

# **The Logic Of Gender**

**On the separation of spheres and the process of abjection**

Endnotes

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Within marxist feminism we encounter several sets of binary terms to analyse gendered forms of domination under capitalism.<sup>1</sup> These include: productive and reproductive, paid and unpaid, public and private, sex and gender. When considering the gender question, we found these categories imprecise, theoretically deficient and sometimes even misleading. This article is an attempt to propose categories which will give us a better grasp of the transformation of the gender relation since the 70s and, more importantly, since the recent crisis.

The account that follows is strongly influenced by systematic dialectics, a method that tries to understand social forms as interconnected moments of a totality.<sup>2</sup> We therefore move from the most abstract categories to the most concrete, tracing the unfolding of gender as a “real abstraction”. We are only concerned with the form of gender specific to capitalism, and we assume from the outset that one can talk about gender without any reference to biology or prehistory. We begin by defining gender as a separation between spheres. Then, having done so, we specify the individuals assigned to those spheres. Importantly, we do not define spheres in spatial terms, but rather in the same way Marx spoke of the two separated spheres of production and circulation, as *concepts* that take on a materiality.

The binaries listed above appear to limit one’s grasp of the ways in which these spheres function at present, as they lack historical specificity and promote a transhistorical understanding of gendered “domination”, which takes patriarchy as a feature of capitalism *without making it historically specific to capitalism*. We hope to delineate categories that are as specific to capitalism as “capital” itself. We argue that these binaries depend on category errors whose faults become clear once we attempt to illuminate the transformations within capitalist society since the 70s. Forms of domestic and so-called “reproductive” activities have become increasingly marketised, and while these activities may occupy the “sphere” of the home, just as they did before, they no longer occupy the same structural positions within the capitalist totality, despite exhibiting the same concrete features. For this reason, we found ourselves forced to clarify, transform, and redefine the categories we received from marxist feminism, not for the sake of theory, but to understand why humanity is still powerfully inscribed with one or the other gender.

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<sup>1</sup> In the broadest strokes, marxist feminism is a perspective which situates gender oppression in terms of social reproduction, and specifically the reproduction of labour-power. Often it considers the treatment of such topics in Marx and in subsequent marxist accounts of capitalism deficient, and in light of the ‘unhappy marriage’ and ‘dual systems’ debates, it generally supports a ‘single system’ thesis. It is also worth noting that this article is meant to continue a conversation from the 1970s, the ‘domestic labour debate,’ which turns on the relationship between value and reproduction, and which deploys Marxist categories in order to consider whether ‘domestic’ and ‘reproductive’ labour are productive.

<sup>2</sup> See ‘Communitisation and Value-Form Theory’, *Endnotes 2* (April 2010).

# 1 PRODUCTION/REPRODUCTION

Whatever the form of the process of production in a society, it must be a continuous process, must continue to go periodically through the same phases. A society can no more cease to produce than it can cease to consume. When viewed, therefore, as a connected whole, and as flowing on with incessant renewal, every social process of production is, at the same time, a process of reproduction.<sup>1</sup>

When Marx speaks of reproduction he does not refer to the production and reproduction of any commodity in particular; rather, he is concerned with the reproduction of the social totality. However, when marxist feminists speak of reproduction, what they often aim to specify is the production and reproduction of the commodity labour-power. This is because, in Marx's critique, the relationship between the reproduction of labour-power and the reproduction of the capitalist totality is incomplete.

## **i When Marx speaks of labour-power, he claims it is a commodity with a distinctive character, unlike any other**

Although Marx speaks of the specificities of the commodity labour-power,<sup>2</sup> there are some aspects of this specification which require more attention.

First, let us investigate the separation between labour-power and its bearer. The exchange of labour-power presupposes that this commodity is brought to the market by its bearer. However, in this particular case, labour-power and its bearer are one and the same living person. Labour-power is the living, labouring capacity of this person, and as such, it cannot be detached from the bearer. Thus the particularity of labour-power poses an ontological question.

Going back to *Capital*, at the outset of Chapter One we encounter the commodity, and it is only a few chapters later that we will fully discover its most peculiar manifestation, that is to say, labour-power. In accord with Marx, it is correct to begin with the naturalised and self-evident realm of commodity circulation, in order to render the commodity a curious and unnatural thing indeed. We will not, however, enquire only about what organises these "things", these objects; but rather – in terms of a gender analysis – we will enquire into these *other bodies*, human objects, which bumble about in their own "natural" way, and who, like the fetishised commodity, appear to have no history. Yet they surely do.

For at the heart of the commodity form is the dual character of labour – both abstract and concrete – and accordingly, Chapter One of *Capital* introduces the contradiction between use-value and (exchange) value. This is the contradiction which unfolds from the first pages of Marx's critique to the very end. Indeed, the split between these two irreconcilable aspects of the commodity

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<sup>1</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol.1 (MECW 35), 565

<sup>2</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (MECW 35), chapter 6.

form is the guiding thread that allows Marx to trace and disclose all the other contradictory forms that constitute the capitalist mode of production.

Let us summarise briefly this contradiction. On the one hand, the commodity in its aspect as use-value stands, in all its singularity, as a particular object differentiated from the next. It has a definite use which, as Marx claims, is necessary for its production as exchange-value. In addition, because it is singular, it is a single unit, one of many which add up to a sum, a quantity of individual things. It does not amount to a sum of homogeneous labour-time in the abstract, but a sum of concrete individual and separable labours. On the other hand, in its aspect as exchange-value, it represents an aliquot portion of the “total social labour” within society — a quantum of socially necessary labour time, or the average time required for its reproduction.

This contradiction, *the* contradiction — far from being specific only to “things”— is fundamentally the very condition of being in the world for a proletarian. From this standpoint, the proletarian confronts the world in which the capitalist mode of production prevails as an accumulation of commodities; the proletarian does this *as* a commodity — and therefore this confrontation is at once a chance meeting between one commodity and another, and at the same time an encounter between subject and object.

This ontological split exists because labour-power is neither a person nor *just* a commodity. As Marx tells us, the commodity labour-power is peculiar and unlike any other. The peculiarity of the commodity labour-power is what gives it a central place in a mode of production based on value, as the very use-value of labour-power (or living labour capacity) is *the* source of (exchange-) value. Furthermore, the contradiction between use-value and (exchange) value has additional implications, when we consider the very production and reproduction of labour-powers. This peculiar “production” is specific enough to deserve extra attention, for, as far as we know, *at no time does a labour-power roll off an assembly line.*

How then is labour-power produced and reproduced? Marx identifies the particularity of the use-value of labour-power. But does he adequately distinguish the production of labour-power from the production of other commodities? He writes:

the labour-time requisite for the production of labour-power reduces itself to that necessary for the production of [its] means of subsistence.<sup>3</sup>

When raising the problem of the value of labour-power, Marx concludes that it is equal to the labour-time necessary for its production, as is the case for any other commodity. However, in this case, it is mysteriously reduced to the labour-time necessary for the production of the worker’s means of subsistence. But a cart full of “means of subsistence” does not produce labour-power as a ready-made commodity.

If we were to compare the production of labour-power with the production of any other commodity, we would see that the “raw materials” used for this production process, i.e. the means of subsistence, transmit their value to the end product, while the new labour needed to turn these commodities into a functioning labour-power adds no value to this commodity. If we were to push this analogy further, we could say that — in terms of value — labour-power consists only of *dead labour.*

In the above quote, Marx reduces the necessary labour required to produce labour-power to the “raw materials” purchased in order to accomplish its (re)production. Any labour necessary

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<sup>3</sup> Marx, *Capital* vol. 1 (MECW 35), 181.

to turn this raw material, this basket of goods, into the commodity labour-power, is therefore not considered living labour by Marx, and indeed, in the capitalist mode of production it is not deemed necessary labour at all. This means that however necessary these activities are for the production and reproduction of labour-power, *they are structurally made non-labour*. This necessary labour is not considered as such by Marx because the activity of turning the raw materials equivalent to the wage into labour-power takes place *in a separate sphere from the production and circulation of values*. These necessary non-labour activities do not produce value, not because of their concrete characteristics, but rather, because they take place in a sphere of the capitalist mode of production which is not directly mediated by the form of value.

There must be an exterior to value in order for value to exist. Similarly, for labour to exist and serve as the measure of value, there must be an exterior to labour (we will return to this in part two). While the autonomist feminists would conclude that every activity which reproduces labour-power produces value,<sup>4</sup> we would say that, for labour-power to have a value, some of these activities have to be cut off or dissociated from the sphere of value production.<sup>5</sup>

## **ii Therefore, the reproduction of labour-power presupposes the separation of two different spheres**

As articulated above, there is a sphere of non-labour or extra-necessary labour which envelops the process of transforming dead labour, that is commodities purchased with the wage, into the living labour capacity found on the market. We must now look at the specificities of this sphere.

Terms like the “reproductive sphere” are insufficient for identifying this sphere, because what we are trying to name cannot be defined as a specific set of activities according to their use-value or concrete character. Indeed, the same concrete activity, like cleaning or cooking, can take place in either sphere: it can be value-producing labour in one specific social context and non-labour in another. Reproductive tasks such as cleaning can be purchased as services, and prefab meals can be bought in place of time spent preparing meals. However, to fully appreciate how — beyond labour-power — gender is reproduced, it will be necessary to differentiate reproduction that is commodified, monetised, or mass produced from that which is not.

Because the existing concepts of production and reproduction are themselves limited, we need to find more precise terms to designate these two spheres. From now on we will use two very descriptive (and therefore rather clunky) terms to name them: (a) the *directly market-mediated* sphere (DMM); and (b) the *indirectly market-mediated* sphere (IMM). Rather than coming up with jargonistic neologisms, our aim is to use these as placeholders and to concentrate on the structural characteristics of these two spheres. In the course of our presentation (see Part 2) we will have to add another set of descriptive terms (waged/unwaged) to sufficiently elaborate the nuanced characteristics of these spheres.

The production and reproduction of labour-power necessitates a whole set of activities; some of them are performed in the directly market-mediated or DMM sphere (those that are bought as commodities, either as product or service), while others take place in that sphere which is not

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<sup>4</sup> Such as Leopoldina Fortunati: see *The Arcane of Reproduction* (Autonomedia 1981).

<sup>5</sup> On this point, we are very much influenced by Roswitha Scholz’s value-dissociation theory, even if there remain major differences in our analyses, especially when it comes to the dynamics of gender. See Roswitha Scholz, *Das Geschlecht des Kapitalismus* (Horleman 2000).

directly mediated by the market — the IMM sphere. The difference between these activities does not lie in their concrete characteristics. Each of these concrete activities — cooking, looking after children, washing/mending clothes — can sometimes produce value and sometimes not, depending upon the “sphere”, rather than the actual place, in which it occurs. The sphere, therefore, is not necessarily the home. Nor is this sphere defined by whether or not the activities taking place within it consist of those that reproduce labour-power. It is defined by the relationship of these reproductive tasks to exchange, the market and the accumulation of capital.

This conceptual distinction has material consequences. Within the directly market-mediated sphere, reproductive tasks are performed under directly capitalist conditions, that is, with all the requirements of the market, whether they are performed within the manufacturing or the service sector. Under the constraints and command of capital and the market, the production of goods and services, regardless of their content, must be performed at competitive levels in terms of productivity, efficiency and product uniformity. The index of productivity is temporal, while that of efficiency pertains to the ways in which inputs are economically utilised. Furthermore, the uniformity of the product of labour requires the uniformity of the labouring process, and of the relationship of those who produce to what they produce.

One can immediately see the difference between tasks performed in this sphere, and that outside of it. In the DMM sphere, the rate of return on a capitalist investment is paramount and therefore all activities performed — even if they are “reproductive” in their use-value character — must meet or exceed the going rate of exploitation and/or profit. On the other hand, outside the DMM sphere, the ways in which the wage is utilised by those who reproduce the use-value labour-power (via the reproduction of its bearer) is not subject to the same requirements. If those ways are uniform at all, they are nevertheless highly variable in terms of the necessary utilisation of time, money and raw materials. Unlike in the DMM sphere, there is no direct market-determination of every aspect of the reproduction process. (In Part 2 we will address the indirectly market-mediated sphere of state-organised reproduction).

The indirectly market-mediated sphere has a different temporal character. The 24-hour day and 7-day week<sup>6</sup> still organise the activities within this sphere, but “socially necessary labour time” (SNLT) is never *directly* a factor in that organisation. SNLT applies to the process of abstraction occurring through the mediation of the market, which averages out the amount of time required within the labour process to competitively sell a product or service. Bankruptcy and the loss of profit are factors weighing on this process; likewise the innovative use of machinery in order to decrease the time required to produce goods. Thus, the increase of profit or market share dominates the DMM sphere. Of course, mechanisation is also possible in the IMM sphere, and there have been many innovations of that sort. In this case, however, the aim is not to allow the production of more use-values in a given amount of time, but to reduce the time spent on a given activity, usually so that more time can be dedicated to another IMM activity. When it comes to the care of children, for example, even if some activities can be performed more quickly, they have to be looked after the *whole day*, and this amount of time is not flexible (we will return to this in part 5).

In addition, different forms of domination characterise these spheres respectively. Market dependency, or impersonal abstract domination, organises DMM relations of production and

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<sup>6</sup> That is, homogeneous time. See Moishe Postone, *Time, Labour and Social Domination* (Cambridge University Press 1993), chapter 5, ‘Abstract Time’.

reproduction, through the mechanism of value-comparison in terms of socially necessary labour time. The kind of “direct market-mediation” within this sphere is abstract domination, and as such, it is a form of indirect compulsion determined on the market (“behind the backs of the producers”). Hence, there is no structural necessity toward direct violence, or planning, in order to allocate labour *per se*.

In contrast, there is no such mechanism comparing the various performances of the concrete activities occurring in the IMM sphere — which is to say, as being socially determined. They cannot be dictated by abstract market domination and the objective constraints of SNLT, except in an indirect way such that the requirements of production transform the requirements of labour-power’s maintenance outside of the DMM sphere. Instead, other mechanisms and factors are involved in the division of IMM activities, from direct domination and violence to hierarchical forms of cooperation, or planned allocation at best.<sup>7</sup> There is no impersonal mechanism or way to objectively quantify, enforce or equalise “rationally” the time and energy spent in these activities or to whom they are allocated. When an “equal and just” sharing of these activities is attempted, it must be constantly negotiated, since there is no way to quantify and equalise “rationally” the time or energy spent. What does it mean to clean the kitchen, what does it mean to look after a child for one hour: is your hour of childcare the same as my hour of childcare? This allocation cannot but remain a conflictual question.

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<sup>7</sup> The gendered internalisation of this allocation of IMM activities, what we will call ‘naturalisation’, obviously plays a large role in this. We will look closer at this mechanism in Part 4.



## 2 PAID/UNPAID

Marxist feminists have often added to the distinction between production and reproduction another one: that between paid and unpaid labour. Like many before us, we find these categories imprecise and we prefer to use the waged/unwaged distinction. As we further explicate the spheres of DMM and IMM in relation to that which is waged or unwaged, we elucidate the overlapping of these spheres through the principle of *social validation*. En route we will explore the ways in which the activities in question can be called labour or not; that is, if they *qualify* as labour or not in this mode of production.

The difference between paid/unpaid on the one side, and waged/unwaged on the other is blurred by the form of the wage, by what we must name *the wage fetish*. The wage itself is not the monetary equivalent to the work performed by the worker who receives it, but rather the price for which a worker sells their labour-power, equivalent to a sum of value that goes one way or another into the process of their reproduction, as they must reappear the next day ready and able to work.<sup>1</sup> However, it appears that those who work for a wage have fulfilled their social responsibility for the day once the workday is over. What is *not* paid for by the wage appears to be a world of non-work. Therefore, all “work” appears to be paid tautologically as that which is work, since one does not appear to get paid for that which one does when not “at work”. However, it is imperative to remember that Marx demonstrated that no actual living labour is ever paid for in the form of the wage.

Obviously, this does not mean that the question of whether an activity is waged or not is irrelevant. Indeed, she who does not go to work does not get a wage. Wage-labour is the only way the worker can have access to the means necessary for their own reproduction and that of their family. Moreover, validation by the wage qualitatively affects the activity itself. When an activity that was previously unwaged becomes waged, even when it is unproductive, it takes on some characteristics that resemble those of abstract labour. Indeed, the fact that labour-power is exchanged for a wage makes its performance open to rationalisations and comparisons. In return, what is expected from this labour-power is at least the socially-average performance – including all its characteristics and intensity – regulated and corresponding to the social average *for this kind of labour* (clearly the absence of value makes it impossible to compare it with any other kind of labour). An individual who cannot deliver a proper performance in the necessary amount of time will not be able to sell their labour-power in the future. Therefore, the wage validates the fact that labour-power has been employed adequately, whilst universally recognising it as social labour, whatever the concrete activity itself might have been, or whether it was “productively” consumed.

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<sup>1</sup> The fact that the wage itself does not come with a training manual is interesting. One may do with it ‘as one pleases’ – particularly those who are its direct recipients – and so it is not distributed according to the specificities of the IMM sphere, i.e. the size of one’s family, standard of living or the responsible/economical use of a particular income stream. This point would require more attention, but for now it will suffice to say: it is just not the capitalist’s responsibility.

Now we must consider this distinction between the waged and unwaged, insofar as it intersects with that between the IMM and DMM spheres. When we consider those activities which are waged, we are referring to those which are social<sup>2</sup>; those which are unwaged are *the non-social of the social*: they are not socially validated but are nonetheless part of the capitalist mode of production. Importantly, however, these do not map directly onto the spheres of IMM and DMM.

We see that within the interplay of these four terms there are some waged activities which overlap with those of the IMM sphere: those organised by the state (the state sector). Within this imbricated set of categories, the sphere of IMM activities intersects with the sphere of waged labour. These waged and IMM activities are forms of state-organised reproduction that are not directly market-mediated (see figure 1). These activities reproduce the use-value of labour-power but are waged and thus socially validated. Nevertheless, these activities are not productive of value, nor are they subject to the same criteria of direct market-mediation (see above). They are social because they are remunerated through the social form of value. Because they are not productive of value, they are the forms of reproduction which are a collective cost to capital: they are paid indirectly through deductions from collective wages and surplus-value in the form of taxes.

Let us now turn things round one more time and look at what the wage *buys*; that is, what is an element of the wage, what constitutes the exchange-value of labour-power. The wage buys the commodities necessary for the reproduction of labour-power, and it also buys services which participate in this reproduction, whether directly (by paying a private nanny, for example) or indirectly (for example, by paying taxes for state-expenditure on education, which is part of the indirect wage). These services, whether they are productive of value or not,<sup>3</sup> have a cost that is reflected in the exchange-value of labour-power: they imply, in one way or another, a deduction from surplus-value.

What remains are the activities that are non-waged, and that therefore do not increase the exchange-value of labour-power. These are the non-social of the social, the non-labour of labour (see Addendum 1). They are cut off from social production; they must not only *appear as*, but also *be* non-labour, that is, they are *naturalised*.<sup>4</sup> They constitute a sphere whose dissociation is necessary to make the production of value possible: the *gendered sphere*.

In the next part we will finally turn to the individuals who have been assigned to this sphere. However, we should first consider another binary: public/private.

**Figure 1:** A graphical representation of the relation between the DMM/IMM and waged/unwaged spheres.

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<sup>2</sup> Clearly, all activities taking place in the capitalist mode of production are social, but certain reproductive activities are rejected by its laws as non-social, as they form *an outside within the inside of the totality of the capitalist mode of production*. This is why we use the social/unsocial binary, sometimes found in feminist accounts, with caution. A problem with the term is that it can imply that ‘reproductive labour’ occurs in a ‘non-social sphere’ outside of the capitalist mode of production, in either a domestic mode of production (see Christine Delphy, *Close to Home: A Materialist Analysis of Women’s Oppression* [Hutchinson 1984]), or as a vestige of a previous mode of production. It can even sometimes be used to argue that it is another mode of production left unsocial because of its lack of rationalisation and that what is needed is the socialisation of this sphere. We think it is less confusing, and far more telling, to focus on the process of social validation itself.

<sup>3</sup> Services that are paid from revenue are unproductive, and, in this sense, are part of the waged IMM sphere.

<sup>4</sup> Marx provides a useful insight into the process of naturalisation: ‘Increase of population is a natural power of labour for which nothing is paid. From the present standpoint, we use the term *natural power* to refer to *social power*. All *natural powers of social labour* are themselves historical products.’ Marx, *Grundrisse* (MECW 28), 327.

## **ADDENDUM 1: on labour**

For us, labour will be defined, in its opposition to non-labour, as an activity that is socially validated as such, because of its specific function, its specific social character in a given mode of production. Other bases for definitions of labour are also possible, to cite a few: exchange between man and nature, expense of energy, distinction between pleasant/unpleasant activities. However, we think that none of these definitions can help us understand anything about the character of unwaged IMM activities. These definitions only take into account their concrete characteristics, and in the case of unwaged IMM activities, this leads to banal or absurd descriptions. Is comforting a child an exchange with nature? Is sleeping a labour that reproduces labour-power? Is brushing one's teeth labour? Brushing somebody else's teeth? We think that our definition of labour, while it may seem banal at first glance, is the only one capable of passing over these meaningless questions, and that it constitutes the right starting-point for research into the specific character of these activities.

### 3 PUBLIC/PRIVATE

Many people use the category “public” to designate the state sector. And marxist feminists often use the concept of the “private” sphere to designate everything within the sphere of the home. We find it necessary to hold fast to the traditional dichotomy of private/public as that which separates the economic and the political, civil society and the state, bourgeois individual and citizen.<sup>1</sup> Prior to capitalism the term “private” referred to the household, or *oikos*, and it was considered *the* sphere of the economic. With the advent of the capitalist era the private sphere moved outward beyond the household itself.

Here we begin to see the inadequacy of the concept of “the private sphere” as a place outside of “the public sphere” that includes the economy, as for example in feminist theory. For the private is not merely that which is located in the domestic sphere, and associated with domestic activities. Rather, it is the totality of activities inside and outside of the home. As a result of the structural separation between the economic and the political (political economy) – corresponding to the spread of capitalist social (production) relations – the private sphere becomes increasingly diffuse, rendering the home only one amongst many moments of “the economic” or “the private”. Therefore, contrary to most feminist accounts, it was *only* within the context of pre-modern relations – prior to the separation of the political and the economic under capitalism – that the private sphere constituted the household. In contrast, in the modern capitalist era, the scope of private exploitation spans the entire social landscape.

Where then is “the public” if the private is the totality of productive and reproductive activities? Marx claims that the public is an abstraction from society in the form of the state. This sphere of the political and the juridical is the real abstraction of *Right* separated from the actual divisions and differences constituting civil society. For Marx, this abstraction or separation must exist in order to attain and preserve the formal equality (accompanied, of course, by class inequality) necessary for self-interested private owners to accumulate capital in a manner uninhibited rather than controlled or dictated by the state. This is what distinguishes the modern state, which is adequate to capitalist property relations, from other state systems corresponding to other modes of production, whether monarchical or ancient democratic.

This means that the modern capitalist state and its “public sphere” is not an actually existing place, but an abstract “community” of “equal citizens”. Hence, the differentiation between the sphere of economic relations and that of the political – including relations between unequals mediated by relations between “abstract equal citizens” – renders “citizens” only *formally* equal according to the state and civil rights. As a result, these “individuals” appear as equals on the market – even though in “real life” (the private sphere of civil society) they are anything but.<sup>2</sup> This abstraction, “the public”, must exist precisely because the directly market-mediated sphere is

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<sup>1</sup> For Marx, civil society – or what in most political theory is considered ‘natural’ society – stands *opposed* to the state.

<sup>2</sup> See Marx, *On the Jewish Question* (MECW 3).

mediated by the market, a space of mediation between private labours, produced independently from one another in private firms owned and operated by private (self-interested) individuals.

What then is the relationship between on the one hand, the spheres of public/private, political/economic, state/civil society, and on the other hand, the spheres of direct and indirect market-mediation? The meeting-point of these spheres marks the moment of their constitutive separation, and defines those anchored to one as distinct from the other, as *different*. This difference is determined by whether those individuals defined by the state directly exchange the labour-power commodity they bear within their person as their own property, or – if that exchange is mediated indirectly – through those with formal equality.

Now we are ready to look at the individuals who have been assigned to each sphere. What we see at first, when we look at the dawn of this mode of production, is individuals who have different rights, which are defined by the law as two different juridical beings: *men and women*. We will be able to see how this juridical difference was inscribed on the “biological” bodies of these individuals when we come to analyse the sex/gender binary. For now, we must see how the dichotomy between public and private does the initial work of anchoring individuals as men and women to the different spheres reproducing the capitalist totality through their differential right not merely to private property, but to *that property which individuals own in their persons*.

This peculiar form of property is necessary to generalised wage-relations because value presupposes formal equality between the owners of commodities so that “free” exchange (capital and labour-power) can occur despite the fact that there is a structural “real” inequality between two different classes: those possessing the means of production and those dispossessed of that form of property. However, “free exchange” can only occur through a disavowal of that class difference, through its deferral to another binary: *citizen and other*, not between members of opposed classes but between those within each class. In order to found the bourgeois mode of production, it was not necessary for all workers to be given equality under the sign of “the citizen”. Historically, “citizen” only names a specific category to which both property owners and certain proletarians are able to belong. As capitalist juridical relations disavow class through the reconstitution of the difference between citizen and other, the historical conditions under which the bourgeois mode of production was itself constituted were various forms of unfreedom. For this reason we have citizen and other as mapping onto: *male (white)/ non-(white) male*.

For instance, under the conditions of slavery in North America, the classification of white was necessary to maintain the property of masters over slaves. Women were also classified as other, but for different reasons, as we shall see. One factor worth mentioning here is that within this relation of white/person of colour/woman, the preservation of the purity of the “white master”, as opposed to the “black slave” is of the utmost importance – as well as the strict preservation of the dominant master signifier of equality (“white blood” and therefore “white mothers”) across future generations of the bourgeoisie. Therefore the division between white and non-white women was also closely regulated in order to preserve such a taxonomy, within the mixed context of both plantation-based commodity production in the New World and the rise of industrial capitalism.<sup>3</sup>

However, what constitutes the citizen/other binary in this mode of production is not based upon a negative definition of slavery but rather upon “free” labour, consisting of those with, as opposed to without, the same formal freedom. “Free labour” as Marx identified it – that is, the

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<sup>3</sup> See Chris Chen’s ‘The Limit Point of Capitalist Equality’ in this issue.

technical definition of freedom for the wage labourer — requires what we might call “double freedom”:

For the conversion of his money into capital, therefore, the owner of money must meet in the market with the free labourer, free in the double sense, that as a free man he can dispose of his labour-power as his own commodity, and that on the other hand he has no other commodity for sale, is short of everything necessary for the realisation of his labour-power.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, haven't women always been wage-labourers? Of course, since the origin of capitalism, women have been bearers of labour-power, and their capacity to labour has been utilised by capital; but they have only quite recently become the *owners* of their labour-power, with “double freedom”. Prior to the last quarter century, women were indeed free *from the means of production*, but they were not free to sell their labour-power *as their own*.<sup>5</sup> The freedom of ownership, which includes mobility between lines of work, was historically only for some at the expense of others. Those struggling for political and “public” freedom, or double freedom, were caught in a double-bind. They were forced to make arguments on behalf of their (“but-different”) equality, while at the same time having interests in contradiction with those of others who identified with the same fight for equality on different terms.<sup>6</sup>

This is especially true in the case of women, who were caught between demanding freedom as the ideal, equal human, and freedom *as different*. This is because their “real difference” under capitalism is not ideal or ideological but embodied, and structurally reproduced through the practices which define women as different. This “real difference” is entangled within a web of mutually constitutive and reinforcing relations which necessarily presuppose the citizen, state and public sphere to which women might appeal for human and civil rights on the one hand, and reproductive rights on the other.

Therefore, even if it is true that formal freedom itself was a precondition for value production and exchange, nevertheless, what it organised — the civil society of bourgeois individuals — was necessary for the continuing reproduction of the public or legal sphere. The right to “be equal” and thus equally free, does not itself reorganise the distribution of property, nor as we shall see, the conditions of possibility for capital accumulation. These spheres work in concert. If this were not the case, it would be possible to abolish the actually existing forms of historically-specific “difference” through legal and “political” actions, *within* the state. This would amount to the abolition of the private through the public sphere — a revolution through reform which is structurally impossible.

“Equality” as double-freedom is the freedom to be structurally dispossessed. This is not to say that it is not *worthwhile*. The question is, can it also become “worthwhile” to capital, the state and its attendant apparatuses of domination? As most of us will have experienced first-hand, the

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<sup>4</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol.1, (MECW 35), 179.

<sup>5</sup> In France, before 1965, women could not engage in wage-labour without the authorisation of their husband. In West Germany, that was not before 1977 — see Part 5 below.

<sup>6</sup> We find the need for a class analysis which can cut through this thicket of intra-class disparities, while attending to the disparities of each with regard to their own particular and differential relation to capitalist domination. In short, proletarian identity, as an abstraction based upon a common form of unfreedom, was *never* going to account for everyone, even at the most abstract level. Another more nuanced analysis would be needed — one which would come up against the problematic of workers' identity itself.

gender distinction has persisted long after differential freedom was abolished for the majority of women. If this differential freedom was in fact what anchored women to the indirectly market-mediated sphere, why did its abolition not “free” women from the category “woman” and the gendered sphere of reproduction?

## Double-freedom and the sex-blind market

When looking at the history of the capitalist mode of production, it is striking that, in many cases, once inequalities have been secured by juridical mechanisms, they can take on a life of their own, making their own basis in law superfluous. As women in many countries slowly but surely received equal rights in the public sphere, the mechanism that reinforced this inequality in the “private sphere” of the economic — of the labour-market — was already so well established that it could appear as the enactment of some mysterious natural law.

Ironically, the reproduction of dual spheres of gender and the anchoring of women to one and not the other is perpetuated and constantly re-established by the very mechanism of the “sex-blind” labour-market, which obtains not for the man/woman distinction directly but rather for the price distinction, or the exchange-value of their labour-power. Indeed, labour markets, if they are to remain markets, must be “sex-blind”. Markets, as the locus of exchanges of equivalents, are supposed to blur concrete differences in a pure comparison of abstract values. How then can this “sex-blind” market reproduce the gender difference?

Once a group of individuals, women, are defined as “those who have children” (see Addendum 2) and once this social activity, “having children”, is structurally formed as constituting a handicap,<sup>7</sup> women are defined as *those who come to the labour-market with a potential disadvantage*. This systematic differentiation — through the market-determined risk identified as childbearing “potential” — keeps those who embody the signifier “woman” anchored to the IMM sphere. Therefore, because capital is a “sex-blind” abstraction, it concretely punishes women for having a sex, even though that “sexual difference” is produced by capitalist social relations, and absolutely necessary to the reproduction of capitalism itself. One could imagine a hypothetical situation in which employers did not enquire about the gender of an applicant, but only rewarded those who have “the most mobility” and those who are “the most reliable, 24/7”; even in this case gender bias would reappear as strong as ever. As an apparent contradiction, once sexual difference becomes structurally defined and reproduced, woman as a bearer of labour-power with a higher social cost becomes its opposite: the commodity labour-power with a cheaper price.

Indeed, the better-remunerated jobs — that is, those which can tendentially pay for more than the reproduction of a single person — are those for which a certain degree of skill is expected. In those skilled sectors, capitalists are ready to make an investment in the worker’s skills, knowing that they will benefit from doing so in the long term. They will therefore privilege the labour-power that is likely to be the most reliable over a long period. If the worker is potentially going to leave, then she will not be as good an investment, and will get a lower price. This lower price tag, fixed to those who look like the kind of people who “have children”, is not determined by the sorts of skills that are formed in the IMM sphere. Even though the sphere a woman is relegated to is full of activities which require lifelong training, this does not increase the price of her labour-

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<sup>7</sup> Because the creation of a future generation of workers who are for a period of their life non-workers is a cost to capital which it disavows, and because this activity is posited as a non-labour that steals time away from labour.

power, because no employer has to pay for their acquisition. As a result, capital can use women's labour-power in short spurts at cheap prices.

In fact, the general tendency towards "feminisation" is not the gendering of the sex-blind market, but rather the movement by capital towards the utilisation of cheap short-term flexibilised labour-power under post-Fordist, globalised conditions of accumulation, increasingly deskilled and "just-in-time". We must take this definition of feminisation as primary, before we attend to the rise of the service sector and the increasing importance of care and affective labour, which is part and parcel of the "feminisation turn". This turn comes about through the dynamic unfolding of capitalist social relations historically, a process that we will see in the last two parts of the text. But first we must summarise what we have learned about gender until now, and attempt a definition. This requires analysis and criticism of another common binary: sex and gender.

## **addendum 2: on women, biology and children**

The definition of women as "those who have children" presupposes a necessary link between 1) the fact of having a biological organ, the uterus 2) the fact of bearing a child, of being pregnant 3) the fact of having a specific relation to the result of this pregnancy. Conflating the three obscures:

1. On the one side, the mechanisms that prevent, favour, or impose the fact that somebody with a uterus will go through pregnancy, and how often that will occur.<sup>8</sup> These mechanisms include: the institution of marriage, the availability of contraceptives, the mechanisms that enforce heterosexuality as a norm, and (at least for a long time and still in many places) the interdiction/shame associated with forms of sex that do not risk leading to pregnancy (oral/anal sex, etc.).
2. On the other side, the changing definition of what a child is and what level of care a child necessitates. While there was a period in which children were considered as half-animal, half-human creatures who only had to be cleaned and fed until they became small adults — that is, able to work — the modern reality of childhood and its requirements often make "having children" a never-ending business.

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<sup>8</sup> See Paola Tabet, 'Natural Fertility, Forced Reproduction', in Diana Leonard and Lisa Adkins, eds, *Sex in Question: French Materialist Feminism* (Taylor and Francis 1996).



## 4 SEX/GENDER

We are now prepared to address the gender question. What then is gender? For us, it is the *anchoring* of a certain group of individuals in a specific sphere of social activities. The result of this anchoring process is at the same time the continuous reproduction of two separate genders.

These genders concretise themselves as an ensemble of ideal characteristics, defining either the “masculine” or the “feminine”. However, these characteristics themselves, as a list of behavioural and psychological qualities, are subject to transformation over the course of the history of capitalism; they pertain to specific periods; they correspond to certain parts of the world; and even within what we might call the “West” they are not necessarily ascribed in the same way to all people. As a binary however, they exist in relation to one another, regardless of time and space, even if their mode of appearance is itself always in flux.

Sex is the flip side of gender. Following Judith Butler, we criticise the gender/sex binary as found in feminist literature before the 1990s. Butler demonstrates, correctly, that both sex and gender are socially constituted and furthermore, that it is the “socializing” or pairing of “gender” with culture, that has relegated sex to the “natural” pole of the binary nature/culture. We argue similarly that they are binary social categories which simultaneously de-naturalise gender while naturalising sex. For us, sex is the naturalisation of gender’s dual projection upon bodies, aggregating biological differences into discrete naturalised semblances.

While Butler came to this conclusion through a critique of the existentialist ontology of the body,<sup>1</sup> we came to it through an analogy with another social form. Value, like gender, necessitates its other, “natural” pole (i.e. its concrete manifestation). Indeed, the dual relation between sex and gender as two sides of the same coin is analogous to the dual aspects of the commodity and the fetishism therein. As we explained above, every commodity, including labour-power, is both a use-value and an exchange-value. The relation between commodities is a social relation between things and a material relation between people.

Following this analogy, sex is the material body, which, as use-value to (exchange) value, attaches itself to gender. *The gender fetish* is a social relation which acts upon these bodies so that it appears as a natural characteristic of the bodies themselves. While gender is the abstraction of sexual difference from all of its concrete characteristics, that abstraction transforms and determines the body to which it is attached — just as the real abstraction of value transforms the material body of the commodity. Gender and sex combined give those inscribed within them a natural semblance (“with a phantomlike objectivity”), as if the social content of gender was “written upon the skin” of the concrete individuals.

The transhistoricisation of sex is homologous to a foreshortened critique of capital, which contends that use-value is transhistorical rather than historically specific to capitalism. Here, use-value is thought to be that which positively remains after revolution, which is seen as freeing use-value from the integument of exchange-value. In terms of our analogy with sex and gender,

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<sup>1</sup> See her critique of Simone de Beauvoir’s ‘uncritical reproduction of the Cartesian distinction between freedom and the body.’ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (Routledge 1990), chapter 1: ‘Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire.’

we would go one step further and say that both gender and sex are historically determined. Both are entirely social and can only be abolished together — just as exchange-value and use-value will both have to be abolished in the process of communisation. In this light, our feminist value-theoretical analysis mirrors Butler’s critique in so far as we both view the sex/gender binary as being socially-determined and produced through social conditions specific to modernity.

## The denaturalisation of gender

But gender is not a static social form. The abstraction of gender becomes increasingly denaturalised, making sex appear all the more concrete and biological. In other words, if sex and gender are two sides of the same coin, the relation between gender and its naturalised counterpart is not stable. There is a potential discrepancy between them, which some have called a “troubling”, and we term “denaturalisation”.

Over time gender is ever more abstracted, defining sexuality more and more arbitrarily. The marketisation and commodification of gender appears increasingly to *de-naturalise* gender from *naturalised* biological concerns. One might say that capitalism itself deconstructs gender and denaturalises it. Nature — whose increasing superfluity is in juxtaposition to gender’s ongoing necessity — appears as the presupposition of gender rather than its effect. In more familiar terms, reflecting capital’s “problem” with labour: “nature” (the “natural” side of the sex/gender binary) becomes increasingly superfluous to the generational reproduction of the proletariat, while the “cost” assigned to “female” bodies — or the counter-pole to sex — becomes increasingly imperative to capital accumulation as the tendency toward feminisation. Hence, the reproduction of gender is of utmost importance, as labour-power with a lower cost, while a reserve army of proletarians as surplus population is increasingly redundant.

What the female gender signifies — that which is socially inscribed upon “naturalised”, “sexuated” bodies — is not only an array of “feminine” or gendered characteristics, but essentially a price tag. Biological reproduction has a social cost which is *exceptional* to average (male) labour-power; it becomes the burden of those whose cost it is assigned to — regardless of whether they can or will have children. It is in this sense that an abstraction, a *gendered average*, is reflected back upon the organisation of bodies in the same way exchange-value, a blind market average, is projected back upon production, molding and transforming the organisation of the character of social production and the division of labour. In this sense, the transformation of the condition of gender relations goes on behind the backs of those whom it defines. And in this sense, gender is constantly reimposed and *re-naturalised*.

# 5 THE HISTORY OF GENDER WITHIN CAPITALISM: FROM THE CREATION OF THE IMM SPHERE TO THE COMMODIFICATION OF GENDERED ACTIVITIES

To understand this dialectical process of de-naturalisation and re-naturalisation we first have to retrace the transformations within the gender relation over the course of the capitalist mode of production, and attempt a periodisation. At this more concrete level, there are many possible points of entry to take, and we opt for a periodisation of the family, since it is the economic unit that brings together the indirectly market-mediated (IMM) and the directly market-mediated (DMM) spheres which delimit the aspects of proletarian reproduction. We must try to figure out whether changes in the family form correspond to transformations in the process of labour's valorisation.

## **i Primitive accumulation and the extended family**

During the era of primitive accumulation, a major problem facing the capitalist class was how to perfectly calibrate the relationship between the IMM and DMM spheres such that workers would, on the one hand, be forced to survive only by selling their labour-power, and on the other, be allotted only enough personal property to continue self-provisioning without bringing up the cost of labour-power.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, at the moment when the IMM was constituted, it had to take on as much as possible of the reproduction of labour-power, to be as big as possible, but *just enough* so that the proportion of self-provisioning allowed nevertheless required the habitual re-emergence of labour-power on the market. Therefore, the sphere of IMM supplementing the wage was subordinated to the market as a necessary presupposition of wage-relations and capitalist exploitation, and as its immediate result.

In the course of the transition from the 18th to the 19th century, the family — centred in the home as a unit of production — became *the* economic unit mediating between the IMM and DMM spheres of labour-power's reproduction. However, for the first part of the 19th century, as long as no retirement benefits existed and as long as it was also the case that children were expected to go to work before they even reached puberty, the family comprised several generations residing in one home. In addition, the activities of the IMM sphere were not carried out by married women alone; indeed they were done with the participation of children, grandmothers and other

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<sup>1</sup> See Michael Perelman, *The Invention of Capitalism: Classical Political Economy and the Secret History of Primitive Accumulation* (Duke University Press 2000).

female relatives, even lodgers. If it was the case that only the “singly free” adult male members of the family could legally be owners of the wage, this did not mean that adult women and young children did not also work outside the home.

Indeed, at the beginning of industrialisation, women represented one third of the workforce. Like children, they did not decide if or where they would take employment, or which job they would perform; they were more or less subcontracted by their husbands or fathers. (Marx even compared it with some forms of the slave trade: the male head of the family bargained the price of the labour-power of his wife and children and chose to accept or decline. And let us not forget that in some countries, such as France and Germany, women only got the right to work without the authorisation of their husbands in the 1960s or 70s). Far from being a sign of the emancipation of women, or of the modern views of the husband, women working outside the home was a blatant indicator of poverty. Even if married women were generally expected to stay at home when the family could afford it (where they often did home-based production, especially for the textile industry), many women never married – for it was an expensive business – and some were not supposed to become pregnant, forming their own family. Younger daughters were often sent to become servants or helpers in other families, remaining “officially” single. Therefore, even if those responsible for the IMM sphere were always women, and those responsible for the wage were always men (one could say, by definition), the two genders and the two spheres did not map one to one in that period.

## **ii The nuclear family and Fordism**

In the second part of the 19th century, what some call the second industrial revolution, there was a progressive move towards the nuclear family as we think of it today. First, after decades of labour struggles, the state stepped in to limit the employment of women and children, partly because it was faced with a crisis in the reproduction of the work force. Labour-power was expected to become more skilled (for example literacy increasingly became a skill required to access a job), and increasing attention was given to the education of children. A new category emerged, that of childhood, with its specific needs and phases of development. Looking after children became a complicated business, which could no longer be provided by elder siblings.<sup>2</sup>

This process culminated with Fordism, and its new standards of consumption and reproduction. With the generalisation of retirement benefits and retirement homes, generations came to be separated from each other in individual houses. The allocation of family responsibilities between husband and wife became strictly defined by the separation between the spheres. IMM activities that used to be carried out together with other women (such as washing clothes) became the individual responsibility of one adult woman per household. The married woman’s life often came to be entirely confined to the IMM sphere. It became the fate of most women, and their entire lives (including their personality, desires, etc.) were shaped by this fate.

It was therefore with the nuclear family (in a specific period of capitalism, and importantly, in a specific area of the world) that gender became a rigid binary, mapping one to one with the spheres. It became a strict norm, which does not mean everyone fitted into it. Many feminists who refer to gender as a set of characteristics that define “femininity” and “masculinity” have

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<sup>2</sup> For the effects of compulsory education on working-class families see Wally Secombe, *Weathering the Storm: Working-Class Families from the Industrial Revolution to the Fertility Decline* (Verso 1993).

the norms of that period in mind. From this point on, individuals identified as women were born with different life-destinies than individuals defined as men — they lived “on two different planets” (some on Mars...), and were socialised as two distinct kinds of subjects. This distinction cut across all classes.

No longer helped by other members of the family, doing the IMM activities isolated behind four walls, married women were made to bear the entire burden of IMM activities on their own. This isolation would not have been possible without the introduction of household appliances turning the most extreme physical tasks into chores that could be carried out alone. The washing-machine, the indoor water-tap, the water heater — these helped to dramatically reduce the time spent on some IMM activities. But every minute gained was far from increasing the housewife’s leisure time. Every spare moment had to be used to increase the standards of reproduction: clothes were washed more often, meals became ever more varied and healthy, and most importantly, childcare became an all-consuming IMM activity from infant care to the facilitation of children’s leisure activities.

### **iii The 70s: real subsumption and the commodification of IMM activities**

The commodification of IMM activities is clearly not a new phenomenon. From the beginning of capitalism it was possible to buy ready-made meals instead of cooking them, to buy new clothes instead of mending them, to pay a servant to look after the children or to do the housework. However, those were privileges of the middle and upper classes. Indeed, each time an IMM activity is turned into a commodity, it has to be paid for in the wage. Therefore, the mass-consumption of these commodities would only have been likely in periods of steady wage increases, since these services, as long as they were only formally subsumed, increased the exchange-value of necessary labour in an inverse ratio to surplus-value.

However, as a result of the possibilities opened by real subsumption, the value of some of these commodities can decrease at the same time as they are mass-produced. Advances in productivity make these commodities more and more affordable, and some of them — particularly ready-made meals and household appliances — slowly but surely became affordable with the wage. Nevertheless, some IMM activities are more difficult to commodify at a price low enough to be paid for by every wage. Indeed, even if it is possible to commodify childcare, it is not possible to make advances in productivity that would allow its cost to become ever cheaper. Even if the nourishing, washing of clothes, and so on, can be done more efficiently, the time for childcare is never reduced. You cannot look after children *more quickly*: they have to be attended to 24 hours a day.

What is possible is to rationalise childcare, for example, by having the state organise it and thereby reducing the adult-to-child ratio. However, there are limits to how many children one adult can possibly handle, especially if, in that process, this adult has to impart a specific standard of socialisation, knowledge and discipline. This work can also be performed by the cheapest labour possible; that is, by women whose wage will be lower than the wage of a working mother. But in this case, IMM activities are simply deferred to the lowest-paid strata of the total population. Therefore the problem is not reduced. Rather, its negative effects are redistributed, often to poor immigrants and women of colour.

So we see that all these possibilities are limited: there is always a remainder, which we will refer to as *the abject*,<sup>3</sup> that is, what cannot be subsumed or is not worth subsuming. It is obviously not abject *per se* — it exists as abject because of capital, and it is shaped by it. There is always this remainder that has to remain outside of market-relations, and the question of who has to perform it in the family will always be, to say the least, a conflictual matter.

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<sup>3</sup> We take this term in its etymological sense: *ab-ject*, that which is cast off, thrown away, but *from something that it is part of*.

## 6 Crisis and austerity measures: the rise of the abject

With the current crisis, all signs indicate that the state will be increasingly unwilling to organise IMM activities, since they are a mere cost. Expenses in childcare, elderly-care and healthcare are the first to be cut, not to mention education and after-school programs. These will become DMM for those who can afford it (privatisation), or lapse into the sphere of unwaged indirect market-mediation – therefore increasing the abject.

The extent of this remains to be seen, but the trend in countries affected by the crisis is already clear. In the US, and in most countries of the Eurozone (with the notable exception of Germany), governments are cutting their spending to reduce their debt-to-GDP ratios.<sup>1</sup> Countries like Greece, Portugal and Spain, but also the UK, are drastically scaling down their expenses in healthcare and childcare. In Greece and Portugal public kindergartens are closing down. Infringements on the rights of pregnant women to maternity leave and benefits, or to resume their jobs after maternity, have been reported in Greece, Portugal, Italy, and the Czech Republic.<sup>2</sup> In the UK, where state-run nurseries are closing one by one, the situation is described by an anti-capitalist feminist group involved in the Hackney nurseries campaign, Feminist Fight Back:

All over the UK local authorities have begun to announce significant reductions of funding to social services, from libraries and healthcare to playgrounds and art groups, from rape crisis centres to domestic violence services. Of particular relevance to women are the profound effects that will be felt in children's services, both in council and community nurseries and in New Labour's flagship Sure Start Centres, which provide a variety of services to parents on a "one-stop" basis.<sup>3</sup>

In a country where the Prime Minister himself advocates the organisation of community services on a "voluntary basis", under the central policy idea of the "Big Society", a culture "where people, in their everyday lives, in their homes, in their neighbourhoods, in their workplace ... feel both free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities",<sup>4</sup> anti-state feminists are faced with a dilemma:

Our aim is for provision "in and against the state". This raises a core question in the struggle over public goods and shared resources and labour: how are we to ensure that our autonomous efforts to reproduce our own communities do not simply create Cameron's Big Society for him? — thereby endorsing the logic that if the state will no longer provide for us we will have to do it ourselves?<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://endnotes.org.uk/issues/2/en/endnotes-misery-and-debt>

<sup>2</sup> Francesca Bettio, 'Crisis and recovery in Europe: the labour market impact on men and women,' 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Feminist Fightback Collective, 'Cuts are a Feminist Issue'. *Soundings* 49 (Winter 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Speech by David Cameron on 'the Big Society', Liverpool, 19 July 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Feminist Fightback Collective, 'Cuts are a Feminist Issue'

The struggle around kindergartens which took place in Poznan (Poland) in 2012 also reflects this dilemma. The municipality is slowly transferring all the public kindergartens to private institutions to save costs. When the workers of one of the nurseries protested with parents and activists, against privatisation, the local authorities came up with the option of letting the workers organise the nursery, but without providing them with any subsidies or guarantees. This made it a very dim option that was eventually rejected by the workers and parents.<sup>6</sup>

However, some marxist feminists seem to glorify the self-organisation of IMM activities by women as a necessary step in the creation of an alternative society. For example Silvia Federici, in her 2010 text “Feminism and the Politics of the Common in an Era of Primitive Accumulation”:

If the house is the *oikos* on which the economy is built, then it is women, historically the house-workers and house-prisoners, who must take the initiative to reclaim the house as a center of collective life, one traversed by multiple people and forms of co-operation, providing safety without isolation and fixation, allowing for the sharing and circulation of community possessions, and above all providing the foundation for collective forms of reproduction. [...] It remains to clarify that assigning women this task of commoning/collectivizing reproduction is not to concede to a naturalistic conception of “femininity”. Understandably, many feminists would view this possibility as “a fate worse than death.” [...] But, quoting Dolores Hayden, the reorganisation of reproductive work, and therefore the reorganisation of the structure of housing and public space is not a question of identity; it is a labour question and, we can add, a power and safety question.<sup>7</sup>

Silvia Federici is right — we do consider this possibility worse than death. And her answer to this objection, which quotes Dolores Hayden rather freely, misses the point: the labour question is an identity question.<sup>8</sup> Even if we might, in the crisis, have no choice but to self-organise these reproductive activities — and even though, most likely, abject reproduction will in the end mainly be foisted upon women — we must fight against this process which reinforces gender. We must treat it as it is: a self-organisation of the abject, of what no one else is willing to do.

It is important here to state that, even if unwaged IMM activities and the abject might refer to the same concrete activities, these two concepts must be differentiated. Indeed, the category of the abject refers specifically to activities that became waged at some point but are in the process of returning into the unwaged IMM sphere because they’ve become too costly for the state or capital. While IMM is a purely structural category, independent of any dynamic, the concept of the abject grasps the specificities of these activities and the process of their assignment in our current period. Indeed, we can say that, if many of our mothers and grandmothers were caught in the sphere of IMM activities, the problem we face today is different. It is not that we will have to “go back to the kitchen”, if only because *we cannot afford it*. Our fate, rather, is *having to deal*

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<sup>6</sup> Women with Initiative (from Inicjatywa Pracownicza-Workers’ Initiative), ‘Women workers fight back against austerity in Poland’, *Industrial Worker* 1743, March 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero, Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Common Notions 2012), 147.

<sup>8</sup> This is obviously not to say that we don’t value the whole of Federici’s contribution to the marxist feminist debate. Along with Dalla Costa and James’s, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, Silvia Federici’s texts are surely the most interesting pieces from the ‘domestic labour debate’ of the 1970s. What we want to criticise here is a position that is currently influential within the ‘commons’ debate, and that we consider highly problematic.



*with the abject*. Contrary to the IMM activities of the past, this abject has already been to a large extent denaturalised. It does not appear to those performing it as some unfortunate natural fate, but more like an extra burden that one must deal with alongside wage-labour.<sup>9</sup> Being left to deal with it is the ugly face of gender today, and this helps us to see gender as it is: a powerful constraint.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, the process of de-naturalisation creates the possibility of gender appearing as *an external constraint*. This is not to say that the constraint of gender is less powerful than before, but that it can now be seen as a constraint, that is, as something outside oneself that it is possible to abolish.

A last thought, to conclude: if it happens to be true that the present moment allows us to see both our class-belonging and our gender-belonging as external constraints, this cannot be purely accidental. Or can it? This question is critical for an understanding of the struggle which leads to the abolition of gender, that is, to the reproduction by non-gendered individuals of a life in which all separate spheres of activity have been abolished.

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<sup>9</sup> 'A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, *loathsome*. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A "something" that I do not recognise as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which curses me.' Julia Kristeva, *Power of Horrors: An Essay on Abjection* (Columbia University Press 1982), 2.

<sup>10</sup> Obviously there are nowadays some men, even if few, who do a considerable part of the abject. And they get to know what many women experience: *that the abject sticks to one's skin*. Many of these men, especially when they end up having to do most of the childcare, seem somehow to be undergoing a process of *social castration*.

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