

III Gender acquisition

If gender isn't rooted in biology, how do we get it? First of all, as Jane Fishburne Collier remarks in *From Duty to Desire: Remaking Families in a Spanish Village*, "to understand gender, we must understand social inequality. And, if gender conceptions are idioms for interpreting and manipulating social inequality, then we should expect notions of femininity and masculinity to change when one organization of inequality gives way to another."¹ Collier is writing here about 20th-century rural Spain, but similar dynamics took place in UK or US in the 19th century when the transition from an agrarian society – what Ehrenreich and English call the "Old Order" – to the modern industrial society.

Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English write that the shift in the subsistence base was accompanied by a shift in the idiom in which people understood inequality – *haves* and *have-nots* – and also gender, sexuality, marriage etc. They frame the discussion of the shift in gender ideologies with a shift from agrarianism to market capitalism in the 19th-century England and America as "The Woman Question".



- How would you phrase "The Woman Question"?
- What are women to do/ what are women good for, when *wage labour* actually reformulated the way in which people thought about work?

The fact is that wage labour is different from all previous labour relations. Until this type of relationship, products of labour could be sold, labourers could be sold (slaves, indentured servants), but not labour itself. Wage labour infers the idea that somebody can buy a human being's labour for a given duration of time but also the idea that a worker is free to sell his own labour. The direct implication is that a person owns his/her labour force/productive capacity as if it were a property of any other kind and thus can sell it for wages.

This view is opposed to the vision of a person as a "dependent" who is not free to dispose of his/her labour because he/she is dependent on the support of another person (such as indentured servants, apprentices, tenants, farmers, slaves – and, in the 19th century, women, who legally "belonged" to fathers and husbands in classical patriarchy).



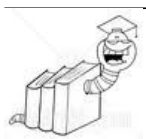
What did wage labour system do that was so significant for how we think about social relations?

¹ Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1997, p. 101.

1. Wage labour introduced the notion that labour is “worth” something – some labours are *worth* more than others – and that we deserve what one have because we earned it or achieved a certain status. If we are not successful, it is our fault because we do not have what it takes to gain success.
2. Wage labour introduced the division between *paid* and *unpaid* work, denoting the qualitative difference between the work done in the household and the work done in the market (unlike the lack of such a difference in the agrarian system). This difference is significant because the kind of work that does not earn wages suddenly became *worth-less*.

Today, there is a tendency to see and accept a symbolic and structural separation between/within different kinds of labour in the market society:

- 1) PRODUCTIVE LABOUR – in the market economy, performing the kind of work that generates wages/ income. This might be equated with the purchasing power to meet basic needs or more than that and it also implies commercial transactions within the market society.
- 2) REPRODUCTIVE LABOUR– making and raising babies. The physical and emotional labour of takecaring and nurturing, of socializing good citizens and future workers and members of ethnic/religious communities.
- 3) “KINWORK” and “COMMUNITY WORK” – maintaining kin networks through sharing work and resources; also writing letters, arranging family events and parties, offering emotional support, etc. This behaviour extends into community, mainly under the form of church and community activism (including party politics).



“And am I wrong to think that my obsessions with family relations started right there in the lifeboat? Didn't my mother quiz me on uncles and aunts and cousins, too? She never quizzed my brother, because he was in charge of snow shovels and tractors, whereas I was supposed to provide the feminine glue that keeps families together, writing thank-you notes and remembering everybody's birthdays and name days.”

From the novel *Middlesex* by Jeffrey Eugenides, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2002, p. 72 (The Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2003)

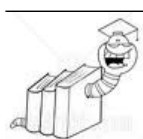
- 4) WORK OF STATUS ENHANCEMENT – especially connected with middle classes. It promotes social worth and prestige of families and husbands. Raising well-adjusted children to become smart consumers. Here, we deal especially with stay-at-home moms taht have become a symbol of middle-upper class status.

It is quite easy to think of a separation line between type of labour 1 and types of labour 2 – 4 and also view it as “natural” or “logical”:

			
Domestic	Private	Unpaid	Love
	Public	Paid	Money

Family Reproduction Women	Co-workers/boss/employees Production Men
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As activities move from the domestic to the public sphere, they acquire an exchange-value and can shift from women's to men's work (for example, chefs in the field of productive labour once completely dedicated to women). However, these separations, dualisms are not "natural", old and inevitable. Most of the apparent separation of the public/private spheres is quite recent, at least when it comes to the qualitative difference of specific types of labour. This is the framework within which "The Woman Question" emerged in the 19th century. Yet, apart from the fact that women were forced to abandon a traditional way of life, "The Woman Question" encompasses a series of other problems that Collier's thesis pins down:



"To understand conception of gender, we cannot look at what men and women are or do, but rather must ask what people want, what privileges they seek to claim, rationalize and defend. To understand gender, we must understand social inequality. And if gender conceptions are idioms for interpreting and manipulating social inequality, then we should expect notions of femininity and masculinity to change when one organization of inequality gives way to another."

From "Mary to Modern Woman: The Material Basis of Marianismo and Its Transformation in a Spanish Village" by Jane F. Collier, in *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Feb., 1986), pp.

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