

85 Re-Thinking the Nature of Work

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bell hooks was introduced in Chapter 1. Here, she thinks about the nature of work from a perspective that is not often considered. As you read, consider the claims that she makes that seem unconventional to you. Why are they unconventional? See if hooks is successful in indicating why we need to “rethink” work.

Source: hooks, bell. *Re-thinking the Nature of Work in Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*, pp. 95–102. South End Press, 1984. Copyright © 1984 by South End Press. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.

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 ground-breaking 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 1970’s 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

