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Sexual and Social Reproduction

In “Family and Class in Contemporary America: Notes Toward an Understanding of Ideology”¹ Rayna Rapp enters in a dialogue with Jane Collier², Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English³ but while Collier and Ehrenreich & English are concerned with how *gender ideology* changes with economic transformation, Rapp is doing something different: she is looking at the *gaps* between the ideologies of capitalism and way in which capitalism actually works.



What are the ideologies of capitalism?

Rapp tackles the notion of success and points out that it is not all about achievement. Ascribed status as well as inheritance are still relevant issues in this field. This brings up the question of *the role of family* in modern society. Rapp addresses this matter by first distinguishing between family and household:

FAMILY	HOUSEHOLDS
- relatives by birth or marriage; - “the normative, correct way in which people get recruited into households”; -	- “entities in which people actually live”; - “the empirically measurable units within which people pool resources and perform certain tasks”; - “the basic units in which labour power is reproduced and maintained”;
➤ provides opportunities (through marriage, mostly) for reproducing and also crossing class lines and gaining access into households with higher or lower status, with more or less resources (e.g. “to marry up/down”)	➤ fundamental to wage labour economy.



Why is marriage especially important for women?

¹ In *Rethinking the Family: Some Feminist Questions*. Edited by Barrie Thorne and Marilyn Yalom. New York, NY: Longman, 1982, pp. 25-39.

² “From Mary to Modern Woman.” *American Ethnologist* 13, no. 1 (1986): 100-107.

³ “Introduction: The Romantic Solution.” In *For Her Own Good: 150 Years of Experts' Advice to Women*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1978, pp. 1-29.

Frederich Engels noted these things in the 19th century and argued that for modern middle-class women, marriage is a relationship of slavery, “the crassest prostitution”. In his view, the marital ideal under capitalism infers that:

- women serve men (sexually as well as domestically) in return for having their material needs satisfied;
- marriage is a relationship of economic exploitation within which the husband represents the bourgeoisie and the wife, the proletariat.

The problem is that people do not see themselves engaged in such an exploitive assembly when they are married.



Which are the reasons women give to justify their “domestic services”?

Rapp agrees with Ehrenreich & English when she lists several of the most common arguments women give when they explain why they do what they do at home:

- ✓ because they love their husbands and kids;
- ✓ because they take pride in their home (and in their well-performed role);
- ✓ because it is their “destiny”.

Of course, one can hardly find women who are willing to admit that their labour is exploited and they live under conditions of oppression and that is precisely because of the ideological separation between the *public* and the *private* spheres and the ensuing dichotomies: work/household and for money/for love.

Friederich Engels considers that economic and sexual exploitation of women is concealed by the ideology of romantic love, which presents marriage for love as achieved status) and by the description of women’s domestic and sexual labour as wifely and maternal duties and not exactly as “work”.



After all, what does “home” signify, symbolize in the modern world?

Conventionally, home is described as the place where love rules. Under modern ideology of gender and family, domestic labour is one way in which women have expressed their love. This ideology is what Ehrenreich & English call “the romantic solution”, an explanation buttressed by so-called scientific “experts” who have found in women’s psyche and biology reasons to justify her oppression: intellectual limitation, emotional frailty, and physical debility. All these specific drawbacks of femininity, they’ve said, explain why they should be kept (if ideally possible) out of the mean and cruel market and shelter them in the protective cocoon of home.

Like all ideologies, this story masks a very different reality:

A) CLASS DIFFERENCE

Working class women did not enjoy the luxury of staying home. Their body and psyche were different from those of upper-class women but this evidence was not brought into the depiction of the so-called *woman’s nature* which has continued to be theorized according to the middle-class norm.

B) DOMESTIC/PUBLIC SPHERES ARE CONSTRUCTS

What people do for love or for money are not such dissimilar things as we like to believe. As Rapp demonstrates, this division is nothing else than an illusion. Domestic versus Work is a false opposition since domestic labour has been a crucial aspect of capitalist economy.



In what sense was domestic labour a fundamental trait of capitalism?



WHAT ABOUT MY WORK AT HOME?

Beyond unpaid domestic labour, any household is a site of informal economy involving money lending, coupon-cutting, leaving the kids with relatives or neighbours during emergency, etc. Such instances are not outside capitalist production; on the contrary, they are fully integral of capitalism and is crucial to the reproduction of the labour power of employees.



“It is women who bridge the gap between what a household’s resources really are and what a family’s position is supposed to be.” (Rapp, Op. Cit., 175)



Is labour still gendered? Can you give examples of this kind in contemporary society?

Rapp as well as Ehrenreich & English suggest the same thing: since families are dominant means of recruiting household members, and household economies are part of the market economy, family relationships can and do involve economic exploitation.



What do you think? Can we relate family with exploitation? Whose exploitation? (women? children?)

We all acknowledge women’s so-called “double day” (or “double burden”) which infers doing shopping, housework, all kinds of chores, childcare, cooking, etc. on top of full—day or paid work. It is true that in most heterosexual 2-parent households fathers have begun to do more to assist women in their domestic work but the percentage of such active husbands is still very low in developing countries. Most feminist scholars have understood this labour in terms of **social reproduction**, recognizing the economic contribution of domestic labour as it:

- includes physical reproduction and daily maintenance of individuals (keeping labour force strong);
- reproduces class division generationally.

Family is also a mechanism for social reproduction in so far as we learn class dispositions as part of our socialization, including **class-based gender acquisition**. These dispositions are called **cultural capital** by Pierre Bourdieu and they comprise language/accent, aesthetic taste, values, knowledge of Culture, and exposure to class-inflected lifestyle that we inherit,

alongside economic capital that facilitates some people's "success" in capitalist economy. It is the kind of thing that can make or break a job interview.

So here is another spike in *the myth of strict meritocracy* – we don't all start as blank slates with nothing but our God-given ability and our own industry; not just economic assets, but also economic assets and cultural assets are responsible for our social success.



What do you envision for yourself, your family and career? What do you expect taking into account your own cultural capital?



The question that might arise here is: why aren't we talking about men, too? Or are we? Is fatherhood today equivalent to motherhood? Should it be so?

In "Who Takes Care of the Maid's Children? Exploring the Costs of Domestic Service" Mary Romero⁴ addresses the ambivalence of woman's position in situations of the kind of having/not having children, pursuing/not pursuing her career, etc. The problem of *the ideology of choice* and of *achieved status*, that is of assuming that people have the lives they have because of the choices they have made, hold people accountable for their life paths.

Yet, Nakano Glenn⁵ speaks about the perils of such a unifying approach:

"When feminists perceive reproductive labour only as gendered, they imply that domestic labour is identical for all women and that it therefore can be the basis of a common identity of womanhood. By not recognizing the different relationships women have had to such supposedly universal female experience as motherhood and domesticity, they risk *essentializing gender* – treating it as static, fixed, eternal and natural. They fail to take seriously a basic premise of feminist thought, that gender is a social construct and that it interlocks with other systems of inequality."

Collier also states that "to represent race and gender as relationally constructed is to assert that the experience of white women and women of colour are not just different but connected in systematic ways" (457)⁶



Do you agree with the following statement?

Race makes a difference in the way women experience gender: white women experience it in a different manner than women of colour do.

⁴ In *Feminism and Families* by Hilde Lindemann Nelson, New York: Routledge, 1997, p. 152.

⁵ Nakano-Glenn, Evelyn, Grace Chang, and Linda Renie Forcey, eds. *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency*. New York: Routledge. 1994, p. 455.

⁶ Op. Cit.