

The Poverty of Patriarchy Theory

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The theory of patriarchy, which says that there is a fundamental division between men and women from which men gain power, is accepted without question today by most of the left.¹ The theory was developed by feminists such as Juliet Mitchell and Miriam Dixson who, in her book *The Real Matilda*,² was inclined to blame Irish working class men for women's oppression, using the theory of patriarchy as the basis for her argument. Anne Summers helped to popularise the ideas in her book *Damned Whores and God's Police* in the early seventies. She wrote "Women are expected to be socially dependent and physically passive because this state is claimed to be necessary for their maternal role. In fact it is because it enhances the power of men."³

But there was some resistance to the idea that all men have power over women, especially from women and men influenced by the Marxist idea that class differences are fundamental in society. Heidi Hartmann, in her essay *The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union*, attempted to provide a bridge between what are fundamentally opposing views.⁴ Hartmann purported to provide a materialist analysis of patriarchy. While capitalists exploit the labour of workers at work, men gained control over women's labour in the family. This has been the theoretical starting point for much of Australian feminist writing over the past ten to fifteen years. However, Hartmann did not challenge the central idea of Mitchell and others, which is that there is such an identifiable social relation as patriarchy. Patriarchy, Hartmann says, "largely organizes reproduction, sexuality, and childrearing."⁵

The arguments of patriarchy theory have been adequately dealt with by the British Socialist Workers' Party.⁶ The purpose of this article is to begin the much-needed task of examining the theory of patriarchy by drawing on the Australian experience from the standpoint of revolutionary Marxism. I will briefly outline the theoretical method underlying Marxism and how it differs from the theory of patriarchy. It is necessary to do this because most feminist arguments against "Marxism" are in fact replies to the mechanical "Marxism" either of the Second International from the early 1890's to 1914 or of Stalinism. Secondly I will show that the historical arguments made by feminists do not stand up to any objective examination. Their determination to make facts fit an untenable theory leads them to distortions and misinterpretation. So I will look at the origins of the family in Australia and the role of the concept of a family wage in the workplace.

Finally, but most importantly, I will show that the ideas of male power and patriarchy have led the women's movement into an abyss. They have no answer to how women's oppression can be fought. Rosemary Pringle, in her book *Secretaries Talk*, expresses a sentiment common in feminist literature today: "no one is at all clear what is involved in transforming the existing (gender stereotyped) categories".⁷ Is it any wonder the women's movement is plagued by pessimism and hesitation? An analysis which says half the human race has power over the other half must in the end question whether this situation can be changed. A theory which says capitalism could be replaced by socialism, but women's oppression could continue, ends up sliding into the idea that men naturally and inevitably oppress women.

The Marxist analysis is that the historical roots of women's oppression lie in class society. The specific forms this oppression takes today are the result of the development of the capitalist family and the needs of capital. Therefore the struggle to end the rule of capital, the struggle for socialism, is also the struggle for women's liberation. Because *class* is the fundamental division in society, when workers, both women and men, fight back against any aspect of capitalism they can begin to break down the sexism which divides them. Their struggle can begin to "transform the existing categories".

Theory

In *The German Ideology* Marx argued that social relations between people are determined by production. The various institutions of society can only be understood as developing out of this core, productive interaction. His argument applies as much to women's oppression as to any other aspect of capitalist society.

*'The fact is ... that definite individuals who are productively active in a definite way enter into these definite social and political relations. Empirical observation must in each separate instance bring out empirically, and without any mystification and speculation, the connection of the social and political structure with production. The social structure and the state are continually evolving out of the life-process of definite individuals, however, of these individuals, not as they appear in their own or other people's imagination, but as they actually are, i.e., as they act, produce materially, and hence as they work under definite material limits, presuppositions and conditions independent of their will.'*⁸

The history of humanity is the history of changes to the way production is organised. The new economic relations established with each mode of production exert pressure on other social relations, making some obsolete, remoulding others. So any institution must be examined historically and in its relationship to other social relations. For instance, an analysis of the family needs to be rooted in its economic and social role and examine how it helps perpetuate the existing relations of production. Marx argued that the relations of production of every society form a whole, a concept Lukács took up in his philosophical writings. He wrote:

*(it) is not to deny that the process of abstraction and hence the isolation of the elements and concepts in the special disciplines and whole areas of study is of the very essence of science. But what is decisive is whether this process of isolation is a means towards understanding the whole and whether it is integrated within the context it presupposes and requires, or whether the abstract knowledge of an isolated fragment retains its 'autonomy' and becomes an end in itself. In the last analysis Marxism does not acknowledge the existence of independent sciences of law, economics or history, etc.: there is nothing but a single, unified – dialectical and historical – science of evolution of society as a totality.'*⁹

Today it is very popular for those influenced by Louis Althusser and others to brand this approach as "reductionist". It is useful to quote Lukács here again, as he can hardly be accused of covering his back after this objection was raised. "The category of totality does not reduce its various elements to an undifferentiated uniformity, to identity". And "the interaction we have in mind must be more than the interaction of otherwise unchanging objects."¹⁰

Marx's proposition "men make their own history, but they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves", sums up the interaction we must look for between the ideas women and men use to justify their actions and responses to social events and the material and economic circumstances in which they operate. This differs radically from the theoretical framework of patriarchy theory. The most common versions take two forms. There are those like Juliet Mitchell who see patriarchy in psychological and ideological terms: "We are dealing with two autonomous areas, the economic mode of capitalism and the ideological mode of patriarchy."¹¹ If you make such a distinction between the economic and ideological, then you cannot explain anything about the development of society. Why do some ideas dominate? And why do some dominant ideas change?

However I do not intend answering these ideas more fully because the arguments which seem to offer a more serious challenge to Marxism are not these but the other version of patriarchy theory argued by writers like Heidi Hartmann. She criticised Juliet Mitchell: "Patriarchy operates, Mitchell seems to be saying, (in *Psyche/analysis and Feminism*) primarily in the psychological realm ... She clearly presents patriarchy as the fundamental ideological structure, just as capital is the fundamental economic structure." Hartmann concludes "although Mitchell discusses their interpenetration, her failure to give patriarchy a material base in the relation between women's and men's labour power, and her similar failure to note the material aspects of the process of personality formation and gender creation, limits the usefulness of her analysis."¹²

However, Hartmann's own attempt at a materialist analysis is not grounded in the concept of society as a totality in which production forms the basis for all social relations. And so she writes:

*We suggest that our society can best be understood once it is recognized that it is organized both in capitalistic and in patriarchal ways...a partnership of patriarchy and capitalism has evolved.*¹³

This is a decidedly un-Marxist formulation, for all Hartmann's pretension to Marxist categories. It has much more in common with structuralist and post-structuralist theories which take a mechanical view of society as a series of social structures which can exist side by side. They do not attempt to unite the social structures into a coherent whole. In fact, they are often hostile to the very concept of society as a totality, preferring a

view of society as fragmented and chaotic. “All attempts to establish a working framework of ideas are regarded with the deepest suspicion.”¹⁴

Hartmann, while at pains to distinguish herself from the feminists who tended towards a psychoanalytical explanation of women’s oppression, uses fundamentally the same approach. The similarity is clear when we look at what Juliet Mitchell, influenced by Althusser’s attempt to graft a structuralist theory onto Marxism, wrote:

*In a complex totality each independent sector has its own autonomous reality though each is ultimately, but only ultimately, determined by the economic factor... the unity of woman’s condition at any time is in this way the product of several structures [and] each separate structure may have reached a different moment at any given historical time.*¹⁵

This framework fits neatly with Hartmann’s view of society as both capitalism and patriarchy. And along with all those who have taken on board elements of this method, Hartmann downgrades class as the fundamental determinant – because in the end you can’t have two structures. One has to be primary, so her analysis does not treat patriarchy and capitalism as two systems in partnership. She argues that it was a conspiracy between male workers and capitalists which established women’s oppression under capitalism. In other words, patriarchy is more fundamental than capitalism. This is an inbuilt confusion in theories which claim to “marry” Marxism and patriarchy theory. Again and again, they have to read their own prejudice into historical facts to fit the abstract and mechanical notion of patriarchy.

The Family

We can agree with feminists such as Hartmann that the family is the source of women’s oppression today. But their analysis of how and why this came about is fundamentally flawed. Summers says “the institution (of the family) confers power on men”.¹⁶ The argument goes that, because men supposedly wanted to have women service them in the home, they organised to keep women out of the best jobs. A conspiracy of all men was responsible for women being driven into the role of wife and mother, working in the worst paid and least skilled jobs – if they were able to work at all.

Actually, we don’t need a conspiracy theory of any kind to explain why women are oppressed under capitalism. Women have been oppressed since the division of society into classes.¹⁷ The capitalist family was established as the result of the particular development of capitalism. The effect of the industrial revolution on the working class family was devastating. Friedrich Engels painted a horrifying picture in *The Conditions of the Working Class in England*. Whole industries were built on the basis of cheap female and child labour during the industrial revolution in Britain. Engels gives figures for the 1840s: of 419,560 factory operatives in the British Empire, 242,296 were female, of whom almost half were under eighteen. Almost half the male workers were under eighteen. Women made up 56.25% of workers in the cotton factories, 69.5% in the woollen mills, 70.5% in flax-spinning mills.¹⁸ Engels pointed out:

When the wife spends twelve or thirteen hours every day in the mill, and the husband works the same length of time there or elsewhere, what becomes of the children? They grow up like wild weeds; they are put out to nurse for a shilling or eighteen pence a week, and how they are treated, may be imagined. Hence the accidents to which little children fall victims multiply in the factory districts to a terrible extent ...

*This dissolution, in our present society, which is based upon the family, brings the most demoralising consequences for parents as well as children.*¹⁹

Diseases such as typhus raged in industrial slums, drunkenness was widespread and there was a “general enfeeblement of the frame in the working class.” In Manchester, more than fifty-seven percent of working class children died before the age of five. These statistics disturbed the more far-sighted sections of the capitalist class.

The working class of the early industrial revolution was drawn from the peasantry, driven off the land by enclosures of the common lands and other measures. But as this source began to dry up, the bosses began to realise they needed to find a way to ensure the reproduction of a working class at least healthy and alert enough not to fall asleep at the machines. And more and more they needed an educated, skilled workforce.

The solution they came up with was the nuclear family. This is hardly surprising when we consider that the bourgeoisie themselves lived in the family. Workers fresh from the countryside were used to working and living in peasant families. It was accepted without question that women should be responsible for childcare and most domestic duties. The second half of the nineteenth century saw a massive ideological campaign by the middle and upper classes to reverse the trend away from the working class family and to force women

more decisively into the roles of wife and mother. This was backed up by attempts to ameliorate at least the worst aspects of working class life, especially those which endangered women and their ability to produce healthy children.

The same process was repeated here in Australia. If anything, the family was even more severely disrupted because of the transportation of convicts and the general lawlessness of the frontier society in the first years of the nineteenth century. Shortages of labour were acute in the early years of the colony, because of the distance from the home country and lack of free settlers. This pushed the colonial ruling class to try to find a solution even earlier than in Britain. Connell and Irving comment on the earliest signs of changing attitudes among the colony's ruling class:

In the 1820s a tightening began. The movement in England by evangelicals against the sexual laxity of the aristocracy soon acquired colonial agents. The Protestant clergy were prominent ... Particular venom was directed against the homosexual relationships formed by many convicts and pastoral workers, though unmarried women got a fair pasting as sluts and whores. The 1812 Parliamentary inquiry into transportation had hardly raised a question about sex; the 1837 inquiry and report positively smouldered with innuendo, scandal and moralising.²⁰

They situate the attempts to confine women to the home, to establish the “feminine” stereotype, firmly in the ruling class's drive to stamp their authority on the new colony. They argue that women “disappeared into domesticity in the age of the bourgeois ascendancy”. From this time on we no longer see women entrepreneurs like Mary Reibey or Rosetta Terry who had run successful businesses and been prominent in other public ventures in the earlier years of the settlement.²¹

Caroline Chisholm led the way in the campaign to establish the working class family in 1847. She advised the British government that if they wanted to establish a “good and great people” they must appreciate that:

For all the clergy you can despatch, all the schoolmasters you can appoint, all the churches you can build, and all the books you can export, will never do much good without what a gentleman in that Colony very appropriately called ‘God's police’ – wives and little children – good and virtuous women.²²

Connell and Irving argue that “by the 1860s the lack of parental guidance and education among working-class children was recognised as a major problem of social control.”²³ After the 1870s, living standards declined as the cities grew rapidly. In the 1880s, infant mortality rates were higher in Sydney than in London. So if anything, the campaign for the family was even more strident here than in Britain. And it certainly was not a campaign by all men, but by the ruling class, male and female, and its middle class supporters both male and female.

Henry Parkes drew the connection between the push to establish the family and ruling class designs in the NSW Legislative Assembly in August 1866:

Our business being to colonize the country, there was only one way to do it – by spreading over it all the associations and connections of family life.²⁴

The idea that male workers joined in an alliance with their male bosses to carry out this scheme so they could get power over women is simply not borne out by the facts. Men did not rush into the family, chaining women to the kitchen sink and smothering them with babies' nappies. As late as 1919, it was reported in the NSW Legislative Assembly that there was a high proportion of bachelors in Australia.²⁵

Anne Summers herself admits that “many women resisted being forced into full-time domesticity, just as men resented being forced to support a number of dependent and unproductive family members.”²⁶ This goes some way to explaining why “the taming and domestication of the self-professed independent man became a standard theme in late nineteenth century fiction, especially that written by women.”²⁷ So men had to be cajoled and ideologically convinced of the benefits of home life – they did not go out to enforce it. Family desertions were very common. But just everyday, ordinary life meant for many workers – working on ships, moving around the country looking for work, doing itinerant and seasonal jobs such as cane cutting, droving, shearing, whaling and sealing – that they were not serviced by their wives' labour in the home much at all.

In any case, when a man took on the responsibility of feeding a wife and children from the low and unreliable wage he earned, he actually faced a worsening of conditions. Stuart McIntyre has shown that working class families living at the turn of the century were most likely to suffer poverty during the years when they had small children. Hardly a gain worth siding with their exploiters for. He says of his statistics:

They ... serve to illustrate the life-cycle aspects of vulnerability to poverty. As such they suggest an explanation of the strength of the working class desire to assist the family breadwinner.²⁸

Summers makes this point herself: “indeed they (men) will generally be better off if they remain single.”²⁹ She dismisses it by assuming that a wife’s services, the emotional security of a relationship “as well as the feelings of pride and even aggrandizement associated with fathering and supporting children” outweigh the minor inconvenience of not having enough money to live on.³⁰ This is a typically middle class attitude; that the ability to survive could be less important than “emotional security”, or that it could reliably exist in a life of poverty and degradation. In any case, on both these criteria – emotional security and the pride of parenthood – it would have to be said women have a stake in the family. It is precisely the yearning to realise these often unattainable goals which does partly underpin the acceptance of the family as the ideal. They tell us nothing about whether the family bestows power on men or not.

This argument is not meant to idealise workers. Sexist ideas about women are as old as class society. So it is not surprising that male workers were sexist and accepted the standard stereotyped view of women. But that is not the same as being in an alliance with male bosses. And it did not mean they strove to establish the stifling, restrictive existence of the nuclear family. It simply means they were the product of given social relations not of their own making. “The sexism of English society was brought to Australia and then amplified by penal conditions.”³¹

The fact is that it was the ruling class, via magazines produced for workers, who actually argued for women to become homemakers, wives and mothers above all else. That is why every mass circulation magazine, every middle class voice shouted the virtues of womanhood – a certain kind of womanhood that is (as they still do today). And it is clear that the overwhelming arguments for women to be primarily housewives came from women. Caroline Chisholm was in the forefront of the efforts to return women to the home:

*the rate payable for female labour should be proportional on a lower scale than that paid to the men ... high wages tempt many girls to keep single while it encourages indolent and lazy men to depend more and more upon their wives' industry than upon their own exertions thus partly reversing the design of nature.*³²

Connell and Irving rightly drew the connection between the establishment of bourgeois society in Australia and the fight to establish the “feminine” stereotype for women: “The women (in the social elite) ... played an active role in maintaining class consciousness through their policing of gentility.”³³ This point is also made in a study of ruling class women in the colony between 1860 and 1880:

*Ladies tended to put the demands of their class above their personal claims to individual expression. The very existence of the upper class in Melbourne depended largely on its continued visibility and the perceived superiority of its values over those of the rest of Melbourne's social world. Any failing, especially in the area of morality, threatened its survival, and the efforts of women were directed at maintaining a visible moral and spiritual superiority.*³⁴

Of course, these women were not feminists. But some of the most advanced women of the middle classes of the time, the suffragists as they were called, mouthed the honeyed phrases promising women the approval of respectable society if only they would devote themselves to the care of their husbands and children. Vida Goldstein was a famous feminist. In 1903 her paper, *Australian Woman's Sphere* recommended that women’s education should include instruction on baby care. Goldstein defended the women’s movement from attacks that said emancipation meant women were refusing to have children by insisting that on the contrary, women were awakening to a truer sense of their maternal responsibility, and that most wanted a career in motherhood – hardly a departure from the sexist ideas of bourgeois society. Maybanke Anderson espoused women’s suffrage and higher education for women but also compulsory domestic science for schoolgirls, and sexual repression.³⁵

The bosses wanted the family and they had to fight for it. Workers, both men and women, had to be goaded, pushed and coaxed into accepting ruling class ideas of a “decent” life. The argument that women’s role in the family was somehow established by an alliance of all men simply ignores the influence of not only middle class and bourgeois respectable women, but also *the feminists* of the time who were vastly more influential – because of material wealth and organisation and ideological influence through newspapers and the like – than working class men.

The Family Wage

Hartmann argues: “the development of family wages secured the material base for male domination in two ways. First, men have the better jobs in the labour market and earn higher wages than women.” This “encourages women to choose wifery as a career. Second, then, women do housework, childcare, and perform other services at home which benefit men directly. Women’s home responsibilities in turn reinforce their inferior labour market position.”³⁶ The argument that the establishment of a family wage institutionalised

women as housewives and mothers earning low wages if they went to work is widely accepted. Lindsey German and Tony Cliff accept that the working class supported the idea of a family wage in Britain.³⁷ In August 1989, I wrote: “the family wage helped establish the connection between sex stereotypes and the workplace.” And the “gender divisions ... in the Australian workforce ... were codified and legitimised by the Harvester Judgement of 1907.”³⁸ I am now much more sceptical about this argument.

Most feminist historians hold up the Harvester Judgement of 1907 as decisive in institutionalising the family wage and low wages for women in Australia. They argue it was a turning point in establishing the gender division in the work force and the idea that women don’t need to work, because they should have a breadwinner. Justice H.B. Higgins, as President of the Commonwealth Arbitration Court, heard a test case involving H.V. McKay, proprietor of the Sunshine Harvester works in Victoria. Higgins awarded what he called a “living wage” based on what a male worker with a wife and “about three children” needed to live on. He awarded 7s a day plus 3s for skill. Women’s wages were set at 54% of the male rate.

Edna Ryan and Anne Conlon argue that:

*the Harvester judgement was to have extraordinary impact on working women. When in later hearings the court further defined ‘the average employee living in a civilised community’, the definition included those responsible for keeping families but women were not presumed to be amongst them. The imposing edifice of a ‘family wage’ was to bar the progress of women’s pay rates for over half a century.*³⁹

It may have been used as the rationale for lower wages for women, but it certainly did not instigate the concept. Nor did it initiate the gender divisions in the workplace. To prove that this judgement was decisive in establishing women’s position in the home and at work, it would have to be shown that it established lower pay for women than before and drove women out of the workforce. Neither is the case.

It is well known that convict women in the early years of settlement were always regarded as cheap labour. And as Connell and Irving point out, “a sex-segregated labour market was established” by 1810. In that year, of about 190 jobs advertised in the *Sydney Gazette*, only seven were for women. Of those, six were for positions as household servants. Most of the women immigrants brought to Australia by the efforts of Caroline Chisholm in the 1840s were employed as housekeepers and maids.⁴⁰ By and large, women’s wages were lower than men’s from the earliest development of industry. In the 1860s, in the Victorian Woollen Mills, men earned 35s a week while women received 10s and girls 4s.⁴¹ In 1896, the Clothing Trades Wages Board in Melbourne fixed women’s wages at 44% of men’s – 3s 4d against 7s 6d for men.⁴² New South Wales didn’t even introduce a minimum wage until 1907. Its aim was “to prevent employment of young girls in millinery and dressmaking for nothing for periods of six months to two years”!⁴³

The facts do not indicate that Higgins’ judgement was decisive in relation to the numbers of women working, or in establishing a gender division in the workforce. Table 1⁴⁴ shows that the ratio of women to men employed in factories in NSW and Victoria continued to rise, illustrating the fact that more women were able to find work other than as domestic servants. And Table 2⁴⁵ shows that the percentage increases of women in the workforce rose at a faster rate than men from 1907-8 to 1909-10.

Table 1:

Ratio of females to males employed in factories, NSW & Vic, 1886-1916

	NSW	Vic
1886	1:7	1:5
1891	1:6	1:5
1903	1:4	1:3
1916	1:3	1:2

Table 2:

Percentage increases in the Work Force, Commonwealth, 1905-10

	Females	Males
1905-6	7.82	6.08
1906-7	11.05	8.15
1907-8	4.66	3.06
1908-9	4.84	2.98
1909-10	8.67	7.24

Any agitation for a family wage has to be seen in the context of the ruling class's push to establish the family. Again and again, the ruling class has had to campaign around these ideas, partly because workers have not taken them up with the enthusiasm they wanted, but also because capitalism itself continually undermines the family. The slump of the 1890s disrupted family life, with men travelling around the country looking for work, or simply deserting their families in despair. By the early 1900s, birth rates had fallen to the lowest in the world. So it is not accidental that the ruling class looked for ways to strengthen the family and the ideas associated with it. It is in this light that we have to view the Harvester judgement and the general climate at the time which has led many feminists to identify this as the turning point for the position of women in Australia.

The feminist argument that decisions such as the Harvester judgement are the decisions of patriarchy, an alliance between male workers and male bosses, does not stand up any better. Leave aside that it made no appreciable difference to the material conditions of women, it certainly cannot be shown to have brought any great boon to male workers. The amount of 7s a week was not a living wage for a family of five. Higgins said he wanted to award "merely enough to keep body and soul together." In fact, he left out any consideration of lighting, clothing, boots, furniture, utensils, rates, life insurance, unemployment, union dues, books and newspapers, tram and train fares, school requisites, leisure of any kind, intoxicating liquors, tobacco, sickness, religion or expenditure for contingencies.⁴⁶ A confusion in the hearing resulted in the allowance for skill of 3s, one shilling less than members of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers got for the same work.

In the end, the decision was overturned a year later. But Higgins was still awarding 7s many years later, in spite of 27% inflation. No wonder Buckley and Wheelwright point out dryly that "trade unionists at the time (unlike historians later) showed little interest in the Harvester judgement."⁴⁷ If male workers were involved in some alliance with capital, they certainly got very little monetary reward for their part in it.

The idea that the capitalists were in some kind of alliance with working class men to get women into the home is ludicrous when we look at the conditions men worked under. In the depression of the 1890s, thousands were sacked, wages plummeted and most trade unions were either completely destroyed or reduced to a miserable rump. In 1905 there were 2500 to 3000 wharf labourers and coal lumpers in Sydney. At least 1500 of them could not earn enough to live on. And at this time male shop assistants, some of the few workers who consistently worked a full week, could not afford to marry unless their wife worked.⁴⁸ Such "rewards" were hardly calculated to keep men on side for the dubious (and mostly unrealised) benefit of having a wife to wait on them. Furthermore, given that the bosses were in such a strong position, there is no reason why they needed an alliance with male workers. They got what they wanted anyway. A more reasonable explanation is that these conditions convinced men that the family wage would raise their living standards.

The concept of a family wage was then of some ideological importance. It strengthened the already prevalent conception about women's role in the home, and how "decent" people should live. But a true family wage was never a reality for more than a small minority of workers. An important fact which shows that workers' families couldn't live on one wage was the huge number of married women who continued to work. In the half century from 1841 to 1891, the number of women in Britain's textile mills grew by 221%. In Australia, the picture was much the same. Working class women have always worked in large numbers. In 1891, 40% of women aged 18-25 worked. And they continued to work in sizable numbers in the twentieth century, even before the massive growth in their numbers following the Second World War.

Men did take up sexist ideas about women's role – this is hardly surprising given the ruling class campaign was backed up even by the feminists of the time. But it is not the case that men argued for the family wage or protective legislation and the like on the basis that they wanted women to be their unpaid chattels in the home. The situation is more complex than that. The arguments from trade unionists in favour of a family wage are overwhelmingly dominated by reference to the needs of women, like this one quoted by Hartmann:

It is needless for us to say, that all attempts to improve the morals and physical conditions of female factory workers will be abortive, unless their hours are materially reduced. Indeed we may go so far as to say, that married females would be much better occupied in performing the domestic duties of the household, than following the never-tiring motion of machinery. We therefore hope the day is not too distant, when the husband will be able to provide for his wife and family, without sending the former to endure the drudgery of a cotton mill.⁴⁹

We might not agree that the solution was for women to be confined to the home. But the man quoted does not talk of women making life easier for men. He says quite clearly that the family wage is seen as a way of alleviating the horrible conditions endured by women in the workplace. Anne Summers also distorts the truth about male workers' attitudes to women workers.

Where equal pay was sought or opposed in the Arbitration Court ... most unions supported the principle – because they saw it as protecting men's jobs. It is less certain however whether most unionists saw it this way. For the male worker on low wages any decision for equal pay would be likely to have direct consequences in his own home; his wife and daughters might find jobs they would otherwise have rejected attractive for economic reasons, his own status as bread-winner would be eroded and the one area of his life where he had any power would be cut from under him.⁵⁰

This is an outrageous assertion with no facts to back it up. The only basis can be her own prejudice. She does not document any examples of male workers opposing pay rises for women, or arguing that they should service them in the home. The feminist interpretation misses the complexity of the relationship of ideas and material circumstances. Workers are products of this society, and the ideas of the ruling class dominate their thinking. But they are not empty vessels which simply take up every phrase and idea of the ruling class just as it is intended. Workers found their material circumstances unbearable. One response when trying to find a way out was to take up ideas propagated by the bosses and use them in their own way and to their own advantage. So the demand for women to be able to live in the family is at the same time repeating bourgeois ideas and an attempt to raise living standards.

Male workers, whether for exclusion of women, for a family wage, or for unionisation of women, were mostly worried about the use of women as cheap labour to undercut conditions and pay generally. Ray Markey, who has done a detailed study of the Australian working class in the latter half of last century, notes that “broadly, the labour movement's response to female entry into the workforce was twofold: one of humanitarian concern and workers' solidarity, and one of fear.”⁵¹ 1891-2, the New South Wales Trades and Labour Council maintained a strong campaign against sweating, particularly of women, and assisted in the formation of unions of unskilled workers, of which a sizable minority were women. In this case, male trade unionists were involved in organising women as workers – not driving them out of the workplace.

Protective Legislation

Hartmann implies that male workers supported protective factory legislation because this restricted the work women could do. This was the result of much protective legislation. But at least here in Australia, it does not seem to have been the motivating force behind union support for it. And once again, middle class reformers saw protective legislation as one way of improving the conditions of working women.

Carol Bacchi argues that “most suffragists favoured special factory legislation for factory women”. She comments that few realised that this placed them under a competitive handicap.⁵² That is why I say the facts have to be distorted and misinterpreted to draw the conclusion that protective legislation was a deliberate ploy by males to limit women's employment opportunities.

Markey says of the attitudes of workers: “Hopefully, it was the thin edge of the wedge: once protection for some workers was accepted on the statute books, it might be easier to extend it later.”⁵³ Overall, protective legislation did improve working conditions. Children especially gained from restrictions on the hours they could be made to work.

Anne Summers criticises male trade unionists for only supporting unionisation of women for fear of their own conditions being undercut, not for the conditions of the women. Markey replies to this criticism; he says the maritime strike of 1890 taught many workers of the danger of having a mass of unorganised workers.

Similar fears had probably motivated the male tailors in encouraging the organisation of the tailoresses. However, far from denigrating the 'class solidarity' of the union movement, this merely emphasises the material basis of class organisation.⁵⁴

Markey makes an important point. Summers expresses a fundamental misunderstanding common not just among feminists: that is, a confusion between the material circumstances people react to and the ideas they use to justify their actions. Mostly people act because of their material situation, not simply because of ideas. Whatever the reasons given for trade union organisation, it is a progressive step. So while it is true that unions such as the Printers and the Engineering Union prior to World War II tried to exclude women, other Australian unions had quite a good record of defending women workers. In the early 1890s, a strike by women laundry workers over one worker being victimised at Pyrmont in Sydney got wide support, as did the Tailoresses' Union in 1882 in Victoria. Neither the actions, nor even the arguments made for the worst positions, paint a picture of some united campaign by male workers in connivance with male capitalists to force women to be simply their domestic servants.

While the facts suggest that by and large workers did not show overwhelming enthusiasm for the family, it does seem that this campaign did not fall on completely barren soil. Workers gradually came to see the family as a haven in a cruel world. It offered the prospect of a home where children could have some care, where women could have their children away from the debilitating conditions of the factory. And gradually, the family took root, becoming one of the most important institutions for the maintenance of capitalism. In this way women's oppression became structured into capitalism.

The family became absolutely central for the reproduction of the labour force – not a minor consideration for the system. It provided a cheap means of reproduction and socialisation of the next generation. Individual working class families were forced to take responsibility for child care, the health of their children, teaching them habits of conformity and respect for authority at minimal expense to the state or individual bosses. The existence of the family helps reinforce the relations of production; capitalists buy the labour power of workers like any other commodity, and its price is kept as low as possible by the role of the family. So labour performed in the home does not benefit other members of the family – it benefits the capitalist class who buy the labour power of workers.

Apart from this economic role, the family plays an ideological role of central importance for the maintenance and stability of the society. The consolidation of the family entrenched the sexual stereotypes of man and woman, living in married bliss and raising happy, healthy children. This in turn provided an excuse for low wages for women. The assumption was more and more that they would have a male breadwinner. Each generation is socialised to expect marriage and family responsibilities, so getting a job and accepting the drudgery of work seems normal and unquestionable behaviour. At times it forces workers to accept poor conditions for fear of losing their job and not being able to provide for their family.

As the sex stereotypes became established, anyone who stepped outside this narrow view of life was seen as strange, as challenging the very fabric of society. This was no accident. It was part of the overall campaign to curtail the sexual relations of the "lower orders" and establish a unified, orderly capitalist society in Australia. As the cycle developed, it was increasingly perceived as "natural" for women to stay at home with the children. This was reinforced by the fact that their wages were inevitably lower than what men could earn. So women with small children were often forced out of the workforce and into the home.

Once we look at the development of the family as satisfying a very real need of capitalism itself, and the massive ideological offensive by the ruling class and their supporters, the picture is very different from that painted by the feminists. There was no conspiracy between male workers and capitalists. In as far as workers accepted the family, it was because they expected it to bring an improvement in their living standard. There is no separate power structure of patriarchy. The capitalists and their allies in the middle classes fought for and won very important changes in order to take the system forward. To workers at the time, it seemed like a gain for them too. And in some ways it was. Given the low level of production at the time, the poor methods of contraception and the absence of state welfare, it is ahistorical and utopian to expect that workers could have had expectations very different from those of the right to a family wage, and the supposed shelter of the family home.

Ideas

Women were relegated to the lowest paid and least skilled jobs as a consequence of their position in the family. Male workers often tried to exclude women from particular trades, ignored the needs of women

workers – even excluding them from their unions – and expressed sexist ideas, as they do today. But society cannot be explained if we begin with the ideas in people’s heads. We have to be able to explain where those ideas came from, otherwise we have to revert to saying men are naturally and inevitably sexist.

Or logically, we would have to say women are responsible for their own and other women’s oppression. Because women themselves are one of the most important agents for the socialisation of children into male and female stereotypes. Women are not free of the prejudices and prevailing ideas about the appropriate role for women. It is more fruitful to see it as Marx did: “The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class.”

The argument that men benefit from women’s oppression is a powerful one, because it *describes* what seems to be the reality in everyday life. Men can often lounge around drinking with their mates

¹ At the International Socialists’ Conference at the beginning of 1990 we scheduled a talk called “Male Power - Does it Exist?” The theory of patriarchy is so widely accepted that the title was mostly received by non-members with astonishment.

² Miriam Dixson, *The Real Matilda*, Penguin, Ringwood 1976

³ Anne Summers, *Damned Whores and God’s Police*, Penguin, 1977

⁴ Heidi Hartmann, “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union” in *Women and Revolution*, Ed. by Lydia Sargent, Montreal 1981

⁵ *ibid*, p. 11

⁶ Lindsey German, “Theories of Patriarchy” in *International Socialism* second series no 12; Chris Harman “Women’s Liberation and Revolutionary Socialism” in ISJ 2nd series no. 23; Tony Cliff, *Class Struggle & Women’s Liberation*, Bookmarks, London 1987; Lindsey German Sex, *Class and Socialism*, Bookmarks, London 1989.

⁷ Rosemary Pringle, *Secretaries Talk*, Sydney 1988

⁸ Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, Moscow 1976, p. 41

⁹ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, London 1983, p. 28

¹⁰ *ibid*, pp. 12-13

¹¹ Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, London 1975

¹² Hartmann *op. cit.*, p. 12

¹³ *ibid*, p. 3

¹⁴ Richard Bradbury, “What is Post-Structuralism?” in *International Socialism*, Second series, No. 41, p. 153

¹⁵ Juliet Mitchell, *Woman’s Estate*, Penguin, 1974, p. 101

¹⁶ Summers *op. cit.*, p. 259

¹⁷ This is a controversial point. The Marxist position was first articulated in Friedrich Engels’ *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*. For a more contemporary defence of the position against feminist attacks, see Eleanor Burke Leacock, *Myths of Male Dominance*, New York & London 1981, and Harman *op. cit.*, p. 37, Note 1

¹⁸ Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Moscow 1977, p. 160

¹⁹ *ibid*, pp. 160-161

²⁰ R.W. Connell and T.H. Irving, *Class Structure in Australian History*, Melbourne 1982, p. 65

²¹ *ibid*, p. 65

²² Summers *op. cit.*, p. 291

²³ Connell *op. cit.*, p. 126

²⁴ Summers *op. cit.*, p. 291

²⁵ Edna Ryan & Anne Conlon, *Gentle Invaders*, Nelson, 1975, p. 108

²⁶ Summers *op. cit.*, p. 170

²⁷ *ibid*, p. 170. Summers does not draw any conclusions about *women* in pushing these ideas.

²⁸ Stuart Macintyre, *The Labour Experiment*, Melbourne 1989, p. 18. McIntyre comments that his figures actually underestimate the level of poverty, because they do not take account of any interruptions in earning capacity. During this

while their wives are housebound with irritable and demanding children. But again, as Marx said, “if the outward appearance and the essence of things coincided”, we wouldn’t need theory. And Lukács describes this kind of theory, which simply describes the appearance of things under capitalism as “reflex consciousness”.

The point is to locate where real power lies, how the institutionalisation of the sex stereotype which is fundamental to women’s oppression took root in this society, and who benefited from it. Once we recognise the family’s importance in reproducing labour power for the capitalist class, it is easier to see that it is not individual men who benefit from women’s role as housewives and mothers. When women labour at home, they are performing a most important economic function for capitalism. Because it is separated from “work” into the “private” sphere of life, this role has been marginalised and trivialised.

period, most workers would have been unlikely to have avoided such interruptions.

²⁹ Summers op. cit., p. 147

³⁰ *ibid*, p. 148

³¹ Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore*, Pan Book, 1988. For his account of the treatment of convict women by the soldiers, coupled with his indictment of the “pompous moral phraseology of the Enlightenment, the good flogging Christians”, see pp. 258-261

³² Quoted in Summers op. cit.

³³ Connell op. cit., p. 53

³⁴ Penny Russell, “For Better and for Worse: Love, Power and Sexuality in Upper-class Marriages in Melbourne, 1860-1880”, in *Australian Feminist Studies*, No. 7 & 8, p. 12

³⁵ Connell op. cit., p. 204

³⁶ Hartmann op. cit., p. 22

³⁷ Cliff op. cit., “Rebuilding the Workers’ Family”, pp. 200-204; German op. cit., pp. 31-36

³⁸ Sandra Bloodworth, “Gender at Work” in *The Socialist*, August 1989

³⁹ Ryan op. cit., p. 91

⁴⁰ Connell op. cit., p. 41

⁴¹ Ryan op. cit., p. 32

⁴² *ibid*, p. 39

⁴³ Report of the Royal Commission into the alleged shortage of labour in New South Wales, with minutes of evidence, Sydney 1911-12, p. xviii – Quoted in Ryan and Conlon, p. 45

⁴⁴ Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, Official Year Book of the Commonwealth of Australia, No. 4, 1911, p. 558 in Ryan and Conlon, p. 78

⁴⁵ *ibid*, p. 79

⁴⁶ *ibid*, p. 91

⁴⁷ Ken Buckley and Ted Wheelwright, *No Paradise for Workers*, Melbourne 1988, p. 234

⁴⁸ Edna Ryan, “Women in Production in Australia” in *Australian Women: New Feminist Perspectives*, Ed. Norma Grieve and Ailsa Burns, Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 266

⁴⁹ From the *Ten Hours Advocate* in 1846, Quoted in Hartmann op. cit., p. 21

⁵⁰ Summers op. cit., Her book is generally very well documented. But she gives no evidence to back up this assertion about equal pay claims of unions in the 1920s.

⁵¹ Ray Markey, “Women and Labour 1880-1900” in *Women, Class and History*, Ed. Elizabeth Windschuttle, Fontana/Collins, 1980, p. 84

⁵² Carol Bacchi, “Evolution, Eugenics and Women: the impact of scientific theories on attitudes towards women 1870 1920” in Windschuttle, p. 140

⁵³ Markey op. cit., p. 95

⁵⁴ *ibid*, p. 94. Markey correctly comments in a note on p. 109 that Summers “presents a false idealist-materialist dichotomy in

Society says work in the home is not important, has no status, so those who do it are of less use to society than those who work for a wage. The theory which says this work is simply for the gratification of men's individual needs is (in spite of the intentions of its proponents) a reflection of this prevailing view, because it too denies the extremely important economic role of the family in the reproduction of the labour force.

Rather than concentrating solely on the times when male workers had a wrong response to their fear that women would be used as cheap labour, it is worth pointing out that in light of the vociferous campaigns for the family by "respectable" society, it is surprising that workers ever took a decent stand at all. The fact is, ideas which really only serve the interests of the employing class usually penetrate the working class – ideas such as sexism and racism along with homophobia, nationalism and religious sectarianism. This is not surprising when we think of the capitalists' control over all means of propagating ideas on a mass scale, and their control over the material wealth of society. The acceptance or otherwise of capitalist ideas by workers depends on many factors such as the level of class struggle, the intervention by workers who hold opposing ideas, to name just two very important ones. We do not need a theory of patriarchy to explain why working men took up ideas opposed to the overall interests of their class.

Racism has plagued the Australian working class. This was another wrong response by workers to the supposed threat of cheap labour, this time by immigrant (especially Asian) workers. To be logical, feminists would have to explain this by another power structure – that of Australian born workers over immigrants. Such a position leads into a morass of power structures – which followers of Foucault accept – that do not clarify, but confuse the issues.

A glaring weakness in the theory of patriarchy is the absence of organisational expressions of patriarchal power. Where are the informal and formal means for co-ordinating and harnessing this power? It is true there are all-male clubs. But the famous ones are inevitably restricted to members of the ruling class. There are no workers other than waiters, cooks and so on frequenting the Melbourne Club. Even informal gathering places such as pubs are divided by class. Robert Holmes a'Court does not hang around with wharf labourers in the early openers. This is highlighted by the fuss that accompanies a visit by dignitaries to workers' pubs and the portrayal of the event as a media stunt.

Even the organisations which male workers did have were not sufficiently strong to influence the outcome of historic events in the period when the family was being established. Only 20% of workers ever belonged to unions before 1890. In the depression of the nineties, the unions were smashed and most hardly continued to exist. The best organised were the skilled workers who were notorious for trying to keep women out of their trades. But they did not just try to keep women out. They tried to keep out the sons of other workers as well with their restrictive entrance to apprenticeships.

However, even these relatively well-organised workers could not determine the nature of the workforce in the long run. It was always the employers who determined any fundamental shift in employment patterns. For instance, the boot trade was originally a skilled area of work, mostly done by men. Over the years, the bosses deskilled the work by the introduction of new technology. This led to the industry becoming an area of female employment.

Ryan and Conlon give an interesting account of how employers began to break up the work of tailoring, employing women on very low wages and getting around the rules regarding apprenticeships during the depression of the 1890s.⁵⁵ Eventually, by the introduction of machines and continuing this process, the clothing trades came to be dominated by low-paid female labour.

We can see in other ways that it has always been the needs of capital which have determined the nature of work. During the depression of the 1890s, the position of women workers appears to have worsened compared with men. But during the 1930s in a similar crisis, often it was women who could continue to work while men spent long periods unemployed. Most accounts of the Great Depression talk of the anguish this role reversal caused for many families. And during the last slump of the early eighties in Australia, it was the traditionally male industries which suffered mass sackings.

During World War II, women were drawn into the workforce in huge numbers, doing work usually restricted to men. After the war, the media launched a huge campaign to re-establish women's role in the home and to emphasise men's place in the old, stereotyped jobs again. In the post-World War II boom, women were

the nature of class relations.”

⁵⁵ Ryan op. cit., pp. 33-34

drawn into the workforce in unprecedented numbers. Because of the nature of some of the fastest expanding industries, women were concentrated in clerical jobs which had previously been mainly a male preserve.

It is impossible to interpret these facts from the point of view of patriarchy theory. Why would men decide as a whole to allow women into the workforce sometimes, drive them out at others, concentrate them in certain jobs which men had previously done? Why did male workers agree to let women into some industries? Why did they agree to allow their jobs to be deskilled and working conditions undermined? Why haven't they demanded that they be given women's jobs by their male allies in the employing class? It does not make sense to even pose the questions this way.

Whether men or women were thrown out of work at any time depended on which industries were hardest hit by a slump. When the ruling class wanted to defend its interests from other national ruling classes in wars, it needed women to replace the male workers they sent off to die for them. Where it was possible to deskill work and lower wages, it was often a useful strategy for bosses to use women. At every point, it was not *male* interests being furthered, but those of *capital* with its continual drive for profits.

Changes in the Family

Not only has women's role in the workforce changed dramatically at times, but the family itself is not unchanging, being continually undermined by the kinds of social upheavals just mentioned, then having to be fought for again. Today, the family is severely undermined by the fact that almost half the workforce are women, many more women enter tertiary education than previously, and divorce rates are at an all time high. A survey done by the Victorian state government estimates that only about four in every ten families is the traditional two partners with children.⁵⁶

Even bosses and parliamentarians have begun to take up the concept of affirmative action and provision of such things as childcare. Not because they are for women's liberation, but because they can see it is wasteful and uneconomic to lose women's skills and experience if they have to leave work to raise children. In spite of their motivations, however, all these changes and more have contributed to changing attitudes in the mass of the population.

Australia Unveiled, the results of surveys conducted by *The Age* in Melbourne, documented some of them. Skilled tradesmen were the "most definite in their rejection of the traditional idea of the woman's role". Of women, 49% thought husband and children should come before a career, but only 42% of men said so. Overall, 84% said that when both partners work, they should take equal responsibility for child care and housework.⁵⁷ If men have power, why have they changed their attitudes, why do they agree they should give up some of it?

Of course, women have not been liberated. But we cannot understand these changes unless we see them in the context of the contradictory role of the family. Historically, the establishment of the family served the interests of the capitalist system. Once established, it played a crucial role in socialising the next generation of workers into sex roles and habits of submissiveness. But capitalism is a dynamic system, continually revolutionising production. Therefore on the one hand, developments since the war tend to undermine the family. On the other, it cannot do without at least the appearance and the idea of the family as the perfect social unit for everyday living. So while the family is breaking down, we also see efforts to shore it up which fit nicely with the need of governments to cut back on welfare and other social benefits such as health and education. It is the ideal cop-out for governments to be able to argue that families should take care of the aged and the sick, that students should take responsibility for their education costs. In some countries the effort to shore up the family takes the form of anti-abortion campaigns by sections of the middle classes.

This Marxist view of the family arises from an analysis which begins with production, which sees society as a whole, but which does not mechanically reduce everything directly to economics. Patriarchy theory would have to say that male workers have been in an alliance for male power in which their interests have continually been ignored, that mostly they have lost out or even been under attack from their allies.

Conclusion

Marx warned in his writings of three consequences of seeing society as an undifferentiated whole, of not putting production at the centre of our analysis. First it can lead to the view that society is unchanging, seeing

⁵⁶ "Shaping Melbourne's Future", published by the Victorian Government 1987

⁵⁷ *Australia Unveiled – The Changing Face of a Nation*, published by *The Age*, Melbourne 1989

society in an ahistorical way, with social relations governed by eternal laws. Second, it can lead to idealism, with the dynamic of society lying in some mystical force outside it. And third, it can lead to the view “that what exists today can only be grasped in its own terms, through its own language and ideas”.⁵⁸

It is popular today to try to graft structuralist and post-structuralist theories onto Marxism. This has been the road to accepting the theory of patriarchy for many Marxists.⁵⁹ However, all these theories display the problems Marx talked about. Foucault, who has become popular with many feminists, equates every relationship between humans with a power struggle, a completely ahistorical concept, and certainly not a new one. Thomas Hobbes, the bourgeois philosopher of the seventeenth century, was convinced that the basic drive in society was the “war of all against all”.

The epitome of the problem is the fascination with “discourse” or language. It has taken on an explicitly idealist content. Chris Weedon, an American feminist makes these typical comments: “Feminist post-structuralist criticism can show how power is exercised through discourse.” And “power is invested in and exercised through her who speaks.”⁶⁰ Consequently some feminists see literary criticism as their main area of struggle.

Rosemary Pringle takes up the theme here in Australia, illustrating what it means to accept what exists in its own terms, through its own language and ideas. She argues that we have to find a way to “privilege” the “feminine discourse”. Women should find ways to use their femininity to “disempower” men. She doesn’t know how.⁶¹ But is it any wonder she can’t tell us how? Ideas do not come from out of the blue, they are not divorced from the material conditions which give rise to them:

The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men – the language of real life.⁶²

Femininity is part of the ideological baggage of capitalism and the family. It is part of the way women’s oppression is reinforced day in and day out. It cannot be used to undermine women’s oppression. The most apt reply to Pringle is that made by Marx to the idealist Young Hegelians in the 1840s:

This demand to change consciousness amounts to a demand to interpret the existing world in a different way, i.e., to recognise it by means of a different interpretation.⁶³

Women’s femininity means flirting, passiveness, being “sexy”, available and yet chaste. Such behaviour reinforces the idea that women are trivial, passive and purely of decorative value. For it to “disempower” men (assuming they have power, which I don’t), women would have to somehow convince men to interpret such behaviour to mean women are serious, aggressive and valuable human beings. So instead of arguing to challenge the stereotypes, of fighting for *liberation* as the early women’s movement did, feminism has gone full circle to espouse a profoundly conservative outlook.

This is the dead end to which the ideas of male power and patriarchy have led. Feminist articles in journals and papers are very good at documenting the horrific conditions most women endure. But they have precious little to say about how to begin to change the society which creates them. Take *Gender at Work* by Ann Game and Rosemary Pringle. It catalogues very well the problems of women at work. It is very good at searching out offensive behaviour by male workers. But nowhere, not once, is there a mention of the possibility of solidarity between men and women in struggle to change the situation. In 1981, only two years before it was published, there was a strike of 200 women textile workers in Brunswick, Melbourne. The Kortex strike was a graphic and inspiring example of how class struggle can radically alter relations in the home. Husbands, brothers, sons and lovers willingly did housework, cooked and minded children so the women could more effectively fight for their \$25 pay rise, which they won. Because they ignore such

⁵⁸ Chris Harman, “Base and Superstructure” in *International Socialism*, Second series, No. 32, p. 16

⁵⁹ Ann Curthoys, in her book *For and Against Feminism*, Allen & Unwin, 1988, says that just as she was being attracted to Marxism, many women she knew were abandoning it under the influence of the ideas of Louis Althusser. Today the “Marxist” journal *Arena* makes serious concessions to post-structuralism.

⁶⁰ Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice & Poststructuralist Theory*, Basil Blackwell, 1988

⁶¹ Pringle op. cit., p. 42

⁶² Marx op. cit., p. 42

⁶³ *ibid*, p. 36

examples, Game and Pringle can offer no way out of the entrenched discrimination and gender stereotypes women suffer from.

Most feminists have abandoned any identification with socialism.⁶⁴ This is not surprising, because if patriarchy is a power structure separate from capitalism the latter can be overthrown, leaving the former intact. This idea is given some credence by the Stalinism of most of the left, which has kept alive the ludicrous idea that the Stalinist countries are socialist, in spite of the continuing oppression of women.

Because Marxism recognises that class divisions in society are fundamental, that women's oppression arises from the particular way capitalism developed, it locates the way forward in the struggle against the very society itself. Men do behave badly, do act in sexist ways, do beat and rape women in the home. Feminists interpret this as the enactment of male power. The Marxist reply is not to simply say these are the actions of men shaped by the society they grow up in. That is only one side to the argument. The other is to point out, as Marx did, that "men make their own history". While humans are the products of society they are also conscious, thinking beings. As I showed, ideas propagated by the ruling class are not simply taken up by workers in a straightforward way. They are refracted through working class experience and interpreted in various ways. The middle class women who fought for the family did so by arguing that women should be "feminine" and restricted to the role of housewife and mother. Working class men saw in the family the prospect of improved living conditions, so they argued for a family wage on the grounds it would improve women's lot.

Ruling class ideas are never completely hegemonic. In every class society, the exploited and oppressed have fought back against their rulers in one way or another. So no matter how tightly the ruling class try to organise their hold on society, they cannot completely wipe out the ideas and traditions of struggle and resistance which come down to each generation from the past.

Of course there is no iron rule that society will be seething with revolution at any particular point in time. In the last ten years, we have seen a massive shift to the right in the political ideas most current in society, continuing a drift which was identifiable from the mid-seventies. This change in the political climate is underpinned by the Labor government's talk of "consensus", and demands that workers make sacrifices "in the national interest". As Labor has led the bosses' attempts to cut living standards and reorganise their economy, workers have suffered a number of defeats and had their trade union organisation weakened. On the one hand we see affirmative action for some women, reflecting gains won during the period when the workers' movement was on the offensive. On the other, we see no end in sight to violence in the home, as families struggle to cope with worsening living standards, the strain of unemployment, poor health care and the like.

In Britain and the United States and to a lesser extent here, we have seen attacks on abortion rights and gay and lesbian rights. The fact that they have met with a militant and vigorous response shows the situation can be reversed. All of history shows that the exploited and oppressed cannot be kept in submission indefinitely. And history also shows that it is when they begin to fight back that the horrible ideas of capitalism can begin to be broken down, precisely because the circumstances which perpetuate them are ripped asunder. Anyone who saw the women tramways workers on pickets, approaching shoppers for money and support in the lockout by the Victorian Labor government early in 1990 got a glimpse of what we mean.

Tony Cliff has shown the relationship of the high points in epic class struggles and the position of women and the struggle for liberation.⁶⁵ A couple of examples will sketch the point here. In the revolution in China, 1925-27, led by the working class in the cities and supported with gusto by the peasantry in the countryside, there were moves to stop the barbarous practices such as foot binding which oppressed women so harshly. In revolutionary Spain, in 1936, a country dominated by the sexism of Catholicism, women could go about among male workers without fear of rape, and participate in the most untypical activities without derision. The very rise of the women's liberation movement was related to the high level of struggle by the working class in the late sixties, as well as the entry into the workforce and out of the isolation of the home by greater numbers of women. And one of the first demands of the revolution in Romania in 1990 was abortion on demand for women.

⁶⁴ See the debate in issues 6, 7 & 8 of *Australian Feminist Studies*

⁶⁵ Cliff op. cit., Cliff shows that even bourgeois revolutions – which could not open the way to a classless society – brought the woman question to the fore because they challenged the social relations of feudal society. And women have always played an important role in social upheavals.

Every time there has been a lull in the struggle, ideas of pessimism, ideas which say the working class cannot offer a way forward, are sung from the roof tops. But these kinds of struggles will break out again. The events in Eastern Europe are shaking the world system not just in the East. In every strike, every demonstration of protest, no matter how small, there lies the seed of struggles which could rip capitalism apart. It is not simply a matter of ideas, of education which convinces workers of different ideas. The struggle creates a material reason to change – the need for solidarity in opposition to their rulers can, in certain circumstances, quite rapidly break down the divisions which in other times hold workers back.

The fight for women's liberation begins there. The idea that men have power over women can do nothing but get in the way. It reinforces the division of sexism. Men are sexist today. But women's oppression does not equal male power. If we see the fight against sexism as separate from the class struggle, we can easily fall into seeing working class men as an enemy. In reality, they are potential allies. In the seventies when building workers were confident of their union strength the Builders' Labourers' Federation (BLF) supported women's right to work on building sites. Every defence of abortion rights against the Right to Life has received support from large numbers of men. In the mass abortion campaign against Queensland's Bjelke-Petersen government in 1979-80, men were able to be won to support the struggle, including transport workers at Email, who stopped work to join a picket. In 1986, BLF support for the nurses' strike in Victoria challenged their sexist ideas about the role of women.

Once we understand that working class men have nothing to gain from women's oppression, we can see the possibility of breaking them from sexist ideas. Then we can be confident that workers, women and men fighting side by side in solidarity, can begin to change the "existing categories". There is nothing automatic about changes in consciousness in struggle. But with an understanding of the roots of women's oppression, socialists can intervene around these issues and relate them to the experience of workers' struggles.

Women are better placed today to fight for liberation than in any time in history. They are no longer simply housewives. They are half the working class and able to exercise the power of that class alongside male workers. Ultimately, it is the struggle of the working class which can destroy the very social structures which gave rise to women's oppression in the first place.

Notes