

RETHINKING THE NATURE OF WORK

Attitudes towards work in much feminist writing reflect bourgeois class biases. Middle-class women shaping feminist thought assumed that the most pressing problem for women was the need to get outside the home and work—to cease being “just” housewives. This was a central tenet of Betty Friedan’s groundbreaking book, *The Feminine Mystique*. Work outside the home, feminist activists declared, was the key to liberation. Work, they argued, would allow women to break the bonds of economic dependency on men, which would in turn enable them to resist sexist domination. When these women talked about work they were equating it with high-paying careers; they were not referring to low-paying jobs or so-called “menial” labor. They were so blinded by their own experiences that they ignored the fact that a vast majority of women were (even at the time *The Feminine Mystique* was published) already working outside the home, working in jobs that neither liberated them from dependence on men nor made them economically self-sufficient. Benjamin Barber makes this point in his critique of the women’s movement, *Liberating Feminism*:

Work clearly means something very different to women in search of an escape from leisure than it has to most of the human race for most of history. For a few lucky men, for far fewer women, work has occasionally been a source of meaning and creativity.

But for most of the race it remains even now forced drudgery in front of ploughs, machines, words, or numbers—pushing products, pushing switches, pushing papers to eke out the wherewithal of material existence.

Critiques like Barber’s did not lead feminist thinkers at that time to re-examine their perspectives on women and work. Even though the notion of work as liberation had little significance for exploited, underpaid, working women, it provided ideological motivation for college-educated white women to enter, or re-enter, the work force. It gave many non-college-educated white women who had been taught that a woman’s place is in the home the support to tolerate low-paying jobs, primarily to boost household incomes and break into personal isolation. They could see themselves as exercising new freedom. In many cases, they were struggling to maintain middle-class lifestyles that could no longer be supported solely by the income of husbands. Caroline Bird explains the motivating forces behind their entry into the work force in *The Two-Paycheck Marriage*:

Whether professional or “pink collar” work, wives didn’t think of themselves in the context of economic history. They had no idea they were creating a revolution and had no intention of doing so. Most of them drifted into jobs “to help out” at home, to save for the down payment on a house, buy clothes for the children, or to meet the rising expenses of college. They eagerly sought part-time jobs, work that wouldn’t “interfere” with their families. Instead of keeping women at home, children of the 1970s were the expense that drove women to earn, for wives with children at home were more apt to be earning than women in general.

Although many of these women never participated in feminist movement, they did think of themselves as challenging the old-fashioned ideas about women’s place.

Early feminist perpetuation of the notion “work liberates women” alienated many poor and working-class women, especially non-white women, from feminist movement for a number of reasons. Campaigns like “wages for housework,” whose organizers simultaneously challenged sexist definitions of work and the

economic structures of capitalism, did not succeed in radicalizing the public's view of feminist definitions of work. Barber was correct when he made the point that these women often desire to quit working because the work they do is not liberating:

Among many poorer Americans, liberation means the freedom of a mother finally to quit her job—to live the life of a capitalist stay-at-home, as it were. Of course work for her has meant scrubbing floors or scouring toilets or sewing endless buttons on discount smocks, and has more to do with self-preservation than self-realization. Even the most debasing sort of menial labor can, it is true, be perceived as an escape from the pointed dilemmas of leisure—providing it is not compulsory. To be able to work and to have to work are two very different matters.

As workers, poor and working-class women knew from their experiences that work was neither personally fulfilling nor liberatory—that it was for the most part exploitative and dehumanizing. They were suspicious of bourgeois women's assertion that women would be liberated via work, and they were also threatened. They were threatened because they knew that new jobs would not be created for those masses of white women seeking to enter the work force, and they feared that they and men of their classes would lose jobs. Benjamin Barber agreed with them:

When large numbers of relatively well-educated women enter a rigid labor market in which large numbers of relatively unskilled workers are already unemployed, their employment will probably spell joblessness for many at the bottom. Non-white young men between sixteen and thirty, who already comprise a large proportion of the unemployed, will find it tougher than ever to get a job. At this point the need to set priorities based on some objective measure of real suffering, oppression, and injustice becomes paramount, and the real costs of feminist insistence on the term "oppression" become visible. Sexism exists with and not in the place of racism and economic exploitation. Liberationists cannot expect the poor to look appreciatively on what appears to be a middle-class campaign to wrest still more jobs away from them.

Black women and men were among the first groups to express fears that the influx of married white women into the job market would mean fewer hirings of qualified black people, given the extent to which white supremacy has worked to prevent and exclude non-white people from certain jobs. By grouping white women of all classes with non-white people in affirmative-action programs, a system was effectively institutionalized that allowed employers to continue discriminating against non-white peoples and maintain white supremacy by hiring white women. Employers could satisfy affirmative-action guidelines without hiring any non-white people. While I was working towards a Ph.D. degree in English, I was continually told by my white professors and peers that I would be the first to get a job, that my blackness would make it easier for me to get a job. This always puzzled me since the majority of affirmative-action positions filled during the course of my years of study went to white women. When a black person (or another non-white individual) was hired it was assumed that no other people of color would ever be considered for positions—this was not the case with white women. Unfortunately, the feminist activism that argued white women were a minority helped create a situation wherein jobs once designated primarily for qualified non-whites could be given to white women, and thus many people of color felt that the feminist movement was a threat to their liberation struggles. Had white feminist activists urged that two categories be set up in affirmative-action programs—one for women distinct from oppressed ethnic groups seeking job equity—it would not have appeared that white women's liberationists were eager to advance their cause at the expense of non-white women and men.

The emphasis on work as the key to women's liberation led many white feminist activists to suggest women who worked were "already liberated." They were in effect saying to the majority of working women, "Feminist movement is not for you." By formulating feminist ideology in such a way as to make it appear irrelevant to working women, bourgeois white women effectively excluded them from the movement. They were then able to shape feminist movement to serve their class interests without having to confront the im-

pact, whether positive or negative, proposed feminist reforms would have on the masses of working-class women. Taking their cues from white women, many black women pointed to their having always worked outside the home as an indication that they were already liberated and not in need of feminist movement. They should have been challenging the idea that *any* work would liberate women and demanding that feminist movement address the concerns of working women.

If improving conditions in the workplace for women had been a central agenda for feminist movement in conjunction with efforts to obtain better-paying jobs for women and finding jobs for unemployed women of all classes, feminism would have been seen as a movement addressing the concerns of all women. Feminist focus on careerism, getting women employed in high-paying professions, not only alienated masses of women from feminist movement; it also allowed feminist activists to ignore the fact that increased entry of bourgeois women into the work force was not a sign that women as a group were gaining economic power. Had they looked at the economic situation of poor and working-class women, they would have seen the growing problem of unemployment and increased entry of women from all classes into the ranks of the poor.

Now that many middle-class white women divorce and find they enter the ranks of the poor and working-class, feminist activists have begun to talk about the "feminization of poverty" and are calling attention to the economic plight of women in the United States. Barbara Ehrenreich and Karin Stallard's essay "The Nouveau Poor" calls attention to the increased entry of middle-class white women into the ranks of the poor and emphasizes that poverty among women of all classes increased from 1967 to 1978, years many people thought were economically prosperous times for women:

The grim economic news belies the image of the '70s as women's "decade of liberation." For some women, in some ways, it was.

Women who were young, educated, and enterprising beat a path into once-closed careers like medicine, law, college teaching, and middle management. In the media, the old feminine ideal of the suburban housewife with 2.3 children and a station wagon was re-

placed by the upwardly mobile career woman with attaché case and skirted suit. Television "anchorwomen" became as familiar as yesterday's news, chairmen became chairpersons, so that at times it seemed as if the only thing holding back any woman was a subnormal supply of "assertiveness." But, underneath the upbeat images, women as a class—young, old, black, white—were steadily losing ground, with those who were doubly disadvantaged, black and Hispanic women, taking the heaviest losses.

Unfortunately, it is no accident that white women have only recently begun to focus on these losses. Classism and racism shape women's perspectives in such a way that bourgeois white women saw no need to call attention to these losses when they were not likely to be among those deprived. Concurrently, much recent attention to the issues of women and poverty (among feminists and coming from the right) implies that it is somehow more tragic, more worthy of note, more a situation in need of change because increasing numbers of white, middle-class women are likely someday to enter the ranks of the poor. This approach to the issue of women and poverty privileges the plight of one group of women. It encourages women to examine the impact of unemployment, divorce, etc. on bourgeois white women rather than compelling us to examine women's overall economic position. Had feminist activists been observing the entire picture all along, it would not have come as such a surprise that women as a group are losing rather than gaining ground economically, and the problems could have been addressed sooner.

Approached in the right way, attacking poverty could become one of the issues that could unite women from various ethnic groups and cultural backgrounds. Ehrenreich and Stallard assert:

The feminization of poverty—or, to put it the other way, the impoverishment of women—may be the most crucial challenge facing feminism today.

Ending economic exploitation of women could become the feminist agenda that would address the concerns of masses of women, thereby breaking down the barriers separating those small groups of women who actively participate in feminist organizations from the

larger group of women in society who have not participated in organized feminist struggle. It could transform feminist movement so that it would no longer serve the class interests of a specific group. A collective attempt to address the problem of women's economic exploitation would focus on a number of issues. Some of these issues might be devising ways working conditions within the present system can be improved, though this will not radically change capitalist patriarchy. This latter point is crucial. It is a point Ehrenreich and Stallard avoid making. While they write numerous paragraphs outlining the problem, they write one paragraph suggesting a possible solution:

We need a feminist economic program, and that is no small order.

An economic program that speaks to the needs of women will have to address some of the most deep-seated injustices of a business-dominated economy and a male-dominated society. Naming it will take us beyond the familiar consensus defined by the demand for equal rights—to new issues, new programs, and maybe new perspectives. Whether there are debates ahead or collective breakthroughs, they are long overdue; the feminization of poverty demands a feminist vision of a just and democratic society.

Ehrenreich and Stallard suggest that women should work to envision new economic programs, but they avoid explicitly criticizing capitalism in this essay. We must accept that it is a system that depends on the exploitation of underclass groups for its survival. We must accept that within that system, masses of women are and will be victims of class oppression.

Most women active in feminist movement do not have radical political perspectives and are unwilling to face these realities, especially when they, as individuals, gain economic self-sufficiency within the existing structure. They are reluctant, even unwilling, to acknowledge that supporting capitalist patriarchy or even a non-sexist capitalist system would not end the economic exploitation of underclass groups. These women fear the loss of their material privilege. As more middle-class white women lose status and enter the ranks of the poor, they may find it necessary to criticize

capitalism. One of the women described by Ehrenreich and Stallard acknowledges that "hard times have a remarkable way of opening your eyes."

As more women face the bankruptcy of the present economic system, we must strive to envision new economic programs while working to alleviate women's current economic plight through meaningful reforms. Efforts to create new jobs by shortening the work week should be supported. Women should support the efforts of couples to share one high-paying position. Women should work to bring an end to the "family wage" men receive. Women should support welfare and demand welfare reform. On a very basic level, women need to learn to manage whatever money they receive more effectively. Women need help to break their addiction to compulsive consumerism. Groups of women on specific jobs need to organize collectively to demand better working conditions. Often poor working conditions make low-paying jobs women hold unhealthy, unnecessarily dehumanizing, stressful, and depressing. Women who work in service jobs who do not know how to address job-related problems need somewhere they can go for guidance and advice. The list of possible reforms and progressive programs is endless. Although some of these issues are already being addressed, they could all benefit from added support. When women see that their economic concerns are a central agenda for feminist movement, they will be more inclined to examine feminist ideology.

Women are exploited economically in jobs, but they are also exploited psychologically. They are taught via sexist ideology to devalue their contributions to the labor force. They are taught via consumerism to believe that they work solely out of material necessity or scarcity, not to contribute to society, to exercise creativity, or to experience the satisfaction of performing tasks that benefit oneself as well as others. Feminist focus on rethinking the nature of work would help women workers resist psychological exploitation even though such efforts would not change the economic situation. By attributing value to all the work women do, whether paid or unpaid, feminist activists would provide alternative self-concepts and self-definitions for women. All too often, focus on professions and

careers within feminist movement led participants to act as if all other jobs, especially those that are low-paying, have no value. In this way, feminist attitudes towards work done by the masses of women mirrored the attitudes of men.

Many women in the job market do service work, which is either low-paying or unpaid (i.e., housework). Housework and other service work is particularly devalued in capitalist patriarchy. Feminist activists who argued for wages for housework saw this as a means of giving women some economic power and attributing value to the work they do. It seems unlikely that wages for housework would have led society to attribute value to these tasks since paid service work is seen as valueless. In paid service jobs, workers are compensated economically, but these compensations do not lessen the extent to which they are psychologically exploited. Their work has the same degrading stigma that is attached to housework. The anonymous authors of *Women and the New World* suggest that wages for housework is "a proposal that takes us even further down the road of capitalism since it brings us into the marketplace and puts a price on activities which should fulfill human needs and not just economic independence for women." Were women to receive wages for housework, it is unlikely that it would ever cease to be designated "woman's work," and it is unlikely that it would be regarded as valuable labor.

There have been too few works written about the value of service work and of housework in particular. (Ann Oakley's *The Sociology of Housework*, Rae André's *Homemakers: The Forgotten Workers*, and one anthology, *The Politics of Housework*, edited by Ellen Malos, are books about housework.) Yet there are few feminist studies that examine the extent to which well-done housework contributes to individual well-being, promotes the development of aesthetics, or aids in the reduction of stress. By learning housework, children and adults accept responsibility for ordering their material reality. They learn to appreciate and care for their surroundings. Since so many male children are not taught housework, they grow to maturity with no respect for their environment and often lack the know-how to take care of themselves and their households. They have been al-

lowed to cultivate an unnecessary dependence on women in their domestic lives, and, as a result of this dependence, are sometimes unable to develop a healthy sense of autonomy. Girl children, though usually compelled to do housework, are usually taught to see it as demeaning and degrading. These attitudes lead them to hate doing housework and deprive them of the personal satisfaction that they could feel as they accomplish these necessary tasks. They grow to maturity with the attitude that most work, not just housework, is drudgery, and spend their time fantasizing about lives in which they do not do work, especially service work. Were they taught to value housework, they might approach all work differently. They might see work as an affirmation of one's identity rather than a negation. Today, many young Westerners, female and male, follow the teachings of varied Eastern religious and philosophical thought in the hopes of experiencing self-realization. During this process, they learn to re-think their attitudes towards work, especially service work. They learn that discipline begins with careful performance of all tasks, especially those deemed "menial" in this culture.

rethinking the nature of work is essential for feminist movement in the United States. As part of that rethinking, women must learn to value work. Many feminist activists did not take the position that it would be a significant and meaningful gesture of power and resistance for women to learn to value the work they do, whether paid or unpaid. They acted as if work done by women could only be deemed valuable if men, especially ruling groups of men, were compelled to acknowledge its value (in the case of housework, by making it wage labor). Whether men acknowledge the value of the work women do is irrelevant if women do not value that work.

Women, like other exploited and oppressed groups in this society, often have negative attitudes towards work in general and the work they do in particular. They tend to devalue the work they do because they have been taught to judge its significance solely in terms of exchange value. Receiving low wages or no wages is seen as synonymous with personal failure, lack of success, inferiority. Like other exploited groups, women internalize the powerful's definition of themselves and the powerful's estimation of the value of their la-

bor. They do not develop an attitude towards work that sees it as an expression of dignity, discipline, creativity, etc. In *Revolution and Evolution in the Twentieth Century*, Grace Lee Boggs and James Boggs suggest that most workers in this society, female and male, think of work as a form of slavery and need to know that they create their humanity through participation in work:

It is inconceivable that humankind could exist without work. The new ethic of work starts out in the first place with the idea that work is a necessity for the human personality. But man/woman has struggled for so long against compulsory work that we have lost the notion that if we didn't work, we would not exist as humans. We exist at the historical conjunction of the highest point of the mass struggle against labor and the technological revolution which eliminated the old reasons to work. So we have to reaffirm that people have to work, but they don't have to work in the old way and for the old reasons. We can't look for a new way or for new reasons unless we believe that there are human reasons for working...

We need to set up a polarization, an opposition between two attitudes towards work. Whether or not one calls these respectively the "bourgeois" and the "socialist" attitudes to work is not important as long as we recognize that at this historical juncture, this transition, there are two attitudes: one which is hatred and repudiation of work, destructive of the human personality, and the other which recognizes work as essential to the development of oneself as a human being.

Traditionally, work has not been a sphere of human activity women have participated in for the purposes of developing their personalities, self-concepts, etc. This is one of the reasons why those who have achieved economic self-sufficiency are often as unable to liberate themselves from oppressive interactions with sexist individuals as those women who do no wage labor and depend on others for their economic survival. These working women often think that interpersonal relationships are the area in which they will develop personality, self-definition, etc. They may cling to the notion that they will someday be liberated from the need to work by

meeting the "right" man. Such thinking leads them to support and perpetuate sexist ideology. Like working-class women, they could benefit from feminist effort to rethink the nature of work. Women who cannot find work, who are unemployed and compelled to rely on welfare, are encouraged by the ruling groups to see themselves as parasites living off the labor of others. The welfare system is structured to ensure that recipients will undergo a process of demoralization in order to receive aid. This process often creates depressions that paralyze these women and make them unable to liberate themselves from the position of dependents. These women could also benefit from feminist efforts to rethink the nature of work. They could participate in feminist-promoted efforts to restructure the current welfare system to link it to a positive concept of work, to ensure that it leads to jobs.

Future feminist movement will be sustained only if the needs of masses of women are addressed. By working to rethink the nature of work, feminist activists will be shaping the direction of the movement so that it will be relevant to all women and lead them to participate.