

Working Papers Series No. 8

THE SEXUAL DIVISION OF LABOUR IN  
CAPITALISM

VERONIKA BENNHOLDT-THOMSEN



## THE SEXUAL DIVISION OF LABOUR IN CAPITALISM

(0) The fact that the social sciences do not dispose of a theory of the sexual division of labour is due to the phenomenon itself, if not to the division of labour along sex-lines as such, then to the specific social value it has acquired at present.

- The sexual division of labour is held as something inherently natural and this nature-like aspect is introduced not by the man but by the woman, as if female biology itself determines abilities and tasks of women.
- As its organisational frame is given by the family, the sexual division of labour is qualified as part of the superstructure and not as a relation of production and accordingly the feminine tasks are not defined as work, as economy or as production.

Because of this ideological setting the method of how to develop further knowledge about the sexual division of labour is already outlined, namely, that we have to start with the analysis of the present situation. Therefore, my argument will be ordered in the following way:

1. A more or less descriptive panorama of the given division of labour by sexes.
2. A critique of the usual perceptions of this relationship, among others by means of ethnographic material.
3. An approach to the problem as to which are throughout history of humankind the common features and the differences in the sexual division of labour by means of the historical materialist category of labour.

4. A reconceptualisation of the sexual division of labour in the present.

(1) The matrix of the sexual division of labour in the present capitalist world system (I.Wallerstein, 1979) is the relationship between the housewife and the wage earner. This does not of course mean that all women are exclusively housewives and all men are wage workers, but it is the principle according to which contemporary society is organised, and which is seen currently throughout the world where women perform the tasks in the area of immediate subsistence. This means that they provide for the daily consumption of eating, clothing and housing, and for the survival of the next generation, whereas, men are active in production which is mediated by exchange and money. While female production is organised through the family, male production instead, follows different forms of organisation: the factory, the handicraft enterprise, the peasant household, the state administration etc. Furthermore, this principle means that women substantially do the unpaid labour and men the paid labour. It also means that women's work is lowly valued, rather being considered as a service rendered by love than as an expenditure of energy. It operates like a stamp on women's work in general. Accordingly, women in the paid jobs are less remunerated than men.

What is a housewife, and what does she do? A housewife in the first instance is a mother, potentially or in actual fact. She combines a large number of abilities, tasks and qualifications in one person. She provides manual services to the husband and children, she cooks, cleans, washes, and so on. She caters to the psychological well being of the family members by providing a 'nice' atmosphere in the house by listening to their sorrows and by giving advice, which means she is doing inter-personal relationship work. She is nurse and tax expert, as well as teacher and gardener (S.Kontos, K.Walser 1978, A.Oakley

1974). The socio-economic category of housewife is relatively young. It emerges in the core of the world capitalist system together with the wage-worker. The historical process is in short as follows. During early industrialisation men and women were both wage-workers and, to a lesser degree, children. At this time the bourgeois housewife emerges. This model spreads over the proletarian class in the form of a wage earning man and an unpaid houseworker by means of protective legislation, and as a result of struggle of the working class organisations for a family wage. (Ute Gerhard, 1978; G.Bock & B.Duden, 1977). This process of housewifization is accompanied by the development of an image of womanhood which attributes to the houseworkers manual and psychological qualifications; the stamp of being female 'nature' (K.Hausen, 1976, G.Kittler, 1980).

Today all women's first profession is 'housewife', whereas the men have open access to a diversity of the professional spheres. (In developed countries 70% of women working in publicly recognised job occupations are concentrated in 25 professions and branches of professions where only few men are working, whereas men are to be found in 300 different professions and branches wherein are found only very few women, Loufti, 1980). In other words the attribute male/female for different tasks are not parallel or at the same level, rather they are qualitatively different. Namely, the tasks of a woman are defined by sex, whereas those of the men are not. Even more all the different occupations of women are shaped by the housewife. The category 'housewife' infects women like a disease. This is also true as far as the so-called 'social' professions are concerned. Women are teachers, nurses, secretaries, and those workers on the assembly line who have to work on extremely small objects that need special manual ability. And this holds true as far as the valorization is concerned as well. Therefore, the

average income of women is (in virtually all countries which publish sex specific statistics) lower than that of men. However, differences vary widely from region to region. In Finland, Norway, Israel and France the income of women has risen in the last two decades to that of 65-70% of the income of men. In Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland it is 67%, but in the predominantly English speaking countries (Australia, Canada, England and the United States) the figure is less than 60%. (D.R. Moroney, 1979, p.601). (In the F.R.Germany the average income of women in industry amounts to 72.3% of that of the men in 1979: Source: F.R. 23rd August, 1980)<sup>1</sup>. However, women do not only earn less on an average than men, but also all work that women do is held in low esteem. An especially striking example stems from the Soviet Union where the medical profession has become a female-dominated field. In proportion to the degree to which the number of female doctors was augmented, the social recognition and monetary rewards of this profession became adversely affected. (M. Buckley, 1981).

The present social position of women has a caste-like character; that of a low caste. The occupations they have to fulfill is predetermined by birth and as with outcastes or untouchables, the tasks performed by women become low merely because of being done by them. If we finally start to take this phenomenon seriously, then one question emerges immediately; how are these facts compatible with the capitalist system (or the industrial system or the modern society; here the concepts are really exchangeable)? Or, what consequences must we draw from this to increase our understanding of the capitalist system? These questions become all the more important when we take into account that this description - women are born to be housewives, this is part of their female nature - emerge only with the industrial development of capitalism.

Women, so goes the argument, because of their ability to give birth and to nourish children, are destined to be housewives because the tasks of the housewife are intimately linked to the work of the mother, namely cooking, washing, cleaning, psychological assistance and so on. Now, how is it that just these tasks, seemingly developed on the basis of the ability to give birth, are assessed at such a low esteem? This without doubt touches a fundamental point as it deals with the character of a society; that is, in which way is the relationship between human beings and their attitudes towards themselves and their own bodies structured by this form of the social division of labour? In other words, how are sexual and social divisions of labour related to each other?

(2) As stated earlier this paper is to develop an approach for a theory of the sexual division of labour based on a critique of the predominant perceptions of this phenomenon. After this descriptive panorama of the actual state of the sexual division of labour, the following will deal with the main elements of the ideology which stems from this reality.

One, if not the basic premise that dominates daily life, as well as that of scientific perceptions, consists of imagining that the presently prevailing form of the sexual division of labour is the only and exclusive form that humankind has brought forth. The axiom thus arising is, either there exists a sexual division of labour or not. And in the same fundamentalist way there follows immediately a question as to whether in actual fact a difference between the sexes does exist. In other words this is a historic or non-historic point of view which rediscovers the entire present situation in all other historical phases. Not unlike the attitude existing in classical political

economy where every flint starts to be called 'capital', every occupation performed by women starts to be seen as 'housework'.

One example of this is the concept of how the human society has been organised for almost 99% of its history up to now (appropriative mode of production or hunter/gatherer groups), which uses the famous model of 'man the hunter'. According to this the man leaves for the hunt and the woman has to stay at home because of pregnancy and breast feeding, doing only some local gathering. Although it is correct to say that historically there did take place a sexual division of labour in which men predominantly did the hunting and women the gathering, it nevertheless is totally beyond a scientific analysis of facts to reason that hunting must be masculine, because it is supposed to need physical strength, quick movements and overcoming long distances. Whereas gathering because of the need of little strength and little local movements is defined as feminine.<sup>2</sup>

First, there exists sufficient proof to indicate that women predominate in carrying the heavy burdens in societies where there are no animals and the wheel does not exist, and that they can carry even heavier loads than the men. (See Murdock, 1937, Malinowski, 1932).<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, what do the authors mean by 'little local movement' or 'women bound to a given locality'? Do they really associate a cavern or the windscreen with home, sweet home? Instead, it is well known that gathering means overcoming long distances and the changing of localities due to falling productivity. (See Friedel, 1975, p.16).<sup>4</sup>

Thirdly, (a) if it should be true that hunting needs the agility and quickness of all the people involved then we should ask whether women are always pregnant and always restrained in their movements? However, there are also examples where pregnant women participate in hunting.



(See Turnbull, 1965: Mbuti-pygmyes).<sup>5</sup>

(b) Does hunting always exclusively mean running down the deer which might really necessitate special quickness or does it also consist of organisation, cooperation and slyness?

(c) Even if so, there now exists enough examples where women are trained to be quick in the same way as men and in these cases it is generally said that they become less fatigued than men. (See Tarahumara, Mexico, F. Benitez 1972).

One central feature of the ideology of the model 'man the hunter' consists in seeing female activities as inherently deficient, as a necessary result of the biological handicap of being a woman. Men can hunt and women are bound to do the gathering. Meat is seen as the basic food and as being of higher value. But archeological and ethnographical material on the contrary proves that the main contribution to the diet has been vegetable food, since it is much more reliable than the hunters luck or misfortune. (See Fisher, 1979).

The most striking feature of the 'man the hunter' model however, consists less in the fact that the fundamental deficiency of women is doing gathering instead of hunting, but that women have not created or owned the weapons for hunting, and that they don't lead wars, nor know how to kill. Godelier, the well known French anthropologist tells us in his recently published article in *New Left Review* (1981, No.127) that 'the origins of male domination' that 'men hunted big game and waged war' to which was attached a higher value, 'in so far as it involved greater risks of losing one's life and greater glory in taking life', whereas women only 'hunted small game, gathered natural supplies, and cooked the daily food'.

The reason forwarded for this was that 'woman by

virtue of her reproductive function is less mobile than man - she becomes pregnant, gives birth, and breast feeds children who are weaned at a later stage' (page 12).

In Godelier's whole paper there is no explanation as to why an occupation which entails risking life, has a higher value attached to it than an occupation which brings forth new life, and why it is more glorious to kill than to give birth.

Godelier in his paper nevertheless criticises male dominance over women whereas his American colleague Lionel Tiger, in his book 'Men in Groups' (1969) on the contrary, wants to show that this dominance is necessary and impossible to change.

Godelier's unconscious male value system in Tiger is conscious aggression and violence; the arguments are nevertheless given with the seemingly value-free bias typical of the social biology that Tiger represents, according to which the human animal is unchangeable because the genes are programmed in a certain unique form.<sup>6</sup>

"The logic of my argument then is: males are prone to bond, male bonds are prone to aggress, therefore aggression is a predictable feature of human groups of males. To reduce opportunities for such aggression is to tamper with an ancient and central pattern of human behavior. In view of the importance of hunting and quasi-hunting behaviour among human males, perhaps it can be suggested that bondless aggressionless males are in a real sense equivalent to childless females. Of course, childless females are viable and many choose their condition and enjoy its benefits. At the same time, it seems reasonable that they also do not experience for good or ill a crucial characteristic of human females and may be held to have lacked participation in a massive biological activity and its psycho-social consequences. In the same way, friendless inhibited males are not only friendless and aggression-inhibiting, but possibly do not experience the male equivalent of child reproduction, which is related to work, defence, politics, and perhaps even the violent mastery and destruction of others." (Tiger 1969: p.190-1)

Tiger's interpretation of the past history of humankind is not only a projection into the past of the relationship between housewife/wage worker; he then also uses the inverse argument to say that men, having been hunters in the past, must also continue to act like that impulsively today.

Another element of the dominant ideology of the sexual division of labour is the attitude that male means socially valuable and female 'socially unvaluable'. This becomes obvious when it is applied to different historical periods. One striking and at the same time strange example has been gathered by Evelyn Reed, citing Julius Lippert who seems to deplore that poor woman who was not allowed to eat human flesh - (quoted in Evelyn Reed, 1975, p.72).

The principle of our male dominated society is transmitted to all other social formations which leads to the interpretation of different social rules and activities between men and women as being a sign of disadvantage and subordination of women. It stems from a misunderstood principle of equality.

The actual demands for equal treatment by law and equal access to all the professions for men and women is historically necessary, and correct in the light of the bourgeois norms of liberty, equality and fraternity, but must nevertheless not be applied to other social historical situations. We on the contrary, know various forms of sexual divisions of labour and social organisation which are extremely unequal, and even show a rather strict division between male and female areas and male and female life cycles without, however, implying any hierarchy or even subordination of women (Mundurucu in Brasil - Y.u.R.Murphy 1974; Jivaro and Canella in Ecuador, Kagaba in Columbia, New Caledonia and ethnic groups in Malekula-Melanesia, Digul-people in New Guinea,

Chwana in South Africa - H.Baumann 1980; E.Leacock 1981)<sup>7</sup>  
 In this context the description of the so-called sexual parallelism of the Incas by Irene Silverblatt becomes interesting. The land was inherited in female and male descent lines and there existed political and religious institutions of women with the Queen at the top, parallel with those of the men. Spanish colonialism, however, changed this parallel structure to a hierarchical one. Similar, if not as striking examples of a parallelism between the sexes, especially where property and land rights are concerned, are given by Friedl (1975) and Boserup (1970).

We therefore come to the conclusion that the existence of a sexual division of labour in itself does not exhibit anything of its character. Rather it seems that all the social formations have an ascription of tasks and occupations to the two sexes, however, there exist not only one but several forms of the sexual division of labour.

(3) Once the pretention of the bourgeois ideology that its concept would apply to the entire history of human kind has been reduced, it is then no longer a problem to state that the sexual division of labour is a constant feature of human society. Once biology and nature has been used to threaten women, they then lose their threatening aspect and we can start to see them as allies. Because biologically respective natural differences between the sexes are the basis on which different occupations are performed. The crucial question however is, what kind of connection exists between the sexual nature of men and women and their different and varying occupations throughout history.

For analysing this and related questions, we need a concept which on the one hand is able to acknowledge biology and nature, (general and anthropological con-

ditions), without on the other hand becoming a historical and static. These requirements are fulfilled in the concept of work developed by historical materialism. 'Labour is in the first place, a process in which both man and nature participate, and in which man on his own accord starts, regulates, controls the material reactions between himself and nature. He opposes himself to nature as one of her forces setting in motion arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate nature's productions in a form adapted to his wants. By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature...' (Marx, 1974, p.173).

This is the general definition of work as given in Marx, and it is meant to embrace all history. However, the concept for the sexual aspects of work must first be developed on this basis because, astonishingly enough, neither Marx nor his interpreters have seen the difference between the female and the male body and accordingly their different relationship to nature in spite of having defined the human body as the human nature. (See A. Schmidt, 1962; A.Lefebvre, 1970, p.92-140). This quite fundamental anthropological question has indeed only been dealt with recently by the feminist social scientists R.Leukert (1976), Maria Mies (1981), Claudia von Werlhof (1981).

We have to include in the determination of work together with arms and legs, hands and head, also belly, breast and sex, and only then the crucial difference in the determination of the human nature is also included, namely the abilities of procreation and of giving birth. In the connecting metabolism between human beings and nature, men and women experience themselves in different ways. The woman experiences herself as being part of nature as she produces new nature and nourishment for it out of her own body. The male relationship to nature

on the contrary is an exchange with nature, mediated through hand and head. Maria Mies describes the different relationship to nature as imposed by the sex, in the following way: the woman feels her whole body as being productive, whereas the man feels himself as being productive by acting upon nature through means of instruments, namely tools. This is, she states, the reason why his relationship to his own and to the outside nature tends to be an instrumentalist one (Mies, 1981, p.11-19).

From this point of view the concept of 'metabolism', that is exchange with nature, applies more adequately to women, whereas, for men appropriation of nature seems more adequate. Women give something in return, they produce nature, whereas men do not. Also, this statement, however, has to be seen with an attitude of historical relativism and not as an invariable anthropological fact: it is possible only because of the experience of centuries of patriarchal history without which our concept might be quite different. So we should not overlook ethnographical and mythological material which might point to another understanding of this relationship by means of other behaviour in hunter and gatherer societies. In all these societies there existed after hunting and harvesting rituals to reconcile outside nature with human nature in the sense of giving something back, establishing an equal exchange. One would like to say that the female and the male relationship to nature have been united by means of these rituals in a single one.

Today this consciousness no longer exists. We even face many difficulties in understanding the attitudes behind this behaviour. On the contrary, present society lives off this conquest appropriation, exploitation and destruction of nature instead of a cooperation with nature through an exchange. What has happened in the meantime?

How has nature changed, namely the inner human one and the outside one? What are the cornerstones of this history?

Maria Mies after having stated that men have established a relationship of power towards nature, towards women and towards their own body, puts forward a thesis according to which this could occur only because men developed a productivity which made them seemingly independent from female productivity. This, her thesis continues, has happened through instruments, namely weapons. The history of male dominance is according to Maria Mies, not the history of the development of the productive forces, but rather of destructive forces; there exists a history of violence. (Mies, 1981, p.17-19).

This has been as far as I know the first, and up to now, also the only attempt of interpreting the history of male dominance by means of a materialist concept of work which distinguishes between a female and a male relationship to nature.

The common procedure in anthropological women's studies consists of trying to discover the historical moment when an original matriarchy has been transformed into patriarchy, much along the lines of the general evolutionist theory (E.Reed, 1975, R.Reiter, 1977, P. Webster, 1975). That means that in this literature women continue to ask how a maternal descent could have been changed into a paternal one and in which way women were forced out of religious, political and other social positions of control and coordination.

An approach, however, which sees the sexual division of labour as an important structuring element of the overall social relationship to nature has to develop its thesis far beyond these lines. Then we have not only to deal with descent or positions the women did or did not occupy in social hierarchy, but also we have to clarify which direction

the overall social development takes because of the emergence of a certain sexual division of labour.

This implies posing the problem in a way similar to which Engels did, when he showed that the existence of the state in an evolutionary perspective presupposes necessarily the existence of the paternal inheritance. (F.Engels, *The Origin of the Family...*) Engels, however, has to be criticised because of his exclusively male oriented concept of work and productivity, so that he does not really succeed in visualising the sexual division of labour. Engels from the onset creates a division between production and reproduction. (See his preface to the first publication in 1884 here 1972 pp 25-26)<sup>8</sup> Then, while developing his thesis about the origins of private property, he overstresses the effect of individual appropriation of nature instead of acknowledging a possible cooperation with nature, and he above all fails to analyse the overall structural effect on social reproduction which has to go hand in hand with the change of a maternal to a paternal descent line.<sup>10</sup> Engels says "The overthrow of mother right was the world historic defeat of the female sex" (p.68). Couldn't it also have been the defeat of the male sex? In fact it has brought alienation and structurally imbedded social violence with it.

In Engels' earlier small pamphlet on "The contribution of labour to the transformation of the ape into human being" his one sided concept of work becomes strikingly clear. There "work" is equal to the "development of the hand" and this again to the "starting dominance over nature". "Work starts with the manufacturing of tools". The oldest tools are "tools for hunting... at the same time weapons" (1970, p.70 & 73, Translation V.B.-Th).

This truly instrumentalist concept of work failed to include one important dimension of the transformation from animal to human being, namely the conscious appropriation of human nature, the conscious acting upon



the human body. The knowledge about procreation and birth, the menstrual cycle and pregnancy, the relationship between the human body and outside nature (stars, plants) however, has to be acquired. It consists of female knowledge and skills, especially in midwifery and healing, and in general a knowledge which also contributes to the organization of kinship and stockpiling (see E.Reed, 1975, L.H.Morgan,1891).

For Engels this aspect of human labour however, remains totally unconscious nature; for him the size of population depends wholly on the conditions of outside nature and the mode of production in the sense of the amount of food to be produced. This assumption owes itself to the patriarchal approach of the natural sciences in the 19th century according to which the knowledge on human physiology and birth control belongs only to the modern era. However, new research in women's studies points again to the fact that it was exactly in the European 17th, 18th and 19th centuries when a knowledge of contraception and birth control did not exist, whereas, non-European people during these periods continued to have this knowledge which also must have existed in Europe before the beginning of the modern times. (E.Leacock, 1977; E.Fisher, 1979: 203-205; G. Becker et al, 1980; L.Gordon 1977; C.Honegger 1979; E. Heinsohn et al, 1979).

As soon as Engels enters into the history of class societies, he forgets finally, the relationship between the social division of labour and the development of all other social institutions (for Engels that means between the kinship system and the social production) as if social classes had nothing to do with patriarchal hierarchy. To the contrary it seems quite evident that there exists a connection, not only, as far as the emergence of class societies is concerned, but an overall structural relationship up to the present as well.<sup>11</sup>

The fact that neither Engels nor the other evolutionist authors succeed in including the sexual division of labour into their analyses is due to their perception of the historical situation they themselves are living in (see Martin and Voorhies 1975: 145-155).<sup>12</sup> In the analysis of capital or the analysis of the modern society respectively the specifically female working-capacity has been ignored and because of this distorted view of the contemporary situation the authors have also been unable to see the historical connections. Here a historical materialist principle applied to those who have created it becomes true, namely that the anatomy of the human being contains the key to the anatomy of the ape. That means to the extent to which the human anatomy has been ignored, also the anatomy of the ape cannot be explored.

My introductory methodological remarks should be understood in this sense, namely that we first have to explore the character of the sexual division of labour in our contemporary society in order to be able to understanding its general, anthropological, historical and ethnological dimensions.

#### 4. A Few Theses on the Sexual Division of Labour in Present Capitalism

In capitalist society, human relationship to nature is determined by the separation of the social production into two fundamental areas, which is subsistence production and production of commodities. By subsistence production we understand all the production for immediate survival which is the manufacturing of basic food for direct consumption, clothing, housing and so on, in short, what we now call basic needs.

In all prior modes of production, subsistence production was at the same time social production, and

vice versa. Only capitalism gives the impression that production can be independent from its basic purpose, namely the reproduction of life. Two parallel processes are at the basis of this false impression of independence. First, the subordination of subsistence production to the production of commodities through secondly, its privatisation and through this, its social invisibility. The exclusive use of concepts like 'production' and 'labour' for the production of commodities especially in the core of the World Capitalist System, in Marxist as well as in so-called bourgeois theories, show how far the process towards invisibility, the attempt to forget, to overlook, and to deny subsistence production has succeeded. Today, it therefore becomes necessary to stress over and over again, that subsistence production does not disappear, but it rather has changed only its character.

When we look at the different steps of this transformation in the last decades, then we can notice the difference between core and periphery, and the so-called First and Second Worlds on the one hand and Third World on the other. The results nevertheless are always becoming more similar. In the Third World, there exists alongside the subsistence production in the cities, (which is done as in the core mainly by women, housewives and maids), the peasant subsistence production in the countryside. Here men and women as well, produce a large amount of their means of subsistence, that is food, housing and clothing, within the peasant household itself. However, this production for their own consumption has existed for a long time already in combination with the production of commodities. Besides the combinations of wage work and subsistence crops, we can find another nearly classical form which consists in the combination of cash crops and subsistence crops.<sup>13</sup>

For nearly one decade however, there can be observed a steady decrease of the subsistence crop because of a process which has been considerably accelerated by development programmes, with credit provision to small farmers (see Bennholdt-Thomsen, 1980, Payer, 1979, Dunham, 1982). This process is accompanied by a growing tendency in the sexual division of labour towards men doing and controlling the paid and monetarised part of the peasant economies, whereas women are doing the unpaid jobs (see B.Rogers, 1980). In other words, the modern housewife emerges also within the peasant household.

Subsistence production however, does not disappear with this process, but it has changed its character: what is disappearing, is the substance of the production, raw materials for food, for textiles, and materials for house construction. All this must be acquired as commodities in an ever growing amount. The preparation of food, clothing and housing for immediate consumption becomes almost exclusively women's work and starts to be a daily time-consuming, but nevertheless unimportant and invisible additional work. The peasants themselves do not disappear, they on the contrary, are at the disposal of agribusiness where they remain as dependent producers of commodities.

The present situation of the sexual division of labour has taken, on a world-wide scale, the following shape. In the capitalism of the core, the subsistence producers are nearly exclusively women, whereas in earlier periods, all immediate producers were at the same time subsistence producers. In the periphery, the degree in which food is no more the immediate aim of peasant production (disappearing because of the dependency on credit) the housewife also emerges even in the peasant sector.

Because of the social production being split up and ascription of subsistence being given to women, the sexual division of labour receives a fundamentally new (up to now unknown) character, which is that the sex becomes the structuring element of the social division of labour.

Even more to the point, I would say that in modern society, the sexual division of labour is not part of the social division of labour, rather the social division of labour is in itself sexual.

Within the framework of a materialist approach, social division of labour means the division of social production in great partitions, such as agriculture, industry and commerce. Furthermore, there is a division into different classes, that is generally spoken of producing and merely consuming classes, and finally the division into the different branches, such as the textile industry, food or steel industries, which need different techniques, skills and knowledge. In comparison to this concept, the division into subsistence production and production of commodities is a more general and also a more fundamental one, because it includes the different aspects of this general definition; therefore it is a social division of labour in a more proper sense.<sup>14</sup> My thesis that sex becomes the structuring element of the social division of labour must appear plausible when the division into subsistence and commodity production and their respective ascription to male and female has been acknowledged. It then has to be clarified as to whether or not this principle applied to earlier forms of the sexual division of labour as well, i.e., if it is really historically as new as I maintain.

The specificity of the present form on the contrary becomes even clearer when we compare it with other historical forms. This applies even to the extreme separation of the sexes in some ethnic groups of Malaysia

and South America as described earlier, or to the sexual parallelism of the Inca. In these cases there exist nearly two societies, a male and a female one. However, they may be separated from each other or combined in a parallel form, but men and women are nevertheless doing nearly the same. They provide for their own food, for separate housing, have separate property, sex specific rights and different political organisations. Compared to this, men and women in our present society are intimately linked because they need each other, as there exists no commodity production without subsistence production and vice versa.

Seen from a social point of view however, men and women are much more distant from each other than ever before, because their occupations are divided into a hierarchy. Yet the hierarchy is impenetrable because the male ranking system is not open to women and they do not have a ranking of their own. We generally call this fact 'asymmetric' but I think this term is much too weak for what it really defines. The hierarchical relationship exists only in a negative way for women in the following sense. Men form society, women are non-society. Men are true human beings, women are not human beings, or to put it in another form, men are the true men, women are no men. Women are strangers in their own society. Male labour is socially visible, female labour invisible. In short, women are no social persons. This is due both to the transformation of subsistence production from being a social production in earlier periods now being a private production, as well as exclusive ascription to women and the assignment of one single female producer to one man.

In the European middle-ages, this was again different. We therefore, cannot call sexual the social division of labour of that time. It is true that most branches were

divided into male and female occupations. For example all phases of textile production were women's work, as well as the brewing of beer, dairy work, the rearing of pigs and hens and a great deal of field work. However, men as well as women, had to give their special sexually defined services to the estate, and later when cities arose, men and women were equally artisans, though also separated according to the different types of handicraft. There did exist female guilds, but also the mistress who only as a widow was allowed to do the handicraft profession independently. In the middle ages, however, there were no equal rights for men and women; on the contrary, men had the law on their side. Nevertheless, the hierarchy which excludes women from society did not exist, because they both did socially equal, and equally recognised work. Quite contrary to the well-known thesis of the growing access of women to all social spheres in modern society, the limitation of socially recognised female professional work has not stopped with the industrial revolution. It actually begins in its massive form only in this period and this becomes even clearer when we compare it to the middle ages. (See Wolf-Graaf, 1981, pp.11, 292-396). A crucial event for the loss of social personality seems to have been the loss for women of the control of the birthing process, which was then violently forced upon them. Their position becomes always weaker in the degree to which former typical female occupations are no longer organised separately under the control of women (e.g. female guilds, midwives).

A thesis which has already emerged when talking about the strict separation of the sexes or the sexual parallelisms, becomes even more complete now: namely that the loss of society which women suffer with industrial capitalist development is not primarily a loss of parti-

cipation in male society, but rather a loss and a destruction of female society in the separation of women from each other without becoming part of the male society.

How can women's work under capitalism be determined? The characterisation of the double freedom for the wage worker, which is to be free from the ownership of the means of production and free to sell his labour power, is obviously not far reaching enough for women's work. Because women in our contemporary society are not primarily defined as bearers of labour power which they would then be free to sell as a commodity, but rather they represent with their whole persons a capacity to work, which is dealt with as a natural resource for the reproduction of others. This characterisation relates to the caste situation mentioned above, namely the fact that by birth they are ascribed sexually determined, specific tasks. The mechanism of this ascription can be compared to the feudal attachment of the bonded labourer to the soil, since women are similarly attached to their ability to give birth, i.e. to their interns, and bonded by means of this.<sup>15</sup> And it is only on the basis that female labour becomes a commodity, but even then she remains marked in the sense of not being the master of herself.

At this point, the objection usually made is that the housewife relationship is a pre-capitalist remnant, and that the generalisation of wage work and the way of transforming housework into so-called social work has not yet been accomplished, but that the growing external production of consumer goods in the factories and the mechanisation of the household itself, are already pointing in this direction. This argument is strongly opposed by three important historical facts, namely:



1. The historical development of housewife production itself. It is a result of industrial capitalism, because it has never existed in this form before.
2. By the turn of the 19th century, it was supposed that housework would soon become superfluous because of mechanisation and external production, but in reality it has nevertheless not reduced since then. Tasks which in fact have been omitted have been replaced by even more time consuming activities (B.Ehrenreich and D.English 1975).<sup>16</sup> Especially the exigencies concerning cleanliness and time consumed by looking after small children, have been enormously augmented. One of the most enervating and energy consuming tasks of mothers of little children is to protect them from the dangers of the mechanised and chemicalised environment both in the home and the general environment.
3. As an analysis of the relations of production in the Third World shows, not only women's work but also a variety of other male and female labour relations are not involved in the generalisation of wage work. Rather, the contrary is true. We can observe an institutionalisation of non-wage forms all over the world.

We can finally sum up, that neither housewife production can be called pre-capitalist nor can the sexual division of labour, which is based on the housewife, be called a historical remnant or even the dominant form throughout the history of humankind. It genuinely belongs to this mode of production.

My reasoning results in a thesis with which I want to close at this point.

Both forms of work, the free labour force as well as the labour force bonded by the specifically female

capacity of work belong together and are building the basis of all capitalist relations of production. The analysis of both forms together, however, cannot consist in merely adding to the existing body of knowledge the part which female labour plays, and which was lacking. We rather have to be aware that there are more further-reaching theoretical consequences to be considered such as the reconceptualisation of the labour force as a commodity, the concepts of social class and stratification, as well as the reconceptualisation of exploitation and accumulation. This surely will be no easy enterprise. I think however, that the crucial point of reference will have been discovered when we recognise the sexual division of labour to be the turning point of all social activities, and the institutions based on them, because the sexual division of labour in capitalism is not a social one, but the social division of labour is a sexual one.

NOTES

1. The low payment of women, respectively their employment in lowly valued occupations are legitimized as being only an additional income to the wage of a husband, or as being only unskilled and temporarily limited work of young women (e.g. in world market factories), who because of their later marriage need no higher training.
2. The findings of Margaret Mead are especially illustrating for these questions. She compares 7 ethnic groups of the South Pacific region according to the shape and expressions the bodies of men and women on the basis of a certain sexual division of labour have acquired. She shows how the tasks performed and the approach towards work mould the male and female physic.
3. Murdock shows a list of 46 activities according to whether they are predominately performed by men or women. The data stem from a research focusing on other questions and therefore cannot yield further reaching conclusions. The list includes 224 "tribes". Bearing heavy loads is an exclusively male activity in 12 cases, exclusively female, however, in 57 cases; it is dominantly male in 6 and dominantly female in 20 cases, and equally done by both sexes in 33 cases.  
Also Malinowski points to the fact that women in so-called primitive societies do more and harder work than the men. This knowledge, however, does not disturb his biological assumptions at all as he immediately proceeds saying "Heavy work ought naturally to be performed by men; here the contrary obtains". (Malinowski quoted according to Rogers 1980 p.15).

4. The fact that long distances have to be overcome while gathering is even used by Friedl as an argument why in most gathering societies population growth is so low (Friedl, 1975, p.16-17).
5. In Mbuti-pygmy societies the sexual division of labour barely exists e.g. men and women care for babies and small children equally. Seen from our perspective we could say they try to minimise the difference.
6. Critiques on Tiger (1969) from a feminist perspective can be found in Reed (1970) and in Martin and Voorhies (1975, p. 162-177). Other authors with similar social biologist assumptions as Tiger are E.P. Wilson; Robin Fox, R. Ardrey; D. Morris and many others. A comprehensive critique of social biology is given by P.A. Green (1981).
7. In Mundruku society the sexes are physically and socially nearly totally separated from each other. In Malekula society each village is divided into two halves, the male and the female one. Men and women live in separate houses and seldom see each other. (Baumann 1980, p.346). This striking antagonism between the sexes in Leacock's eyes is already a reaction to the coming of the patriarchal system which appears with colonialism. Similar interpretations can be found concerning the Amazones, as a warriorlike and/or sex antagonistic behaviour seems to be akin to matriarchal societies, appearing only as an answer to attacks.
8. "According to the materialist conception, the determining factor in history is, in the last resort, production and reproduction of immediate life. But this itself is of a two-fold character. On the one hand, the production of the means of subsistence, of food, clothing and shelter and

the tools requisite therefore; on the other hand, reproduction of human beings themselves, reproduction of the species. The social institutions under which men of a definite historical epoch and of a definite country live, are conditioned by both kinds of production: by the stage of development of labour, on the one hand, and the family, on the other." (Engels, *The Origin of the Family...*, preface to the first edition 1884, 1972: p.25-26) Engels starts calling remultiplication of the species "production". He then, however, changes his approach immediately and doesn't consider it as work and puts it into the category of superstructure.

9. The private property according to Engels emerges out of social wealth which is due to favourable natural conditions like climate, growth of plants, multiplication of herds. Nothing seems more normal and understandable to Engels than the desire (here of the male herd owners) to appropriate the surplus individually and to fix it as private property by means of inheritance to his own biological children. Also Sacks criticises the approach by stating that persons do not spontaneously produce surplus as Engels implies. She too believes that first a power structure must exist which forces upon people to produce more than they need (Sacks, 1975). Social wealth which becomes a surplus to be appropriated does not emerge out of natural conditions but presupposes an existing power relationship. Following the findings of Martin and Voorhies, Engels sequential pattern of higher productivity, social wealth, private appropriation and paternal inheritance has rather to be inverted. Also the importance of private property as a prime mover

in human history seems to be far over estimated. Martin and Voorhies on the contrary show how matrilineal horticultural societies typically don't produce surplus but provide only for as much food as needed by their own clan group (1975. p.234).

10. Existing ethnographic material shows that Engels has by far overstressed the importance of maternal and paternal descent, as the same lines of descent can be combined with totally different social institutions. It, however, seems more appropriate to analyse the sexual character of a given society according to a multitude of elements and not only or primarily the form of descent. Different tasks performed by men and women will on the contrary have to play a major role. What seems especially to be lacking in Engels analysis is the connection between a change in the order of descent and the change of the persons attitude towards their products namely the process of alienation when the products rise as strange and forceful powers against their producers. It, however, seems evident that the process of objectification and alienation of human relations is related to the fact whether the children belong to the mother or to the father. As in true patriarchal societies the products are no more subordinate to the persons but the persons are subordinate to the products. To this same line of argument can be added Morgans (1877) proof that the change from a maternal to a paternal descent in an evolutionary perspective means that the persons do not belong anymore to human beings but to a given territory. Beyond his remark "the sale of his children by the father - such was the first fruit of father right and monogamy!" (Engles, 1972, p.111) Engels seems indeed unable

to analyse the process of alienation which is included in this fact and which becomes an intrinsic part of the social structures thereafter. He is unable to do so because his concept of work uncritically includes alienation.

11. Exactly this aspect, namely the "perverting influence" which the inequality between the sexes imposes on all institutions of society has been stated by Engels' contemporary, the liberal bourgeois writer John Stewart Mill in his pamphlet "The Subjection of Women" published in 1869.
12. This critique does not only apply to the evolutionists. Oakley tries to find out how far within the writings about crucial topics in sociology the sexual differences have been acknowledged. Superfluous to say that the result has been extremely negative. (See Oakley, *The Sociology of Housework* 1974).
13. At present production in the Third World can be divided into two types of subsistence crop and wage work on the one hand and subsistence crop and cash crop on the other, including their possible mixtures. That means besides regions which dominantly show one or another form - e.g. subsistence crop and migrant work in the southern part of Africa and subsistence crop and cash crop in Mexico, Columbia and the Andean region - we can throughout the world find both types also combined with each other, subsistence crop cash crop and wage work.
14. Even when we would use Durkheim's concept of social division of labour namely the division between the different social fields of work and institutions like politics, economics, administration, etc. the same principle would, however, apply as subsis-

tence production and commodity production also divide and include these fields.

15. The following determination of slave work and serfdom by Marx, applies equally to women's housework in capitalism: "It is not the unity of living and active humanity with the natural, inorganic conditions of their metabolic exchange with nature, and hence their appropriation of nature, which requires explanation or is the result of a historic process, but rather the separation between these inorganic conditions of human existence and this active existence, a separation which is completely posited only in the relation of wage labour and capital. In the relations of slavery and serfdom this separation is treated by the other as itself merely and inorganic and natural condition of its own reproduction. The slave stands in no relation whatsoever to the objective conditions of his labour; rather, labour itself, both in the form of the slave and in that of the serf, is classified as an inorganic condition of production along with other natural beings, such as cattle, as an accessory of the earth. In other words: the original conditions of production appear as natural presuppositions, natural conditions of the producers existence just as his living body, even though he reproduces and develops it is originally not posited by himself, but appears as the presupposition of his self; his own (bodily) being is a natural presupposition, which he has not posited." (Marx, Grundrisse, 1974, p.489-90).
16. A common argument against the characterisation of all women as predominantly housewives says that class differences have not been acknowledged



which exists as women of the upper strata leave the housework to servants. The economist John Kenneth Galbraith, however, gives a good empirical answer to this problem in "Economics and Public Purpose", (Boston, 1973): "With higher income the volume and diversity of consumption increase and herewith the number and complexity of the tasks associated with the household, childrens education and entertainment, clothing, social life, and other forms of consumption becomes an increasingly complex and demanding affair. In consequence, and paradoxically, the manual role of the women becomes more arduous the higher the family income, save for the small fraction who still have paid servants". (quoted in E. Lloyd 1975 p.6).

Literature

Baumann, Hermann

- 1980 Das Doppelte Geschlecht, Ethnologische Studien zur Bisexualität in Ritus und Mythos, Berlin.

Becker, Gabriele; Silvia Bovenschen; Helmut Brackert et al

- 1980 Aus der Zeit der Verzweiflung, edition suhrkamp, Frankfurt.a.M.

Benitez, Fernando

- 1972 Los Indios de México, vol 1, Biblioteca ERA, México DF.

Benholdt-Thomsen, Veronika

- 1980 Investition in die Armen. Zur Entwicklungspolitik der Weltbank, in : Lateinamerika, Analysen und Berichte 4:74-96, Berlin.

Bock, Gisela and Barbara Duden

- 1977 Arbeit aus Liebe - Liebe als Arbeit. Zur Entstehung der Hausarbeit im Kapitalismus, in: Frauen und Wissenschaft. Beiträge zur Berliner Sommeruniversität für Frauen, Juli 1976, Courage Verlag, Berlin, pp.118-199.

Boserup, Ester

- 1979 Women's role in Economic Development. London

Buckley, Mary

- 1981 Women in the Soviet Union, in: Feminist Review 8: 79-106.

Dunham, David

- 1982 On the History and Political Economy of  
Small-Farmer Policy, in : CEPAL Review,  
August 1982.

Durkheim, Emile

- (1983) The Division of Labour in Society,  
1968 New York.

Ehrenreich, Barbara und Deirdre English

- 1975 The Manufacture of Housework, in: Socialist  
Revolution 26: 5-40.

Engels, Friedrich

- 1970 Anteil der Arbeit an der Menschwerdung des  
Affen, Marx/Engels, Ausgewählte Schriften  
II, Dietz Verlag Berlin, S. 68-79.

Engels, Friedrich

- 1972 The Origin of the Family, Private Property  
and the State, Pathfinder Press, New York.

Etienne, M. und Eleanor Leacock (eds.)

- 1980 Women and Colonization, Anthropological  
Perspectives, New York, Praeger.

Fiedl, Ernestine

- 1975 Women and Men: an anthropologist's view,  
New York

Gerhard, Ute

- 1978 Verhältnisse und Verhinderungen. Frauen-  
arbeit, Familie und Recht der Frauen im 19.  
Jahrhundert, Frankfurt a.M.

Gordon, Linda

1977 Woman's Body, Woman's Right, Penguin Books.

Green, Phillip

1981 The Pursuit of Inequality, Oxford.

Heinsohn, Gunnar; Rolf Knieper; Otto Steiger

1979 Menschenproduktion, Allgemeine Bevölkerungslehre der Neuzeit, edition suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M.

Hausen, Karin

1976 Die Polarisierung der "Geschlechtscharaktere" - Eine Spiegelung der Dissoziation von Erwerbs- und Familienleben, in: Werner Conze (Hg.): Sozialgeschichte der Familie in der Neuzeit Europas, Industrielle Welt, 21, Stuttgart, pp.363-393.

Heinrichs, Hans-Jürgen (ed.)

1975 Materialien zu Bachofens "Das Mutterrecht", Suhrkamp Taschenbuch, Frankfurt a.M.

Honegger, Claudia (ed.)

1979 Die Hexen der Neuzeit, edition suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M.

Joosten, Andrea

1980 Mann, Marx spricht nicht über Hausarbeit, AHDE-Verlag, Berlin.

Kittler, Gertraude

1980 Hausarbeit, zur Geschichte einer "Natur-Ressource", München, Verlag Frauenoffensive

Kontos, Silvia

- 1979 Die Partei kämpft wie ein Mann, Verlag  
Roter Stern, Frankfurt a.M.

Kontos, Silvia and Karin Walser

- 1978 Überlegungen zu einer feministischen Theorie  
der Hausarbeit, in: alternative, Heft  
120/21: 152-159.

Leacock, Eleanor

- 1977 Women in Egalitarian Societies, in: Briden-  
thal, R. und C. Koonz (ed.), in: Women In  
European History, Boston, pp.11-35.

Lefèbvre, Henri

- 1966 Der Dialektische Materialismus, edition  
suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M.

Leukert, Roswitha

- 1976 Weibliche Sinnlichkeit. Diplomarbeit,  
Universität Frankfurt.

Lloyd, Cynthia B.

- 1975 The Division of Labor between the Sexes,  
in: (ed.) Sex, Discrimination and the  
Division of Labor, Columbia University Press,  
New York, pp.1-24.

Loufti, Martha

- 1980 Northern Women and the New International  
Economic Order, UNDP Division of Information.

Malinowski, Bronislw

- 1932 The Sexual Life of Savages, London.

- Martin, M. Kay and Barbara Voorhies  
1975 Female of the Species, Columbia University Press, New York.
- Marx, Karl  
(1844) Pariser Manuskripte, Rowohlt, S. 209-210.  
1966  
  
1974 Grundrisse, Foundation of the Critique of Political Economy, Penguin Books.  
  
1974 Kapital I, Lawrence and Wishart, London.
- Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels  
1971 Die deutsche Ideologie, Frankfurt a.M.
- Mead, Margaret  
1978 Male and Female; a Study of the Sexes in a Changing World, Penguin Books.
- Mies, Maria  
1981 The Social Origins of the Sexual Division of Labour, I.S.S. Occasional Papers, No. 85, The Hague.
- Mill, John Stuart  
1869 The Subjection of Women, Sue Mansfield (ed.) Crofts Classics, Arlington Heights, Ill.  
1980.
- Morgan, Lewis Henry  
1877 Ancient Society or Researches in the lines of Human Progress from Slavery, through Barbarism to Civilization, London.

Moroney, J.R.

- 1979 Do Women Earn Less Under Capitalism, in:  
The Economic Journal, Vol. 89, No. 355:  
601-613.

Murdock, G.P.

- 1937 Comparative Data on the Division of Labour  
by Sex, in: Social Forces, Vol. 15, No. 4:  
551-553.

Murphy, Yolanda and Robert F. Murphy

- 1974 Women of the Forest, New York.

Oakley, Ann

- 1974 The Sociology of Housework, London.

Payer, Cheryl

- 1979 The World Bank and the Small Farmer, Rome  
Declaration Group, Zürich/Rome.

Reed, Evelyn

- 1975 Women's Evolution from Matriarchal Clan to  
Patriarchal Family, Pathfinder Press, New  
York.  
1978 Lionel Tiger's 'Men in Groups'. Self  
Portrait of a Woman Hater, in:- Sexism  
and Science, New York.

Reiter, Rayna R. (ed.)

- 1975 Toward an Anthropology of Women, New York  
and London: Monthly Review Press.  
1977 The Search for Origins: Unraveling the Threads  
of Gender Hierarchy, in: Critique of An-  
thropology 3, 3-10:5-24.

Rogers, Barbara

- 1980 The Domestication of Women. Discrimination  
in Developing Societies, London.

Sacks, Karen

- 1975 Engels Revisited: Women, the Organisation  
of Production, and Private Property, in:  
R. Reiter (ed.) 1975, pp.211-234.

Schmidt, Alfred

- 1962 Der Begriff der Natur in der Lehre von  
Karl Marx, EVA, Frankfurt a.M.

Silverblatt, Irene

- 1980 The Universe turned Inside Out.....There is  
no Justice for us here: Andean Women under  
Spanish Rule, in Etienne, M. und E. Leacock  
(Hg.), pp.149-185.

Tiger, Lionel

- 1969 Men in Groups, New York.

Turnbull, Colin

- 1965 Wayward Servants, London.

Wallerstein, Immanuel

- 1975 The Rise and Future Demise of the World  
Capitalist System. Concepts for Comparative  
Analysis, in: Comparative Studies in Society  
and History, Vol. 16, No. 4, pp.387-415.

Webster, Paula

- 1975 Matriarchy: a Vision of Power, in: Reiter,  
R.R. (ed.), pp.141-156.



Werlhof, Claudia v.

- 1981 Frauen und Dritte Welt als "Natur" des Kapitals oder: Ökonomie auf die Füße gestellt, in: Dauber, Heinrich und Verena Simpfendörfer, Eigenar Haushalt und bewohnter Erdkreis, Peter Hammer Verlag, Wuppertal, pp.187-215.

Wolf-Graaf, Anke

- 1981 Frauenarbeit im Abseits. Frauenbewegung und weibliches Arbeitsvermögen, Frauen-offensive, München,



Working Papers published so far:

Sub-Series on Money, Finance and Development

- No. 1 - Karel Jansen, 'An Introduction to the Research Programme of the Institute of Social Studies' (November 1982)
- No. 2 - Fernando Tenjo Galarza, 'Accumulation and the Financial Sector in Colombia (1970-1979): An Interpretation' (December 1982)
- No. 3 - E.V.K. FitzGerald, 'Aspects of Finance Capital in Latin America' (December 1982)
- No. 4 - Willem van der Geest, 'International Economic Models as Particular Views on Third World Economic Development' (December 1982)
- No. 5 - Rosalia Cortes, 'Agrarian Structures, Food Prices and Real Wages' (December 1982)
- No. 6 - Karel Jansen and Joan Verloren van Themaat, 'Recession and Adjustment in the Developing Countries. International and National Responses to the Economic Crises of the 1970s' (December 1982)
- No. 7 - William Darity, Jr. and E.V.K. FitzGerald, 'A Kalecki-Keynes Model of World Trade, Finance, and Economic Development' (December 1982)

General Series

- No. 1 - Kurt Martin, 'Agrarian Reforms and Intersectoral Relations: A Summary' (December 1982)
- No. 2 - Steven J. Keuning, 'Distributive Aspects of Indonesian Agriculture' (December 1982)
- No. 3 - Steven J. Keuning, 'The Distribution of Profits in Indonesia' (December 1982)
- No. 4 - Bert Helmsing, 'Agriculture and Industry in a Regional Perspective' (December 1982)
- No. 5 - Mike Douglass, 'From Peasant to Migrant Worker: Regional Perspective from the Central Plains of Thailand' (January 1983)
- No. 6 - Ben White, '"Agricultural Involution" and its Critics: Twenty Years After Clifford Geertz' (February 1983)
- No. 7 - Jan J.P. van Heemst, 'National Accounting and Subsistence Activities in Developing Countries: A Review of Some Major Issues' (March 1983)
- No. 8 - Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, 'The Sexual Division of Labour in Capitalism' (March 1983)

Single copies of the Working Papers are available free of charge from the Publications Office at the Institute of Social Studies.

