OF MARRIAGE AND THE MARKET: WOMEN'S SUBORDINATION IN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Kate Young, Carol Wolkowitz and Roslyn McCullagh (Editors)

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Perhaps the most awkward problem facing any feminist analysis of gender relations arises from the fact that while sexual inequality is demonstrably not an inevitable fact of life, women's subordination to men has proved remarkably persistent, transcending the boundaries of societies which have quite distinct social and economic histories and cultural traditions. Many people have therefore assumed that male authority was in the natural order of things; and radical feminists have felt justified in seeking 'explanations' that are couched in terms of some basic and universal patriarchal order. The common underpinning of the ten essays in this collection, however, is a determined rejection of such easy solutions.

They insist firmly that 'relations between men and women are social relations' and are therefore neither universal nor immutable. They concentrate instead on developing systematic historical accounts of gender relations in a wide variety of social contexts: several countries situated in the capitalist 'periphery' of Africa and South East Asia; socialist states in the Soviet Bloc and the Third World; England; European migrant labour, etc. There are no quick and easy answers by this route, but at least I felt after reading these essays that I had been helped towards a clearer and deeper understanding of the issues.

Apart from the variety of source materials used the editors are keen to emphasise the diversity of viewpoints represented in these papers. Most of the contributors have been influenced by Marxism but none could be described as 'orthodox', and some of the contributors deny altogether the adequacy of historical materialism for analysing sexuality and gender relations. However, fragmentation and eclecticism have been successfully avoided partly, no doubt, because many of the contributors have been working together in the Subordination of Women Workshop. Indeed the book possesses a quite definite sense of unity and common purpose.

This undoubtedly has much to do with the undogmatic spirit with which the authors have approached their task. Despite their disagreements, often fundamental, they are not working separately, each within a closed system. Moreover, by coupling this openness-mindedness with a genuine recognition of the need for rigorous, historical and ultimately empirical analysis, they avoid the kind of sterile, convoluted theorising to which too much Marxist — and some feminist — work has recently been prone.

The essays are also linked by a number of recurrent themes. For example, none of the contributors sees salvation coming solely through women acquiring full access to social production or the market. Concentrating exclusively on the process of production, they contend, ignores other and arguably more fundamental causes of gender subordination. An investigation of the position of women in state socialist societies highlights the inadequacy of economistic analyses of gender relations. The old assumption (held by most socialist as well as bourgeois economists) that resources within families are distributed according to individual needs is refuted in more than one of the essays. Feminists have been hammering away at this one for several years, the nails on this occasion being supplied mainly by Whitehead's survey of domestic budgeting arrangements in England and Ghana, and Maher's account of the effects of the market economy on Berber households in Morocco.

Family households, it is concluded, are 'hierarchical structures characterised by male dominance'. Hence, the persistent reluctance of many traditional Marxists to explore power relations within the family and their tendency to bracket off questions of sexuality and procreation has to be challenged.

But above all the essays are held together by a concern with the processes by which social relations of gender come to be identified as natural attributes of sex. Olivia Harris shows how we continue to treat family and household as natural building blocks of society, even when we know that actual domestic arrangements vary enormously; Stolcke shows how bourgeois thought manages to justify social inequalities of gender by treating them as though they were inheritable qualities; while Elson and Pearson provide a powerful illustration of this process at work. They show how in Third World economies female skills acquired at home (such as sewing) can be ignored by employers and labour organisations when women enter the super-exploited labour markets of the world market factories. Domestic training does not qualify women for 'skilled work' because manual dexterity can be dismissed as a innate feminine attribute. The argument has a familiar ring. As Maureen Mackintosh writes:

Feminist analysis of sexual divisions starts from the premise that they are not "natural" ... Rather, we can turn such a proposition on its head: only in a society where men and women constitute unequal genders is there any reason why gender should be an important organising principle of the social division of labour, with the exception of the physical process of childbearing.' (p5)

Of Marriage and the Market joins a grow-
ing literature that is building carefully and systematically on the feminist revolution in theory. It is not, however, a book for beginners. Though it avoids unnecessary jargon and its arguments are mostly expressed clearly, few concessions are made to readers without some kind of social studies background. Unlike some of CSE’s earlier publications, this collection has not gone out of its way to become accessible to a wide ‘lay’ public. Technical terms, for example, are generally left unexplained. This will certainly limit the book’s avowed aim of making a contribution to the political struggle, but it is a valuable publication nonetheless, and should appear high on lists of recommended reading for many years to come.

Chris Middleton
Of Marriage and the Market: Women’s subordination internationally and its lessons (London: Routledge). Beneria, L. and M. Roldan. 1987. The Crossroads of Class and Gender. Sen, G. and Grown, C. 1988 Development Crises and Alternative Visions DAWN Third World Women's Perspectives; chapter 1 and 3. Earthscan. Amadiume, I. 2000 ‘Introduction’. In Daughters of the Goddess, Daughters of Imperialism: African Women Struggle for Culture, Power and Democracy. London: Zed Books. Oyewumi, O. (ed.) Among older women and women with children, this effect is substantially greater. This indicates that women were willing to substitute away from marriage if the alternatives were favorable enough, suggesting that changes in the desirability of marriage to women may account for some of the aggregate patterns of first marriage documented for this period. I also thank Noelle Yetter at the CPE, and the helpful and knowledgeable staff at the National Archives in Washington, DC. I acknowledge financial support from the National Science Foundation (SES-1227471), the Economic History Association, and the Institute for Economic Development at Boston University. Any errors are mine.