxists have always been among the leading critics of biological determinism, but in this alliance the distinctive contribution of Marx's analytical position on the nature/culture issue has tended to be forgotten. Marx did not posit a polarity between nature and society, but a dialectical and contradictory unity. We tend to read his biting critique of the Robinson Crusoe myth as a critique of utilitarianism, which it certainly is, but it is also an important gloss on the relationship between nature and society. For Marx what is distinctive about humans is that they can reproduce themselves only in society, and that they do so by producing socially their own subsistence. Human social life is therefore biological; there is no independent biological core from which society stands apart and opposed, and there is no society apart from its material realisation in living, reproducing, human beings. Historically the ways in which people have produced and reproduced their

means of subsistence - their modes of production - have varied tremendously, in a dialectical relationship to changing human biological processes. It is on this basis that Marx argued that every mode of production must have its own law of population, in opposition to Malthus's conception of invariant demographic process. From a Marxist point of view, then, we should not really need the sex/gender distinction; the construction, definition and meaning of sexual difference are continually changing social and biological processes¹².

Beyond this basic proposition that there is always a relationship between the social and the biological in human experience, there are no universal statements in Marxist social theory about what that relationship is. It is always historically variable. We expect concepts to grasp the specificity of particular modes of production and we expect assumptions that are appropriate in one historical period, within one mode of production, to be inappropriate in another. We could find precisely the same kind of family form in 99% of all human societies and it would still not mean that this was an invariable biologically determined unit. We could find that women are subordinated to men in all known societies and still that would not mean that such subordination is natural and biologically inevitable. Conversely, the existence of a society where Amazons ruled over men, or where women are polyandrous, has no particular universal significance and cannot be expected to reveal anything especially profound about defying patriarchy in Leeds or Mpumalanga.

To say that there is a dialectical contradictory unity between nature and society is of course a theoretical statement, not directly open to experience. Proof of its power lies in what it allows us to understand, in its application to reality. The rather bitter rejection of Marxism within much of contemporary post-modernist feminist theory has disrupted an intellectual and political project potentially much more fruitful than the present trend toward utilitarianism cloaked in post-modernist guise¹³. Faced with the prevalence of racist and sexist explanation in common sense sociology, at least or perhaps particularly in the United States, many progressive academics have chosen to stress the ways in which culture and social action free humans from the bonds of nature, rather than emphasizing that it is

¹² In his recent work on male domination, Bourdieu [1998] partially grasps this point in his emphasis on the importance of avoiding the destructive opposition between material and ideal (as do all those who following Foucault's emphasis on the importance of understanding the materiality of symbolic representation in understanding sexuality). In his insistence on maintaining analytical distance from Marxism, however, Bourdieu glosses over the problem of why the relationship between the representation and that which it represents is not arbitrary.

¹³ See Ebert [1996] for a particularly powerful mapping (and indictment) of the link between utilitarian theory and the post-modernist critique of Marxist feminism.

our nature to be social. This has left the field relatively free to those evolutionary sociobiologists who posit an inherent behavioural core selected for at some putative moment in our past; for them we move through history eternally constrained by the aggressive instincts of man the hunter and the nurturing emotions and care for detail of woman the child-bearing gatherer.

3.7 The social subject as constituted by social relations

A second fundamental Marxist insight implicit in the Robinson Crusoe critique is that since people exist only in society, all social forms, including individual subjects, must be conceived of in relation to each other. Hence analytically we think of society as a system of social relations. This is why Marx emphasises that capital is a relationship, not a stock of value, why we say that classes only exist in relation to each other, why we think that a unit such as a firm (or a household) is defined by relations that cross-cut it (the concrete is concrete because it is the product of many determinations).

This insight is not specific to Marxism; it is one of the building blocks of sociological analysis. The play of utilitarianism is so strong in contemporary social theory, however, that the opposition between structure and agency and the identification of agency with the voice of the individual are simply assumed or asserted. Exchange and bargaining models are also based on a conception of structure. Few would attempt to argue that these models apply descriptively only to those situations where people are objectively measuring different options and then explicitly negotiating a transaction or playing out a game. Even in the United States, normatively and in practice, such situations constitute a relatively restricted area of life in households. Rather it is assumed that there are unconscious structures, either in the human psyche or in the nature of society, that lead people to act in this way systematically enough to constitute a pattern.

Thus the debate between Marxism and utilitarian models is not about structure vs. agency, but rather what kind of dynamic structural model best helps us to understand the social shaping of agency. Kandiyoti's [1988] political dilemma - how to subject the gendered categories of everyday life to consistent feminist critique, how to avoid taking as given what should be contested - does not seem to me theoretically resolvable with a sharp opposition between structure and agency. In a Marxist approach both the given and transformative representations arise from the contradictions of structure. Marxism would suggest that the methodological individualism implicit in the bargaining solution to the

household problem is inappropriate. One must begin with the social relations that define individuals, not with free-standing individuals building their worlds through systems of exchange. Once the relationship between structure and agency is rephrased as the relationship between individual choice and structural determination the analysis is already vitiated since agency is rooted in systems of social relations.

Contradiction, opposition within unity, is central to Marx's theory of social relations. Hence in Marxist theory cooperation does not stand in analytical opposition to conflict. Marx's most elaborated illustration of this is his analysis of capitalist class relations where interdependence between labour and capital in the process of production is accompanied by conflict, oppression and resistance. There is thus no inconsistency between saying that workers are exploited, that they also resist, and that they depend on owners of capital for employment. By analogy, it is not surprising to find both cooperation and conflict in domestic groups. Marxist emphasise the ways in which social reproduction continues despite unresolvable and enduring class contradictions through the mediation of political and ideological institutions.

Since Marxism recognises no biological core to human behaviour, no universal sexual division of labour, however, it is incorrect to assume that gender (sexual) relations are in themselves inherently contradictory - that will depend on the mapping of biological reproduction into historically specific modes of production. In class societies this means that the nature of gender conflict and cooperation cannot be understood independently of class contradictions and the mediation of political and ideological institutions. This is not the same as reducing gender to class, but it does imply an analytical and political complexity much greater than that demanded if one isolates a sex/gender complex.

There is a risk of analytical slippage and political abuse in the Marxist position. Marx's dictum that people make history but not precisely as they think can be translated as what people think does not matter - their world can be transformed for them so that they will think what they should think. Power can become its own moral authority. The social construction of subjectivity hovered dangerously close in Althusser to the denial of the materiality of the subject. But such a position is clearly out of line with the political emphasis that Marx gave to his own intellectual project - workers' understanding *Capital* as the basis of a political programme, and with the long socialist tradition that frames Marxist theory.

Utilitarianism itself is not benign, either analytically or politically. The feminist

critique of Becker's household model is a rephrasing in gender terms of earlier critical Marxist work on class in which the absurdity of arguing that workers choose their own exploitation was exposed. In both cases the role of power relations and ideology cross-cutting firms/households and constituting the framework of choice are pointed out. The difference between the Marxist conception of class and the neo-classical feminist bargaining critique of household models is that Marxist theory proceeds to explain how and why these relations of power and their ideological representation are constituted and thus defines a clear political project. Utilitarian feminism points nowhere and everywhere. Feminist theorists who would never accept the Hobbesian view of all against all as a satisfactory assumption have implicitly accepted the notion of a generalized gender war.

3.8 The specificity of capitalism

For Marx, the mode of production which organises contemporary society at a global level is capitalism. Like many other 19th Century evolutionists (and theorists of both modernisation and post-modern consumerism) Marx observed the ever-expanding generalisation of commodity relations under capitalism. His distinctive contribution, however, was to root commoditisation in the distinctive, historically specific, class relations of capitalism, through which exploitation is veiled by capital's purchase of the commodity labour-power in the labour market. One of the distinctive features of capitalism is the division between labour and labour-power, and the fact that capital does not itself fully organise and assure the reproduction of the latter. It is this division which sets a boundary between productive and reproductive work - the former being that which produces value for capital, the latter being that which produces and reproduces the everyday subsistence of workers.

Marx's historical analysis of capitalism clarifies why certain forms of analytical representation are ideologically so compelling in modern thought. His critique of commodity fetishism is particularly important in moving ahead with feminist work on domestic groups, while avoiding unuseful turnings, for he explains why in capitalist societies we are likely to ascribe the characteristics of markets to relations that are quite different. I am just as concerned as any post-modernist with the importance of beginning with people's everyday experience, and politically with returning to it, but the notion that agency is best understood through the building up of individual models of decision rather than analysis of dialectical structure is one of the most suasive and enduring fallacies in contemporary

social thought. Describing decisions is not the same as constructing models on that basis. The extension of the analytical apparatus of neo-classical micro-economics into all domains of social life is a particularly good example, and the wrong direction for feminism to take.

This historical specificity of capitalism means that we also need historically appropriate conceptual approximations to understand it. For Marxists the relations that define social life are real, material and historically variable, but we cannot directly observe them. What we can observe are people acting, communicating, interacting among themselves and with nature, often in groups such as families, or households, or savings clubs, or churches. The descriptive concepts we use to capture these observations cannot possibly subsume all the variation we see, and they certainly do not directly correspond to the social relations that define them, but they must be historically appropriate or our observations will not fit and will not allow us to grasp underlying pattern. A word like household should thus be an historically appropriate approximation, not necessarily perfectly describing all cases, but sufficiently exact to allow us to understand the dynamics of variation, i.e. it should be more than an odd-job word.

4. THE HOUSEHOLD AS AN HISTORICALLY APPROPRIATE APPROXIMATION

Using these points from Marxist theory and method, we can reread the feminist critique of the assumptions underlying the concept of the household. While reaffirming many of the critical insights of this literature, a Marxist reading allows us to salvage the household as a useful historically appropriate concept, and the household survey as a useful though very approximate methodological instrument. Because the central Marxist point is the historical specificity of different modes of production, I invert the discussion of the first two assumptions to discuss why the domestic/public opposition is a real, but ideological effect, of the distinctive organisation of class relations under capitalism.

4.1 The domestic/public divide

There are two prongs to the feminist critique of the universalisation of the domestic/public opposition: first that the division itself is not important in many societies, and second that even where it exists the activities of domestic groups include political and cultural dimensions that cross cut and extend beyond these groups.

The second point is clearly true, and politically important. The idea that gender relations are defined in the domestic domain and then extended elsewhere led to the overly simplistic idea that redefining gender relations at home and empowering women to cross into the public domain would be sufficient to address gender bias everywhere. The analytical and political force of this point is particularly strong, however, as a critique of those who conceptualise society as a hierarchical structure with collections of either individuals or family groups at its base, the state at the apex, and markets and civil society in between. If, like Marx, one conceives of social groups as being defined by social relations, it is evident that domestic groups are defined by cross-cutting political, ideological (and class) relations as well as by domestic relations. The central premise in Marxist theory is the relative importance of the relations of production in all these complex determinations (not, as some would have it, the reduction of everything to production).

It is thus evident that a household survey is a very approximate and partial research tool; it can never provide a complete picture of the determinants of the relationships that it pretends to explore. If one attempts to expand a survey questionnaire by including information on the broader political and cultural aspects of everyday life affecting household members, it will be too long to be a good survey instrument. More, importantly, however, a survey questionnaire is not the best way to get at this information. One can capture some attitudinal information through surveys, but not the ways in which people actually act, reconcile contradictions, subvert authority, and converse. Nor can one capture the quality of children's schooling, the regularity of the availability of medicines in the health post nor the passibility of roads in the rainy season. To design and interpret household survey data, to deconstruct the household, from either a Marxist or feminist perspective, one needs detailed qualitative and historical information as well as other kinds of quantitative data. For this one needs clearly delimited, theoretically specified questions - not an ever-lengthening survey questionnaire.

The first point is also true, and inspired in many ways by Marxist work (after all Engels popularised the view of many nineteenth century evolutionists that the patriarchal family was linked to the development of the state and class-societies), but it is from a Marxist perspective insufficiently clear as to why sharply bounded domestic groups are so important in capitalist societies. The domestic/public opposition universalises the particular historical conditions of capitalism and thus hides from view the underlying dynamics and constant shifts of the boundaries of domestic groups. The most fundamental of these

is the division between labour and labour power implicit in commoditization under the class relations of capitalism. It is this division which means that work such as treating the ill is called employment in one context - such as a hospital - and caring if it takes place at home. The contradictory class nature of this division makes control of domestic groups a constant concern of the bureaucracy of the capitalist state, defining, censusing, monitoring and constantly renegotiating the boundaries of domestic groups¹⁴. The subjection of colonised peoples to capitalism is a history of legal arbitration, overlapping legal codes and the redefinition of pre-colonial systems as parts of 'family' law.

Marxists have been rightfully criticized by feminists for concentrating their analytical attention on the production of value in formally capitalist production, to the detriment of understanding non-monetary production and hence the dynamics of the economy as a whole. The alternative to this neglect should not be to assume away the divide by unproblematically extending the apparatus of neo-classical micro-economics from firms to families. We can impose a common unit of account - shadow market prices for food produced and consumed at home, or labour equivalents - as approximations, but for understanding the dynamics of accumulation within the economy as a whole, the contingent relationship between economic growth and the quality of everyday livelihoods, and the contradictory tensions of both cooperation and conflict within domestic groups, it is important not to efface the divide analytically. The fact that what happens in markets is shaped by what happens outside them is important, but constructing a common unit of account disguises the fact that under capitalist production there *is* no common unit of account. Not all work produces value; that work which is necessary but does not produce value is ideologically defined as not-work. To assume that what happens in households represents processes of maximisation of individual interests effaces theoretically precisely what we need to understand.

Low's work applying household economics to the dynamics of small-holder agrarian production in a migrant labour system in Swaziland explained why strong smallholder response to a high-input hybrid maize programme did not lead to the fulfilment of the projects's original goals - increased levels of maize marketing. Wages of migrant workers were spent buying inputs to produce hybrid maize for home consumption even though the

¹⁴ This process of renegotiation is particularly tense in this period of global restructuring where as Henrietta Moore [1994] has pointed out the debate on the family is really a debate around the changing boundaries of state and market and the resulting expansion of areas of vulnerability.

unit costs of local traditional maize varieties were much lower. Low explains this as the result of a process of maximisation in which it makes sense for households with members with high-wage earning potential to use high-input labour saving technologies to produce hybrid maize for subsistence and households with low-wage earning potential to produce traditional labour intensive varieties. Using a common unit of account, z-goods, makes this insight possible. At the same time, however, another part of the answer may be that maize as a food-crop, whether of traditional or hybrid varieties, cannot be freely marketed until subsistence demands have been met. These demands are generally voiced by women, and may thus be interpreted as gender differences of individual interest, but underlying them are the contradictions of the market divide.

How to handle the market divide is a major issue for the methodology of household surveys. The Household Income and Expenditure surveys (HIES) set monetary equivalents for all forms of production and transfers in kind in order to measure and compare the incomes of different kinds of households. Much work has been done on how to engender statistics to take fuller account of work done by women, much of which is also applicable to children. Data on subsistence production, informal sector activity and gifts, which are often important income sources for women, are typically difficult to track, leading perhaps to an underestimate of their incomes. Yet there is ample ethnographic evidence to show that monetary and non-monetary incomes are not necessarily used in the same ways. In Lesotho, for example, money equivalence for bridewealth cattle is not calculated at the prevailing market rate because people know that cattle given in bridewealth cannot be freely sold by the person controlling them [Ferguson 1990]. Interpretation of information on household income data thus depends on triangulating qualitative and in-depth survey information on the ways in which different income flows are managed by different people in different kinds of households.

4.2 The domestic domain

Although there is no universal basis for a domestic/public opposition, from a Marxist perspective it is reasonable to expect that activities that have to do with the provisioning of basic subsistence - residing together, preparing and eating food, sleeping, having sex, parenting children, caring for the dependent - will cluster in relatively enduring forms around relations of kinship. The reason for this is not, however, that there is a common biological core that defines localised kinship groups. Rather social interdependence in

production and reproduction of the conditions of existence is the basis of biological reproduction and hence kinship. This means that domestic groups organise biological processes and hence that they will often have biological referents. Domestic groups that do not have such biological referents can and do of course exist; when they endure, the language of kinship is often extended to them.

This position thus contradicts the radically constructivist approach to kinship and gender advanced by Yanagisako and Collier [op cit.] which frees both from biological reference. Relations of gender are defined by conjugality and generation, i.e. the ways in which we know what we will call male and female. Yanagisako and Collier were so concerned to avoid ceding any terrain to socio-biology, that they left us without any base for recognising male/female at all - gender becomes analytically equivalent to any arbitrary polar concept which defines major lines of cultural difference. This violates common sense feeling that on the whole we can recognize men and women, if not male and female behaviour, cross-culturally. As Scheffler [1991: 370] has observed: "Wholly 'culturalizing' kinship not only leaves us vulnerable to sociobiological arguments; it also opens the door to feminist essentialism."

Where the Marxist and constructivist positions are congruent, however, is in their insistence that the content of gender relations is not specified by biological relations of conjugality and generation. To accept the biological referents of domestic groups does not imply that clustering will invariably be organised in the same way, or that the activities carried out will be the same, i.e. there is no naturally defined sexual division of labour within domestic groups. To the contrary, Marx's emphasis on the historical specificity of different modes of production precisely means that the processes of social reproduction, and the place and content of kinship within them, are historically variable. Nor should this cluster of activities necessarily be carried out by a single group of fixed composition with impermeable boundaries.

At the same time, in all existing modes of production, this clustering of activities tends to endure - sexual liaisons may be transitory and casual but conjugality and parenting are based on longer term interdependence. The history of such enduring interdependence is reflected in the selective genealogical recognition of logically open kinship systems. It is thus reasonable to assume the existence of broadly defined localised family groups interdependent in the provisioning of everyday subsistence, unless historical conditions clearly show us otherwise. Precisely because these ties are enduring, we should expect to

find overlapping domestic groups. So also should we find useful an historical approach to the organisation of domestic groups, such as the tracing of developmental cycles (without assuming that there is an invariant cycle that all follow).

From this perspective, the distinction drawn between productive and reproductive work can have no general validity. Work is work - weeding a field, threading a needle, hauling water, balancing books, delivering a child. All forms of labour which produce the conditions of subsistence are production, and all are part of the conditions of reproduction. There is no reason to expect that the units that form will necessarily be constituted in the same way or carry out the same activities, be embedded in the same symbolic discourse, or generate the same affective experience. Social reproduction is reserved for the broader process that goes beyond production itself and includes the political and ideological as well as the economic. The universalisation of the division between productive and reproductive work - our feeling that preparing a meal is qualitatively different from weeding a field, or that when we say a woman works we mean that she is employed outside the home - is an ideological product of the sharp division between labour and labour-power under capitalism, where the latter becomes a commodity that can be bought and sold¹⁵.

To accept that there is a domestic domain within which relatively enduring groups form around relations of kinship, does not mean that these groups are discrete or that people can only belong to one such group or that everyone who belongs to such a group is always resident there. But from a Marxist perspective, the key issues should be understanding this variation and its importance in its historical context, not just documenting the infinite richness of human variation. In the contemporary world there are, for example, as feminist theorists have pointed out, many households in which relations of conjugality and procreation are not based in co-residence. There are many women heading households without cohabiting male conjugal partners. From a Marxist perspective, one must ask why. The answers will not be uniform and do not necessarily imply social pathology or deviance, but when this pattern is linked to a history of slavery, divided families under labour

¹⁵ Much creative Marxist work has taken a position different to that developed here, attempting to describe a patriarchal or domestic mode of production which has been historically articulated with different modes of production. The problems with such an approach to understanding gender relations and domestic work in contemporary advanced capitalist societies were discussed from a Marxist perspective by Young[1981] in her critique of dual systems theory. Similar objections were made by myself [O'Laughlin 1977] and others to work attempting to use the concept of a domestic mode of production to analyse the place of household production in developing capitalist societies.

migration, or the incarceration of young black men in a racist prison system, it is not enough to say that it shows the cultural shaping of sex by gender.

Similarly, the point should not be documenting that many households do not follow Chayanov's developmental cycle of the domestic group, but rather why they develop or dissolve in the way they do. From this perspective, the failure of Chayanov's application of the cycle in the case of the Russian peasantry in the period under study was that he abstracted from class relations cross-cutting households in a context where it was not historically appropriate to do so. Hence his model did not adequately account for the ways in which household members either selling or buying wage-labour altered the supply of labour available to households. It is possible, however, to adapt his model, as Low [1986] did, to account for migrant labour¹⁶.

When I did fieldwork in southern Chad, rural livelihoods were profoundly shaped by the cultivation of cotton as a cash-crop. Food circulated between different granary groups, but if it was felt that the flows were not compensated for by reciprocal sharing or cooperation in work and social support, then food would be refused. In a world where sharing is normative but livelihoods are also dependent on the production of commodities, it makes sense, I think, to identify domestic clusters which operate under norms of reciprocity and look at flows and transfers between them, especially if we are trying to understand differences in livelihoods. This does not resolve the issue of overlapping groups, but the fault lines of such groups are often links of everyday cooperation clustered around kinship with long-term reciprocity an important part of the process (as when refusal to eat food is a signal of imminent rupture).

The fact that there is variation in composition and activities of domestic groups does not necessarily mean that we cannot compare them. Measuring, classifying and understanding these differences are objectives of survey research. The fact that women-headed households have not been adequately studied in survey research, for example, derives from bias in the ways households were classified, not from the conception of a household in itself.

A further example of overlapping domestic groups in West and Southern Africa is provided by the circulation of children, often on the basis of fosterage, which again

¹⁶ This does not mean that Low's model satisfactorily explains why migrant labour is done by men rather than women, as Evans [op cit] points out.

challenges the notion that domestic groups form around ties of kinship. Yet again from my experience of rural fieldwork, I think it is generally safer to assume that relations other than cooperation in everyday subsistence are involved when ties of kinship are extremely tenuous. The integration of children, who are not clothed or sent to school or bequeathed property, as 'kin' rather than domestic workers often disguises poorly paid wage-labour. A methodology that obliges us to question the status of such children is salutary.

Finally, some of the major methodological inconsistencies and problems in household survey methodology arise in the context of oscillating labour migration, particularly between town and country. People move between different households and feel that they belong to all of these groups and the composition of domestic groups is constantly changing. But here again, the analytical cost of forcing a separation is not necessarily as high as Russell [*op cit*] pretends. Living conditions are generally different in city and country, not just because prices are different but also because what you need to survive is different. Hence grouping rural and urban units together as a way of comparing resources bases may be deceptive. Russell's example of the overestimation of relative rural poverty in Swaziland is an important issue, but could probably be resolved through careful registry of remittances through in depth studies to back up household surveys. In working with household surveys in rural Southern Mozambique, like Swaziland an important labour reserve area, I found that people included migrants in their lists of household members because such naming constituted a claim to sharing resources as well as description of regular remittance. Without careful probing and regular prolonged study, it was not possible to distinguish the difference.

The important feminist point that household units are not natural universal domestic groups does not mean, that is to say, that positing such a unit is historically inappropriate today. The historical appropriateness of the household concept is based on the global intrusion of state and market and the resultant empirical importance of households as relatively fixed and bounded domestic groups, throughout the contemporary world, or at least anywhere where household surveys are designed and carried out. As Whitehead [*op cit*] pointed out, households are important intervening units in access to land, resources and socio-economic status. Correspondingly, despite powerful feminist critiques of the assumptions underlying theoretical approaches to the household, with analytical care Chayanov's concept of the developmental cycle of domestic groups, and (despite my caution around universal units of account) even Becker's z-goods, have helped us to understand

important things about the organisation of everyday life, including its gendered dimensions.

4.3 The homogeneity of the household.

The feminist critique of the personification of households points out that households are made up of individuals with different interests and identities, and that there is no reason to assume that one person - a household head - acts benevolently in the interests of the whole. Descriptively these points are accurate and important, but their analytical meaning is discussable. From a Marxist perspective, analytical priority should not be given to households as collections of individuals (which they must be at an empirical level) but to the relations which define them. Since these relations may be contradictory, there is no reason to accept the analytical opposition between conflict and cooperation. Rather one would expect that interdependence within households would entail both. Similarly, the existence of a patriarchal structure of authority within households does not mean that this authority is uncontested; to say that women are oppressed or victimised within households, for example, does not necessarily deny them agency, voice, identity and power.

Further, for Marxists, thinking about conflicting positions within households by conceptualising individuals playing bargaining games with their respective differential bundles of resources imposes an ideological view of how markets work on a non-commoditised area where it is even less appropriate. The processes through which contradictions within households are worked out vary with different kinds of households and in relation to cross-cutting political, economic and ideological relations. Understanding how this takes place requires conceptual work and close qualitative study in diverse contexts. A research agenda that sets off to collect endless bundles of resources and model their combination under maximisation assumptions will reveal very little about the differentiation of experience within and between households.

Methodologically, then, although I do not think that households necessarily have strategies (for that implies common decision making processes), I do find it acceptable to assign agency to households, to speak about what they do and do not do, as long as this does not exhaust the analysis. To abstract from interdependence in households to focus on individuals is much more problematic analytically. It is often repeated in consultancy reports, for example, that 80% of the population of Mozambique live in rural areas and are engaged in agricultural production. This is based on counting the number of individuals

working or living in rural areas and is more or less accurate. The predominance of agricultural employment is invoked both to argue the importance of an agrarian strategy and to criticise industrial bias in past macro-economic strategy. If we look at rural households in labour reserve areas, however, only about one-third have an exclusively agricultural base; the others combine farm and off-farm employment, including out-migration. Furthermore, if we trace these households over time, attending to their developmental cycle, we will find that only a tiny percentage have never been dependent on off-farm employment as well as their own agrarian production. From this perspective, economic policy must address the interdependence of farm and off-farming income, rather than assuming that if 80% are farmers then improving agricultural productivity will be sufficient to increase rural incomes, particularly those of women farmers.

With somewhat less confidence, I would even argue that the methodological focus on the head of household in surveys is defensible in many contexts. There are two reasons for the assumption that there is a household head, generally an adult male. The first is that it is simpler to do so, but the second is that it is often true. I frequently had difficulty when asking women in villages in southern Mozambique about their ages. “I do not know; my husband will tell you because he has my identity card”, many answered¹⁷. Systematic under-reporting of women and younger people’s activities and opinions is thus predictable and a limitation of a rapid survey form. Simply putting in more questions and expanding the number of respondents will not redress this problem; it needs to be backed up more qualitative and extended forms of observation and inquiry, which will allow us to interpret what comes out of surveys.

5. CONCLUSION

If one conceptualises society as made up of units that produce macro-regularities by making decisions at the micro-level, then ‘household’ is not a very robust concept. It aggregates individual interests that are clearly different and often contradictory. From this perspective a research strategy that emphasises tracing the bundles of resources that different household members hold and then modelling mathematically the bargaining conditions

¹⁷ This is also an issue in the United States where the 1980 census introduced the concept of householder to replace that of household head, in response to feminist criticisms that the methodology of the census assumed a husband/boss head of household in married couple households. In practice, though, in most married couple households, the husband continued to be designated as householder [Scott 1992: 422].

under which domestic groups will cohere makes sense. This implies a research agenda in which households surveys pursue more and more detail about individual members. This agenda has been a response to the feminist critique of assumptions of household homogeneity, yet feminist work shows intuitive distaste with its terms - maximisation assumptions which abstract analytically and methodologically from the political and ideological relations that lie behind different bargaining positions. Questionnaires have got longer and longer, yet certain questions are still not asked. There is no way, I would argue, for feminists to deal with their lack of ease, without breaking with neo-utilitarian thought, the analytical apparatus of micro-economics, and the reduction of gender issues to 'intra-household resource allocation'.

There are analytical alternative to be pursued. From a Marxist perspective, I have argued here, the concept of the household is a useful, historically specific approximation, though a very limited one. The Marxist analytical and methodological response to the assumption of household homogeneity agenda is not to move to the level of the individual unit of decision, but to pursue analytically the cross-cutting relations of class, politics and ideology that define social difference and identity. Neither the design nor the interpretation of household surveys is possible without reference to the qualitative and historical information that makes their categories and questions relevant. And neither such qualitative information nor quantitative data are possible to create without a theoretical approach that can place the construction of the categories of social identity - gender, race, class, ethnicity, nation - in structural context.

Marxism is not and should not be a fixed dogmatic system, which like some religious traditions, can only grow as a body of knowledge and analysis through hermeneutic reinterpretation of past doctrinal statements by its founding fathers. It should and has engaged with the central debates of contemporary social theory, and it has grown through critique. Critical feminist theory has and should continue to enrich Marxism, as has critical discussion of lacunae in Marxist work on, for example, racism, colonialism, affect, or the social construction of meaning. Nonetheless fundamental Marxist insights allow us to locate and rephrase the important criticisms that feminist theory has made of the assumptions underlying household models, to clarify conceptual and methodological work on domestic groups, and to provide a clearer and more productive analytical agenda for understanding social differentiation and changing livelihoods than do individual decision models. In this agenda, the concept of household survives as a useful, historically appropri-

ate, analytical and descriptive concept.

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