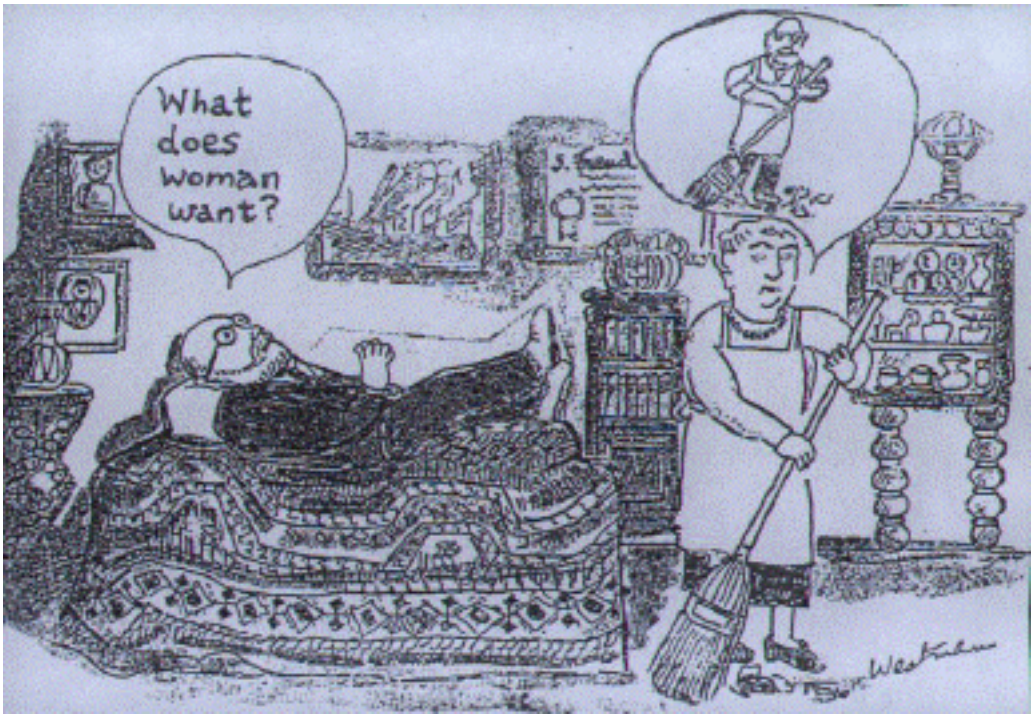
Review

Martha E. Gimenez

Bringing It All Back Home: Class, Gender & Power in the Modern Household by Harriet Fraad, Stephen Resnick, and Richard Wolff. London and Boulder, CO: Pluto Press, 1994. $66.50 hb; 18.95 pb.



This is an unusual text for it brings together, in a combination of skills one seldom encounters, the contributions of a psychoanalytic therapist, Harriet Fraad, and two economists, Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff. Given the current fashion to declare Marxism dead and the long standing feminist hostility to Marxism this book, which seeks the development of a Marxist Feminist analysis of household relations, is indeed an unexpected treat. The main theoretical contribution is the conceptualization of the modern household in feudal class terms, where husbands are like lords who appropriate their wives' surplus labor; in this light, relationships between men and women in households are class relationships. After the authors elaborate their central arguments, several feminist writers (among them Julie Matthei, Kim Lane Scheppele and Nancy Folbre) assess their strengths and weaknesses in a series of short statements. The authors' rejoinder is a very useful summary and clarification of their main points. The theory is

then used by Resnick and Wolff to explain the effects of Reaganomics on U.S. households. In a final chapter, Harriet Fraad uses feminist and psychoanalytic theories as well as the Marxist Feminist framework outlined earlier in the book to explain the significance of eating disorders among women, focusing on anorexia and the determinants of its current prevalence among career and achievement-oriented women.

A superficial reading of the main arguments is likely to mislead the reader, for as soon as one is confronted with the idea that women produce surplus labor at home which, in turn, is appropriated by their husbands or other males in positions of authority (e.g., fathers, uncles, brothers), one is reminded of the pioneering work of Margaret Benston (1969), Peggy Morton (1971), Marlene Dixon (1978) and Wally Seccombe (1973), among others, and of the lengthy and inconclusive domestic labor debate during the 1970s. Benston, for example, compared households to feudal peasant production units in which women, like peasants or serfs, produced unpaid use values; Dixon, on the other hand, conceptualized marriage as a contract legitimating the slavery of women, husbands being the slave masters appropriating their wives' labor.

In light of the above, the authors' claims would seem to replicate earlier feminist attempts to theorize marriage, domestic labor, and their implications for gender inequality. Their goal, however, is not the explanation of gender inequality but the development of a new theoretical analysis of the household and its interrelations with other institutions. They have conceptualized the household as a site where a set of feudal class processes obtain, qualitatively different from those between capital and labor. Their analysis differs from previous Marxist Feminist and Socialist Feminist perspectives on households, gender and class because, instead of locating classes outside households, while making the latter the main site where gender inequality is produced and reproduced (notwithstanding the "gendered" nature of all social processes, as feminists currently contend), they conceptualize class processes within households.

Another unique aspect of their analysis is their definition of class and gender (and other dimensions of inequality and of the social formation) as processes, rather than as relations and/or locations. Class is defined as the set of economic processes involved in the production, appropriation and distribution of surplus labor. Class analyses are possible in any site where surplus is produced. Households are sites where women produce surplus labor (in addition to the labor necessary for their own consumption) and husbands appropriate their surplus. It therefore follows that the relations between husbands and wives and, more generally, between men and women in households, are exploitative class relations.

Gender, in their framework, exists in the realm of ideology; society produces many and contradictory gender processes; i.e., sets of processes of a cultural or ideological nature involved in the production and distribution of meanings about male/female identities, relations, etc. The relationship between gender and class posited by the authors is one of interaction and mutual dependence and transformation. Class and gender processes are conditions of existence of each other and are partially determined by each other. How people live gender and the kinds of gender identities they develop depend

upon and are shaped by their class positions in households and "class and gender positions within households operate as both causes and effects of those positions outside households" (p. 2). The ways individuals understand their gendered identities "influences what class positions they will accept or seek" (p. 5); such understanding is in turn shaped by their form of participating in the processes of producing, appropriating and distributing surplus labor.

There are political, economic and cultural conditions of existence of the feudal household. State policies, ideologies, and gender processes, among which the ideology of love is paramount, are non-economic constraints that shape the feudal nature of class divisions within households where women contribute to their on exploitation through the production of surplus value as the "natural" expression of love.

The relationship between the feudal household and its conditions of existence is not always harmonious. The authors view current U.S. trends such as married women's higher levels of labor force participation, higher divorce and separation rates, domestic violence, growing numbers of gay, lesbian and single women's households and communal households as results of the interaction between capitalist and feudal class processes and contradictions and tensions within feudal households. In their view, full-time housewives are outside the capitalist class structure; they occupy only feudal class positions within their households. Once employed, however, they are supposed to produce surplus labor inside and outside their homes and, given the obvious limits to their efforts, the amount of surplus labor they are able and willing to perform at home declines. Within their framework, domestic tensions, violence and household changes today can be explained as effects of economic policies (the Resnick and Wolff's chapter examines this question in detail) and of political (e.g., the women's movement) and ideological (e.g., feminism) changes undermining the conditions of existence of feudal households while creating conditions favorable to the emergence of alternatives such as "ancient households" (in which individuals produce and appropriate their own surplus labor) and "communist households," characterized by a "communist class structure" (in which those who produce surplus labor collectively appropriate it).

The conceptualization of households as "feudal" sites where husbands/lords expropriate the surplus labor of their wives/peasants is descriptively compelling but, in my view, theoretically unconvincing because it reduces household relations to exploitive relations, neglecting the cooperation between household members, and because it assumes that wives do not benefit from their husbands' earnings or that the benefits are always less than the imputed value of their surplus labor. This is why the debate on domestic labor remained inconclusive; there were good arguments on both sides of this issue and no clear resolution of the differences. Dialectically, households are a unity of opposites where social relations between men and women and their children are exploitive and cooperative and which aspect prevails is something that cannot be predicted apriori, thus casting doubts on the appropriateness of this particular view on household relations. Furthermore, class divisions affect who does or does not domestic labor, thus introducing more complexity in the household composition characteristic of capitalist societies. Paradoxically, while the authors' emphasis on processes and mutual

interdependence of economic, ideological and political processes is grounded on their rejection of the alleged economic determinism of "traditional" Marxism, they offer a bleak and "economistic" portrait of household relations by presenting exploitation as the reality underlying the ideologies of romantic love.

The contradictory expectations to which women are subject, which stem not only from the interaction between their capitalist and feudal class expected behaviors but also from conflicting ideological demands have, as Fraad argues in her perceptive essay, important conscious and unconscious psychological effects which manifest themselves in symptoms captured under the general notion of eating disorders. Among them, anorexia is the way achievement oriented, ambitious women deal with the cultural and economic processes demanding both their subservience to and departure from their mothers' role in the feudal household. The interaction between capitalist class processes which increasingly pull women into the labor force, and psychological, racial, political and social processes that ultimately result in women's conflictive relationship to food and nurturing activities epitomizes the multiple relationships between class and other institutions the authors postulate as an alternative to classical or "traditional" Marxism.

Whether or not one agrees with the authors' analysis, by taking Marxism seriously for feminist concerns this book is an important contribution to the Marxist and Feminist literatures and to the enterprise of continuing the more than ever crucial task of demonstrating the contemporary relevance and vitality of Marxist theory.

Works Cited

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