





SUGGESTION

Household Matters: Engendering the Social History of Capitalism

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Abstract

This essay takes up the project of engendering capitalism by turning to the household. It situates a gendered analysis of capitalism within recent histories of capitalism, feminist analyses of social reproduction, histories of family and industrialism, histories of sexuality, and histories of women's labor. It argues that to analyze capitalism from a household perspective clarifies three core elements of capitalist political economy. First, capitalism depended on reproductive and productive labor inside the household, from early industrialization through its most recent incarnations. Second, reproductive labor, historically anchored in the household, has served as a crucial site for development of capitalist labor relations. Third, that intensified commodification of reproductive labor has driven capitalist accumulation as well as capitalist social relations, whether that labor occurs within the household or is located beyond it.

For over a decade, scholars have been rediscovering capitalism as an economic process, a term of analysis, and a historical force. This “new” history of capitalism emerged in response to developments of our time that appeared to have reshaped the world economy. As historian Jürgen Kocka has argued, the end of the Cold War, the ideological prominence of market liberalism, the Great Recession of 2007–2009, and the expansion of capitalist development in the Global South and former communist regimes, sparked renewed interest in interrogating the contours of capitalism.¹ We now have robust reconsiderations of the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the violence of primitive accumulation, and the continuum between free and unfree labor. The significance of banks, risk-taking, speculation, and other means of

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financing capital have joined studies of labor conflict, commodification, and expropriation of resources. Waged labor no longer seems as central to the definition of capitalism as it once did, as scholars have reassessed unwaged or non-waged labor's importance to productive relationships, including that of the housewife and the enslaved.²

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the centrality of care work – for one's household, in other people's homes, and in the service and health sectors – to the functioning of Western economies. Without child and elder care, mothers especially faced additional burdens in meeting the demands of double days of earning income and tending to the household. Initially celebrated as heroes, the nurses, home attendants, meat packers, fruit pickers, and retail clerks designated as “essential workers” risked bringing infection home in order to provide for other households.³ This recent history leads us to take up the project of engendering the history of capitalism by turning to the household, to the labors performed therein, and to the growing commodification of those labors – whether carried out within or beyond the home – to understand the overall political economy.

We ask, how does the history of capitalism look different if you start from the household? What insights does this entry point and angle of vision offer for crafting an engendered history of capitalism? Once we begin an analysis of capitalism from the household, multiple themes and dilemmas immediately emerge: coerced and unforced reproductive labor; the emotional and educational work of making people through socialization; persistent “precapitalist” bartering, scavenging, and other forms of provisioning; household-based market production; industrial homework; household consumption; family budgeting; collective and individual men's control over the bodies of women and children (and often other men); marriage, family, and their fracturing; and the dual dynamic of regulating while exploiting sexualities. To consider some, but certainly not all, of these topics, we shape our discussion around the commodification of reproductive labor: that is, the long-term, deepening process of monetizing household production, basic subsistence goods, and the labor of social reproduction itself through market exchange, pricing, and the wage

²Emblematic texts in the vast “new history of capitalism” include, Köcka and Van der Linden (eds), *Capitalism*; Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman (eds), *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development* (Philadelphia, PA, 2016); Jason W. Moore, “The Capitalocene, Part I: On the Nature and Origins of our Ecological Crisis”, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 44 (2017), pp. 594–630; Sven Beckert and Christine Desan (eds), *American Capitalism: New Histories* (New York, 2018); Andrew B. Liu, “Production, Circulation, and Accumulation: The Historiographies of Capitalism in China and South Asia”, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 78 (2019), pp. 767–788; Trevor Burnard and Giorgio Riello, “Slavery and the New History of Capitalism”, *Journal of Global History*, 15 (2020), pp. 225–244; Andrew David Edwards, Peter Hill, and Juan Neves-Sarriegui, “Capitalism in Global History”, *Past & Present*, 249 (2020), pp. 1–32; Destin Jenkins and Justin Leroy (eds), *Histories of Racial Capitalism* (New York, 2021); and Jonathan Levy, *Ages of American Capitalism: A History of the United States* (New York, 2021). For an outstanding and rich bibliography, see the “History of Capitalism Bibliography” (2021) created by Seth Rockman and his students at Brown University. Available at: <https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:x6qjs69e/>; last accessed 23 March 2023.

³Jennifer Klein, “Inoculations: The Social Politics of Time, Labor, and Public Good in COVID-America”, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 99 (2021), pp. 30–46; Anna Triandafyllidou (ed.), *Migration and Pandemics: Spaces of Solidarity and Spaces of Exception* (Cham, 2022). E-book available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-81210-2>.

relation. We further distinguish the commodification of bodies from the commodification of household labor.

We argue that to analyze capitalism from a household perspective clarifies three core elements of capitalist political economy. First, rather than segregating the home as the arena of reproduction from the factory as a site of production, capitalism depended on reproductive and productive labor inside the household from early industrialization through its most recent incarnations. Second, reproductive labor, which has historically been anchored in the household, has served as a crucial site for development of capitalist labor relations (unpaid and paid, patriarchal and equalitarian, coerced and less coerced), and their attendant social conflicts. Third, intensified commodification of reproductive labor has driven capitalist accumulation as well as capitalist social relations, whether that labor occurs within the household or is located beyond it.

We adopt this approach because the histories of capitalism too often stand apart from women's history, the history of sexualities, and gender analysis. Women and gender historians have lamented the missing women and minimal attention to gender in the reconsideration of capitalism.⁴ We share in this critique and disappointment. For it is not just that the working (or capitalist) class has had at least two sexes, but that sexual divisions of labor, gender definitions, kinship and family formation, and normative sexuality have shaped – even as they have reflected – the mode of production. As historian Jonathan Levy has reminded us, “[t]he history of capitalism must be economic history but also something more”. Economic history must be reconceived as a gendered history that is both about how people live and about who has the power to define those lives, that is, as social and cultural history. These histories must be gendered in a fully intersectional sense, accounting for race, class, caste, sexualities, and other factors in their material as well as ideological forms.⁵

Foundational Insights

To lay out a history of capitalism from the perspective of the household and reproductive labor, we build from the pioneering analyses of socialist feminists. Social reproduction theory, whether articulated in the 1970s Wages for Housework movement or, more recently, by political philosopher Nancy Fraser, placed “social reproduction” – or the human labor of “creating or reproducing society as a whole” – alongside production as an engine of capitalism.⁶ Marxist feminists, like Silvia

⁴Amy Dru Stanley, “Histories of Capitalism and Sex Difference”, *Journal of the Early Republic*, 36:2 (2016), pp. 343–350; Ellen Hartigan-O'Connor, “The Personal Is Political Economy”, *Journal of the Early Republic*, 36:2 (2016), pp. 335–341; Nan Enstad, “The ‘Sonorous Summons’ of the New History of Capitalism, Or, What Are We Talking about When We Talk about Economy?”, *Modern American History*, 2 (2019), pp. 83–95; April Haynes, “Intimate Economies, 1790–1860”, in Nancy A. Hewitt and Anne M. Valk (eds), *A Companion to American Women's History*, 2nd edn (Hoboken, NJ, 2021), pp. 89–106; Tracey Deutsch and Nan Enstad, “Capitalism in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries”, in *A Companion to American Women's History*, pp. 261–278.

⁵Levy, *Ages of American Capitalism*, p. xxi.

⁶Tithi Bhattacharya, “Introduction”, in Tithi Bhattacharya (ed.), *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentring Oppression* (London, 2017), p. 2; Louise Toupin, *Wages for Housework: A History of an International Feminist Movement, 1972–1977* (London, 2018); Nancy Fraser, “Contradictions of Capital

Federici, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Selma James, and Lise Vogel, refuted the dismissal of women's unpaid work within the household as non-productive since the 1970s.⁷ More recently, social reproduction theorists have built on the insights of Black feminists to show that the "reproduction of life" has long required an intertwined web of coerced and paid labor that depended upon lower caste and class women.⁸

Earlier insights of theorists and historians reinforce our argument that engendering the history of capitalism requires starting from the household. Women's and family historians Joan Scott, Louise Tilly, and Wally Seccombe argued that distinct family formations, means of familial economic survival, and structures of women's work accompanied different phases of capitalism as it shifted from early industrializing to consumer-driven forms.⁹ Historical demographers have related both household formation and structure to the expansion of markets, consumption practices, and participation in waged work.¹⁰ In a similar vein, Fraser recently connected regimes of social reproduction, family formation, and/or household organization to the historical development of capitalism. She tied each regime to a distinct stage of capitalism: nineteenth-century liberal competitive capitalism; twentieth-century state-managed capitalism; and present-day globalizing financial capitalism.¹¹ Our historical approach turns to deeply researched histories to both enrich and complicate Fraser's theoretical framework.

We also take guidance from the systematizing work of historian Peter Drucker and sociologist Elizabeth Bernstein. Both scholars link capitalist evolution to gender ideologies and sexual formations. Drucker charts accumulation regimes in terms of

and Care", *New Left Review*, 100 (2016), pp. 99–117; Nancy Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism: How Our System is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet – and What We Can Do About It* (New York, 2022). For long-standing proponents, see Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Brooklyn, NY, 2012); Lise Vogel, "Domestic Labor Revisited", *Science & Society*, 64:2 (2000), pp. 152–153. For recent syntheses on social reproduction theory, see Susan Ferguson *et al.*, "Introduction", Special Issue on Social Reproduction, *Historical Materialism*, 24:2 (2016), pp. 25–37; Susan Ferguson, *Women and Work: Feminism, Labour, and Social Reproduction* (London, 2020).

⁷Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero*; Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* (Bristol, 1972); Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory* (Chicago, IL, [1983] 2013).

⁸Ferguson, *Women and Work*, p. 105; Premilla Nadasen, *Care: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (Chicago, IL, 2023), pp. 47–97. For integration of social reproduction theory with histories of racial capitalism, see Diana Paton, "Gender History, Global History, and Atlantic Slavery: On Racial Capitalism and Social Reproduction", *American Historical Review*, 127:2 (2022), pp. 726–754.

⁹Louise A. Tilly and Joan W. Scott, *Women, Work, and Family* (New York, 1978); Wally Seccombe, *A Millennium of Family Change: Feudalism to Capitalism in Northwestern Europe* (New York, 1992); *idem*, *Weathering the Storm: Working-Class Families from the Industrial Revolution to the Fertility Decline* (New York, 1993).

¹⁰Steven Ruggles, "Patriarchy, Power, and Pay: The Transformation of American Families, 1800–2015", *Demography*, 52:6 (2015), pp. 1797–1823; Maria Stanfors and Frances Goldscheider, "The Forest and the Trees: Industrialization, Demographic Change, and the Ongoing Gender Revolution in Sweden and the United States, 1870–2010", *Demographic Research*, 36:6 (2017), pp. 173–226; Tine De Moor and Jan Luiten van Zanden, "Girl Power: The European Marriage Pattern and Labour Markets in the North Sea Region in the Late Medieval and Early Modern Period", *The Economic History Review*, 63:1 (2010), pp. 1–33; Mary S. Hartman, *The Household and the Making of History: A Subversive View of the Western Past* (New York, 2004).

¹¹Fraser, "Contradictions of Capital and Care", pp. 103–104.

gender and “same-sex formations” (along with forms of racism and global political orders). He matches binary manhood/womanhood and invert-dominant same-sex formations with “classical imperialism”, performative gender and gay-dominant identities with Fordism, and “public patriarchy” and homonormativity with neoliberalism.¹² Bernstein connects early modern capitalism with domestic production, extended kin networks, and procreative sexuality. She associates modern industrial capitalism with wage labor, the nuclear family and “amative/companionate” sexuality. The economy of “late capitalism” dominated by services, finances, information technologies, and flexible accumulation produces blended families and isolated individuals as well as what Bernstein names “bounded authenticity”, a sexual ethic in which “relational meaning resides in the market translation”, in which commodified “girlfriend” relationships are real but temporary.¹³

Their interventions challenge gaps in social reproduction theory. Most discussions focus on dependent care and household maintenance through a range of domestic labors for the family, including feeding, nursing, and emotionally supporting its members. Sex outside of reproduction – non-reproductive labor in the conventional sense of that term – usually goes unnamed, even in the form of commercialized sex. Prostitutes are like wives insofar as they tend to the needs of the male wage earner, replenishing his labor power, the feminist theorist Leopoldina Fortunati has argued. Fortunati is virtually alone in including sex workers in analyses of the ways that reproductive labor benefits capitalist accumulation.¹⁴ Queer and feminist scholars, like Fortunati, Bernstein, and Drucker, demonstrate the historical construction of sex and the making of capitalist relations through sex.¹⁵ Such insights guide our inclusion of sex – as reproduction, as pleasure, as commodity, and as a historical construct legitimizing some intimate relationships and households over others – among the elements in a household-centered history of capitalism.

Charting the Field

Taking inspiration from this rich tradition of mapping capitalism to family, domestic, or sexual relations, we offer our own schematic-in-the-making that charts broad phases of capitalism with unwaged domestic labor, waged domestic labor, commodified social reproduction, commodified bodies, and reconstructed households (Chart 1). Read horizontally, our chart draws attention to the multifaceted character of socially reproductive labor, its ties to sexual and familial relations, and its imbrication in both the home and the larger marketplace. Read vertically, the chart lays out broad changes in the character of each element, suggesting that these elements both define capitalism’s character in that moment and react to other transformations within capitalism. For example, waged domestic

¹²Peter Drucker, *Warped: Gay Normality and Queer Anti-Capitalism* (Chicago, IL, 2015), p. 8.

¹³Elizabeth Bernstein, “Bounded Authenticity and the Commerce of Sex”, in Eileen Boris and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas (eds), *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies, and the Politics of Care* (Stanford, CA, 2010), pp. 152, 160.

¹⁴Leopoldina Fortunati, *Arcane of Reproduction* (New York, 1989).

¹⁵Jordana Rosenberg and Amy Villarejo (eds), “Queer Studies and the Crises of Capitalism”, *GLQ*, 18:1 (2012), special issue.

Phase of capitalist development/ social relations	Household Labor and Social Reproduction ¹				
	Unwaged domestic labor	Paid & waged domestic labor (workers)	Commodified social reproduction (goods)	Commodified bodies	Reconstructed households
Pre- & early market capitalism/Family economy/Household mode of production/ Market capitalism/Settler colonialism/Racial capitalism	Labor needs of household define work roles of men, women, and children Interdependence of work and residence Displacement of Indigenous households	Servants as familial retainers Some domestic services purchased in market	Wet nursing Enslaved women's social reproduction Market purchase of household goods grows slowly (early consumer revolution)	Prostitution Coerced reproduction of enslaved women	Complex households with kin; servants; enslaved women, men, and children; and retainers Procreative sexuality
Family wage economy/ Industrialism/ Colonialism and Imperialism Fordism/Family consumer economy/ Postcolonial "development"	Unwaged domestic labor continues in a "family-wage" economy Women retain responsibility for domestic & reproductive labor Extraction by metropole of reproductive labor	Servants as paid workers Paid domestic services expand – seamstresses, governesses, washerwomen Market-based reproductive employment expands (commercial laundries; creches)	Household composition based on need for cash (vs. laborers) and consumption needs Purchase of household goods Industrial products penetrate household and reshape domestic labor	Red light districts	Nuclear family Amative/companionate sexuality New forms of autonomy for daughters/young women Emergence of queer identities
Post-Fordism/ Neoliberalism	Dual breadwinner/female caregiver Wage-earning lone motherhood	Personal services widen their reach (dog walkers, personal trainers) "Care economy"	Large portions of domestic needs met by purchase (meal kits, take out, fast fashion, breast pumps)	Intimacy for hire (the "girlfriend experience") Surrogacy	Blended families and isolated individuals alongside marital households "Bounded authenticity"

¹ This chart is schematic and centers the household and social reproductive labor (thus setting aside conventional productive/wage work). Dotted lines and arrows signal overlapping, ongoing, and contested processes.

Chart 1. Household labor and social reproduction.

workers who were attached to households in the earliest phases of market capitalism are now more commonly independent contractors, precariously making their way in the personal services sector in post-Fordist capitalism. Like all such mappings, this one simplifies a far more complex reality that includes the productive labor regimes of unwaged and waged work, political organization, and the substantial variation spatially and temporally across regions of the globe. The arrows and dotted lines in the chart signal the overlapping, ongoing, and contested processes in each of the categories. We emphasize, in other words, the “uneven development” of change.¹⁶

Before proceeding, some definitions are in order. The household, no less than capitalism, is a historic construct and subject to change over time. Its boundaries vary depending on the overall political economy. Resilient and malleable, it has responded to interventions by states and their agents as well as by markets and their imperatives. By household, we mean a unit of living consisting of kin whether bound by formal or informal “familial” ties as well as others residing and working within, such as servants, slaves, apprentices, and boarders, whether or not its inhabitants pool income along with sharing labor. It is a place for work in all its dimensions, as well as one location for sex, which might be considered a form of labor. The household has expanded or contracted over time depending on the number of inhabitants and their work. It has remained a prominent arena for reproductive labor, which we regard as a central force in the development of capitalism.¹⁷ Thus, we agree with the conclusion of global labor historian Marcel van der Linden, drawing upon feminist historian of Germany Jean Quataert, that the household should be “the basis unit of analysis rather than individuals, because [. . .] doing so enables us to keep ‘in focus at all times the lives of both men and women, young and old, and the variety of paid and unpaid work necessary to maintain the unit’”.¹⁸

Reproductive labor we define as those activities that sustain people daily and generationally through the quotidian tasks of life necessary to develop and maintain both labor power and social relations. These activities are both material (like feeding), emotional (like love), and assimilative (like transference of norms and

¹⁶We derive the concept of “uneven developments” from Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Intimate Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago, IL, 1988).

¹⁷Our analysis could fruitfully be extended and elaborated for households rooted in non-kin relationships. Boardinghouses, shared houses among roommates, and brothels come to mind. See Wendy Gamber, *The Boardinghouse in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore, MD, 2007); Jessica Hester, “A Brief History of Co-Living Spaces”, *Bloomberg*, 22 February 2016. Available at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-02-22/a-brief-history-of-co-living-spaces-from-19th-century-boarding-houses-to-millennial-compounds>; last accessed 19 September 2022. Jade Luiz, “Clandestine, Ephemeral, Anonymous?: Myths and Realities of the Intimate Economy of a Nineteenth-Century Boston Brothel”, in James A. Nyman, Kevin R. Fogle, and Mary C. Beaudry (eds), *The Historical Archaeology of Shadow and Intimate Economies* (Gainesville, FL, 2019), pp. 214–238.

¹⁸Marcel van der Linden, *The World Wide Web of Work: A History in the Making* (London, 2023), p. 39. He quotes from Jean H. Quataert, “Combining Agrarian and Industrial Livelihood: Rural Households in the Saxon Oberlausitz in the Nineteenth Century”, *Journal of Family History*, 10 (1985), p. 148. See also his chapter “Household Strategies”, pp. 111–124. For similar emphasis on the importance of the household, see Joan Smith, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Hans-Dieter Evers (eds), *Households and the World-Economy* (Beverly Hills, CA, 1984); Joan Smith and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Creating and Transforming Households: The Constraints of the World Economy* (New York, 1992).

values), whether occurring in the family, school, church, workplace, or community. Their meaning, too, has varied over time and space. Reproductive labor has most often been allocated to women. As Africanists Karin Pallaver and Filipa Ribeiro da Silva conclude about colonialism: African women were “those who had to take care of the household and food production” and were those who “as mothers [. . .] were needed to reproduce the workforce”.¹⁹ Conflated with the unpaid, usually intimate, duties of mothers, wives, and daughters, reproductive labor, when commodified as employment, has rarely commanded adequate wages or even recognition as work throughout the globe. Women’s responsibility for caring for and maintaining households further justified irregular working hours, short-term jobs, and exclusion from labor law in Western societies.²⁰

Precisely because we argue for considering reproductive and productive labor together, we begin with major insights from the well-developed scholarship on the history of wage-earning women. Such research has already expanded understandings of industrialization by decentering the factory as the locus of labor and by placing the individual worker in the context of family and community as well as the shopfloor. It also redefined the working-class to include wives and daughters. In this section, we briefly set out histories of female wage workers and the gendered ideologies of work that shaped the place and status of women workers. This section reminds us of that an engendered social history of capitalism must include, even if not limited to, histories of work that women’s and gender scholars have already presented.

We then offer an account of capitalism centered on the household. This section considers how subsistence production and the unpaid labor of social reproduction sustained capitalism, even as both became attached to market exchange and capitalist forms of commodification. While we have considered global and transnational processes, as histories of capitalism must, our intervention disproportionately draws upon the history we know best – the settler colonial, racial capitalist United States – in full recognition of the partial story we present – but with the hope to provoke comparisons and further elaborations.

Woman Wage-Earners and Gendered Ideologies of Work

For decades, women and gender historians have underscored the distinctive and central role of female wage workers for class formation, capital accumulation, and the growth of wage labor. During capitalist industrialization, a process that extended well into the twentieth century as some older Western locations deindustrialized while manufacturing relocated to the Global South and rural areas, daughters particularly provided cheap labor for assembly work. Textile manufacturing, a sparkplug of industrialization, depended on such labor. From the eighteenth century, European economic development – encompassing Irish linen, British cotton, French silk, and German textiles – relied on young women who moved

¹⁹Karin Pallaver and Filipa Ribeiro da Silva, “Introduction”, *African Economic History*, 50:1 (2002), p. 6.

²⁰For recent syntheses on social reproduction theory, see Bhattacharya (ed.), *Social Reproduction Theory*; Ferguson *et al.*, “Introduction.”

from cottage industry to factory spinning.²¹ The initial employees of the Lowell, Massachusetts mills in the 1820s and 1830s were daughters from nearby farms, although immigrant women and men replaced them within two decades.²²

The places of women's employment expanded from the late-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. To be sure, domestic and agricultural labor – whether subsistence, coerced, or for a wage – still accounted for most of the work undertaken by women worldwide well into the twentieth century. Such was the case for colonial Java where women engaged in subsistence agriculture with their children, while the cash crop cultivation system of the mid-nineteenth century forced men to relinquish about 20 per cent of their output to the authorities.²³ Meanwhile, Javanese households gained additional income from women's handloom weaving for domestic and local consumption into the World War I era.²⁴ In colonial Africa, the growth of commercial agriculture and extractive industries that favored men led, in some areas, to women's loss of control over land and narrowed their agricultural work to meeting household consumption needs. Mining towns segregated women's labor into low-pay and low-status laundry and cooking for male workers. In some plantation agriculture, as in Ghana's cocoa production, female kin provided the basic labor but had no guaranteed wages and their male kin retained the proceeds.²⁵

Women were particularly found in light manufacturing, especially garments and munitions, but also in heavy industry, such as steam-powered laundries. By the end of the nineteenth century, white, US-born women were staffing new department stores and the growing retail and hospitality sector of the emerging consumer capitalist economy, while newly arrived European immigrants went into the factories to escape domestic service, repeating a trajectory made by earlier generations of rural people under changed global social relations. In Europe, women also moved into retail and white-collar jobs. The corporation required a vast labor force of typists and clerks, usually supplied by high-school-educated women from the dominant racial, ethnic, or caste group worldwide (with exceptions under cultures of seclusion) as Fordist capitalism's tentacles spread. In the US, only Black-owned businesses hired African Americans for white-collar labor until after the Civil Rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s. The new professions where women concentrated in the twentieth century – teaching, social work, and

²¹Mary Jo Maynes, "Gender, Labor, and Globalization in Historical Perspective: European Spinsters in the International Textile Industry, 1750–1890", *Journal of Women's History*, 15:4 (2004), pp. 47–66.

²²Thomas Dublin, "Women, Work, and the Family: Female Operatives in the Lowell Mills, 1830–1860", *Feminist Studies*, 3:1/2 (1975), pp. 30–39; and Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826–1860*, 2nd edn (New York, 1993); for a global perspective on the use of women as cheap labor, Jan Lucassen, *The Story of Work: A New History of Humankind* (New Haven, CT, 2021), pp. 332–341.

²³Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, *Women, Work and Colonialism in the Netherlands and Java: Comparisons, Contrasts, and Connections, 1830–1940* (London, 2019).

²⁴*Idem*, "Challenging the De-Industrialization Thesis: Gender and Indigenous Textile Production in Java under Dutch Colonial Rule, c.1839–1920", *Economic History Review*, 70:4 (2017), pp. 1219–1243.

²⁵Kathleen Sheldon, *African Women: Early History to the 21st Century* (Bloomington, IN, 2017), ch. 4.

nursing – became extensions of motherhood, justifying lower wages compared to occupations filled by men.²⁶

These trends deepened and repeated themselves in the second half of the twentieth century. Post-Fordism generated both a service economy and financialization. The service economy itself was multifaceted: besides retail and restaurants, there developed business and white-collar services, like accounting and corporate law, and personal services, like dog walkers and fitness trainers. Education and healthcare became engines of economic growth in old rustbelt cities like Pittsburgh, where a workforce of low-waged nurse's aides and personal attendants, disproportionately Black and immigrant women, grew while unionized jobs in steel held by men vanished.²⁷ By 1970, clerical work accounted for nearly three quarters of employed women in the US, with married women with children returning to the office part-time.²⁸ When the chain store replaced the local grocery and the big box displaced the downtown department store, owners and managers replicated the gendered and racial hierarchies of who stood behind counters or typed in offices, with women and men of color hired for backroom work and moving to the front of the enterprise only when the labor became more repetitive and the wages lowered.²⁹

More low-waged manufacturing migrated out of the US and Western Europe. In Latin America and throughout Asia, export industries feminized their manufacturing workforces (with notable exceptions, such as Argentina, which had robust manufacturing from the nineteenth century and a male workforce). But unlike the globalization of early industrialization, enhanced by the slave trade and new legal entities like the joint stock company, such gender divisions occurred in a context in which multinationals and widened supply chains were more pervasive in overtaking production for use or local markets, as along the US-Mexico border.³⁰ In the twenty-first century, Chinese daughters departed from rural households to become the temporary residents of new factory cities, crowded like the Lowell mill girls into dormitories, producing the clothing and electronics spurring Chinese

²⁶For an overview, Eileen Boris and Lara Vapnek, "Women's Labors in Industrial and Postindustrial America", in Eileen Hartigan-O'Connor and Lisa Materson (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of American Women's and Gender History* (New York, 2018), pp. 171–192. See also Evelyn Nakano Glenn, "From Servitude to Service Work: Historical Continuities in the Racial Division of Paid Reproductive Labor", *Signs*, 18 (1992), pp. 1–43; Deborah Simonon, *A History of European Women's Work, 1790 to the Present* (London, 1998); Gerry Holloway, *Women and Work in Britain Since 1840* (London, 2005); Amarjit Kaur, *Women Workers in Industrialising Asia: Costed, Not Valued* (New York, 1988).

²⁷Gabriel Winant, *The Next Shift: The Fall of Industry and the Rise of Health Care in Rust Belt America* (Cambridge, MA, 2021); Tracy Neumann, *Remaking the Rust Belt: The Postindustrial Transformation of North America* (Philadelphia, PA, 2016).

²⁸Kim England and Kate Boyer, "Women's Work: The Feminization and Shifting Meanings of Clerical Work", *Journal of Social History*, 43:2 (2009), pp. 307–340.

²⁹Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (Cambridge, MA, 2010). For comparison, see Bridget Kenny, *Retail Worker Politics, Race and Consumption in South Africa: Shelved in the Service Economy* (London, 2018).

³⁰Teri L. Caraway, *Assembling Women: The Feminization of Global Manufacturing* (Ithaca, NY, 2007); Jane Collins, *Threads: Gender, Labor, & Power in the Global Apparel Industry* (Chicago, IL, 2003); Annelise Orleck, *We Are All Fast-Food Workers Now* (Boston, MA, 2018); Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC, 2015).

ascent as the new Manchester of the world.³¹ Myths of the disposable woman worker in need of mere “pin money” jacked up profits on the global assembly line, as it had since capitalism’s earliest factories.³²

Nimble fingers and motherly care distinguished the woman worker from the male, but that was not all. Hegemonic, and dichotomous, ideals of womanhood and manhood evolved in tandem with capitalism. From the early nineteenth century, these ideologies mystified women’s labor and imagined the household as exclusively a domain of wifely and maternal devotion, but primarily for white women and increasingly for the middle-class among them. Historian Jeanne Boydston argued that antebellum American writers of prescriptive domestic literature effectively performed a magician’s disappearing act as capitalist social relations expanded. Through a process of romantic idealization, they transmuted the household into “a new Eden – a paradise delivered up [...] from a benevolent and bountiful nature, without the curse of labor”.³³ That successful transmogrification reshaped the basis for male dominance and female subordination. To be idealized as a “mother” rather than valued as a seventeenth- or eighteenth-century “goodwife” was to gain limited forms of cultural authority primarily from a position of dependence. The social authority of “worker” was increasingly denied to women – despite the labor they did inside and outside the household. Worker became synonymous with man.³⁴

Manhood, no less than womanhood, was thus central to understanding the power relations of capitalism. In the US, as capitalism expanded in the early nineteenth century, only free, i.e. white, men who controlled their own labor – the small proprietor, agrarian yeoman, and the skilled master craftsman – were truly independent men.³⁵ By the mid-nineteenth century, in the industrializing US north, wage labor no longer signified dependency; masters and servants had been replaced by employers and employees, ensnared in the legal fiction that they could engage in freedom of contract as equals when the dependency of the lone worker on the wage actually empowered the employer.

Workingmen’s supposed autonomy was mirrored by workingwomen’s dependency. That perception never stopped New England women sewers of shoes and tenders of looms from protesting that they would not be “slaves”. On the eve of the Civil War, they decried low wages and worsening conditions, drawing on that potent symbol of unfree labor, the slave, as the hireling’s worst fate.³⁶ Indeed, in the late nineteenth-century Anglo-American world, the discourse of slavery epitomized

³¹Melissa Wright, *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism* (New York, 2006); Pun Ngai, *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workforce* (Durham, NC, 2005).

³²Leslie Salzing, *Genders in Production: Making Workers in Mexico’s Global Factories* (Berkeley, CA, 2003).

³³Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (New York, 1990), p. 147.

³⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 157–158.

³⁵Daniel Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850–1920* (Chicago, IL, 1978); David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York, 1991); Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago, IL, 1995).

³⁶Dublin, *Women at Work*; Alan Dawley, *Class and Community: The Industrial Revolution in Lynn* (Cambridge, MA, 1976).

by “factory bondswoman” and “sewing serfs” framed discussions of capitalist exploitation in exposés on the victimization of women workers.³⁷ In these discourses, gender served as a category through which to express exploitation, with womanhood requiring saving, often by enclosure in the naturalized space of the home, as if domiciles were never subject to violence.

Collective action through unionization became necessary for men to be men, with provision through a family wage the unionized worker’s ultimate badge of manhood. Craft unions mobilized around the idea that “the man is the provider and should receive enough for his labor to give his family a respectable living”, one US unionist explained in 1904.³⁸ Gender as a category of analysis, to borrow from Joan Scott, provided the language for labor organizing and reform efforts, but also the frameworks to naturalize the reasons for and results of economic activity. Yet, the family wage proved an elusive reed to organize economic life; a man’s wage was rarely enough without the unpaid reproductive labor of wives and daughters and, in many cases, income generation by others in the household.³⁹ The myth of a woman at work for “pin money” sustained the fiction of the family wage while leaving women workers vulnerable to exploitation and denying the existence of masses of self-supporting women.

Gender ideologies justified occupational segregation not only in the US. As historian of India Samita Sen has shown, Bengali jute mills excluded women from well-paying jobs on the basis that respectable women should be secluded, not laboring in public.⁴⁰ Women lost status for being on the streets, even if not of the streets. These relations were racialized as well, with domesticity attached to true womanhood and true womanhood defined through whiteness or Britishness, against the enslaved African, the uncivilized “native”, “heathen” Chinese, and all conquered non-Europeans. Men were to protect their wives and children but those who were enslaved could not stop violence against kin, their sale, or their own forced mobility and coerced sexual performance.⁴¹

These ideologies of gender and work traveled worldwide, mixing with pre-existing gender divisions and power relations. Racist assumptions about African women’s physical strength meant that the gendered ideologies of labor under capitalism were more often a matter of convenience than of consistency. As with slavery, European and American settler colonists never exempted colonized women from the heavy labor of carrying 200-pound sacks of cocoa from farm to port.⁴² The global sweatshop of the late twentieth century also generated gendered portraits of victimization, highlighting the abject “Third World Woman” exploited by

³⁷For example, Nell Nelson, “City Slave Girls”, *Chicago Daily Times*, July–August 1888. Available at: <https://undercover.hosting.nyu.edu/s/undercover-reporting/item-set/55>; last accessed 19 September 2022. Louis Albert Banks, *White Slaves: The Oppression of the Worthy Poor* (Boston, MA, 1893).

³⁸Levy, *American Capitalism*, pp. 169–170; quoted in Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York, 1982), p. 153.

³⁹Sonya O. Rose, *Limited Livelihoods: Gender and Class in Nineteenth-Century England* (Berkeley, CA, 1992).

⁴⁰Samita Sen, *Women and Labour in Colonial India* (Cambridge, 1999).

⁴¹Thomas A. Foster, *Rethinking Rufus: Sexual Violations of Enslaved Men* (Athens, GA, 2019).

⁴²Sheldon, *African Women*, ch. 4.

employers, fanned by garment unions and NGOs like Global Exchange, the Clean Clothes Campaign, and the National Labor Committee.⁴³

Household Labor: Extracted, Socially Reproductive, and Increasingly Commodified

The status of woman as second-class worker and gendered ideologies of labor illuminate much about capitalist class formation, profit extraction, and labor regimes, but such histories are not enough to fully grasp the engendering of capitalism. These frames set the household and reproductive labor to the side, perpetuating the disappearance that began with the nineteenth-century idealization of the “home” and “angel in the house” in the US and Europe. Centering the household and the reproductive labor associated with it, this section traces processes by which the work of the household became enmeshed in capitalism as both unwaged reproduction of human life and labor power and, over the last several centuries, as increasingly commodified goods and waged labor.

The home served as a site of production. In subsistence economies, its denizens consumed the results or exchanged them for other goods, allocating the labor as required. With industrialization, when women and girls weren’t in factories, they were stitching, braiding, pinning, and assembling at home.⁴⁴ Outwork transformed female labor into an integral part of emergent capitalist systems, especially by turning married women and mothers into income generators. In the nineteenth century, that making was true for rural Sweden as for urban Britain and colonized India. As Marx himself noted, connecting the home to the factory were “invisible threads”, women and child pieceworkers that made the factory system more profitable by undertaking time-consuming tasks and shifting the cost of production from the employer to the worker who usually supplied the space, tools, and other materials.⁴⁵ Thus, self-defined housewives crafting lace in Andhra Pradesh, India obfuscated production for the world market as leisure and pin money. They fed the process of capital accumulation in which male merchants and middlemen, often kin, controlled a vast putting out system. As with immigrant tenement garment finishers in the late nineteenth century US whose labor exposed the home as an outpost of the factory, the lacemakers punctured the ideology of separate spheres.⁴⁶

Just as household-based production made the leap from serving household needs to generating capitalist profit, so too did reproductive labor increasingly meet capitalist imperatives. Unpaid domestic work regenerated the labor force, as those labors became increasingly commodified and enmeshed in the wage relation. Payment for domestic services certainly existed before full-blown industrial capitalism. Early

⁴³Ethel Brooks, *Unraveling the Garment Industry: Transnational Organizing and Women’s Work* (Minneapolis, MN, 2007).

⁴⁴Tom Dublin, “Women and Rural Outwork”, in *Transforming Women’s Work: New England Lives in the Industrial Revolution* (Ithaca, NY, 1994), pp. 29–76.

⁴⁵Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. I (New York, 1967), p. 461. Eileen Boris, *Home to Work: Motherhood and the Politics of Industrial Homework in the United States* (New York, 1994); Malin Nilsson, Indrani Mazumdar, and Silke Neunsinger (eds), *Home-Based Work and Home-Based Workers, 1800–2021* (Leiden, 2022).

⁴⁶Maria Mies, *The Lace Makers of Narsapur* (Melbourne, 2012), reprint of 1982 edition.

modern Europe had a flourishing commercial sex trade in which even married women sold sex.⁴⁷ Port towns like the North American city of Baltimore depended on women laundresses, cooks, innkeepers, seamstresses, and prostitutes to replenish the seafarer workforce. As Early American historian Seth Rockman observes for the years from the 1790s through the 1810s, “labor that once fell primarily to one’s own wife, mother, or daughter could increasingly be purchased from someone else’s on terms that were casual, contractual [or] coercive”, with the hiring out of slave labor bringing down already low prices for such work.⁴⁸ But these services increased with urbanization and industrialization in the nineteenth century.

Women as independent proprietors or as employees of others particularly sold such services in venues that concentrated male laborers, such as African mining camps and other extractive locations. Women contracted temporary marriages or, as camp followers of armies before bureaucratic systems of provision, they cooked and washed, nursed, and gratified men. In the Panama Canal Zone, West Indian women’s provisioning provided the labor that fed and housed the Black West Indian labor force necessary for the expansion of the US’s imperial infrastructure. That is, women reproduced the fighting/working force, without which production was impossible. Some of these women were conscripted, blurring the line between free and unfree labor.⁴⁹

Waged domestic labor within the home was also subsumed within capitalist labor regimes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Households long contained servants, but paid labor within capitalism detached these workers from the social obligations that had bound servants to their households and transformed them into waged employees, subject to the lowest remuneration possible, on the assumption that any woman could undertake cooking, cleaning, and caring. Paid domestic workers have lived in – often under duress – or come in for the day since the nineteenth century. Insourcing and outsourcing of reproductive labor occurred in tandem: paid domestic workers labored in employers’ homes as households purchased similar goods and services from women in the service sector. For example, cooks prepared the food that nourished; servants and laundresses ensured that the spaces people inhabited and clothes they wore remained clean; and childcare workers guided developing humans to growth (and safety).

As capitalism drew slavery within its orbit, it required far-flung networks of social reproductive labor from enslaved women. As historian of the Atlantic world Diana Paton has argued, the Atlantic slave system from its earliest days through its

⁴⁷For example, Julia Laité, “A Global History of Prostitution: London”, in Magaly Rodríguez García, Lex Heerma van Voss, and Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk (eds), *Selling Sex in the City: A Global History of Prostitution, 1600s–2000s* (Leiden, 2017), p. 124.

⁴⁸Seth Rockman, *Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore* (Baltimore, MD, 2009), p. 102.

⁴⁹Thavolia Glymph, “Noncombatant Military Labor in the Civil War”, *OAH Magazine of History*, 26:2 (2012), pp. 25–29; George Chauncey Jr., “The Locus of Reproduction: Women’s Labour in the Zambian Copperbelt”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 7 (1981), pp. 135, 139; Luise White, *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi* (Chicago, IL, 1990); Kamala Kempadoo, *Sexing The Caribbean: Gender, Race, and Sexual Labor* (New York, 2004); Joan Flores-Villalobos, *The Silver Women: How Black Women’s Labor Made the Panama Canal* (Philadelphia, PA, 2023).

nineteenth-century incarnations depended upon the efforts of African women who birthed and raised the enslaved workers sold away from the continent. In its later stages, the internal slave trade in the US and Brazil tied enslaved women's reproductive labor in the American Chesapeake and Brazilian northeast to the geographical expansion of nineteenth-century plantation slavery.⁵⁰ Legal scholar Pamela Bridgewater has spoken of forced reproduction "as basic to the institution as forced labor".⁵¹ More recently, historian of slavery Jennifer Morgan has shown "the role of kinship in authorizing hereditary racial slavery and in shaping the development of slavery as a financial and commercial instrument" that spurred capitalist development in the English Atlantic world.⁵²

Under chattel slavery, the very bodies of women and men turned into assets. Bodies had value not only for labor power but also as collateral for banks and to be traded for a profit, a form of human trafficking.⁵³ According to legal historian Amy Dru Stanley, "slave breeding lay at the heart of antebellum political economy, no less so than did finance, housework, and commodity production".⁵⁴ In this sense, reproduction became a form of production as birthing people enhanced wealth of owners either from future labor power or as an asset that could be monetized and sold, a futures in human form. Enslaved women nursed the children of other women, both Black and White, in perhaps a quarter of slave-owning families in the US South.⁵⁵

Mothers' milk has long been up for sale. Before reliable artificial forms of infant feeding, rural women in France, local women in colonial India, Irish immigrants in New York City, and village women in Britain, France, and throughout Europe turned a component of reproduction into income as wetnurses.⁵⁶ That is, the bodies of poor and working-class women – long used to feed the children of high-status women – could also be mined for profit; once embedded in capitalism, their breast-feeding not only added cash to meager household income but also sustained that essential economic ingredient, the making of people and subsequent labor power. Human milk became "a medicalized commodity", in women's historian Lara

⁵⁰Paton, "Global History, Gender History, and Atlantic Slavery", pp. 727–728.

⁵¹Bridgewater quoted in JoAnn Wypijewski, "The Long Hand of Slave Breeding, Redux", *Counterpunch*, 14 May 2022, reprinted on Portside at <https://portside.org/2022-05-14/long-hand-slave-breeding-redux>; last accessed 19 September 2022.

⁵²Jennifer L. Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic* (Durham, NC, 2021), p. 26.

⁵³Daina Ramey Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved, from Womb to Grave, in the Building of a Nation* (Boston, MA, 2017); Stephanie Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South* (New Haven, CT, 2019); Paton, "Global History, Gender History, and Atlantic Slavery".

⁵⁴Stanley, "Histories of Capitalism and Sex Difference", p. 350. See also Edward Baptist, "'Cuffy', 'Fancy Maids', and 'One-Eyed Men': Rape, Commodification, and the Domestic Slave Trade in the United States", *American Historical Review*, 106 (2001), pp. 1619–1650.

⁵⁵Emily West with R.J. Knight, "Mothers' Milk: Slavery, Wet-Nursing, and Black and White Women in the Antebellum South", *Journal of Southern History*, 83:1 (2017), pp. 37–68.

⁵⁶Janet Golden, *A Social History of Wet Nursing in America: From Breast to Bottle* (New York, 1996); George D. Sussman, *Selling Mothers' Milk: The Wet-Nursing Business in France, 1715–1914* (Urbana, IL, 1982); Lara Vapnek, "The Labor of Infant Feeding: Wet-Nursing at the Nursery and Child's Hospital, 1854–1910", *Journal of American History*, 109:1 (2022), pp. 90–115, summarizes recent studies across time and space.

Vapnek's formulation, available in milk banks and at hospitals; it was white gold. In the early twenty-first century this precious currency led for-profit companies to ask inner-city Black women to sell their milk so that other women could nurture their babies. The shortage of formula in the post-Covid breakdown of commodity chains underscored the perils of commodification.⁵⁷

Childbirth also has a history that moved from the home to the hospital, displacing communities of neighbors and kin and the midwife with new professions. Even the 1970s and 1980s return to "natural" childbirth among urban middle classes turned into a business with how-to books, birth coaches, and doulas. Poor women on public assistance long found themselves surveilled, subject to mothering instruction as a prerequisite for obtaining prenatal and infant-care resources, and offered fewer choices on how they would deliver their children.⁵⁸ Indeed, commodification had differential impact by class on the bearing and rearing of children; women's reproductive labors have not only sustained households and families, but have also been essential to class formation. Class privilege – and class struggle – over commodifying domestic labor played out in changing form. In some contexts, having the income to purchase reproductive labor on the market signified class standing, while in others, having sufficient wealth to reserve a woman's labor for unpaid family work became a site of class status.

Producing the next generation created future workers to be sure, but it also socialized them to their place in society. Global historian Jan Lucassen has noted that the demographic transition from continuous pregnancies with high infant mortality to fewer children whom mothers nurtured and educated allowed married women to move from home production to other work sites. Nonetheless, in finding themselves "pregnant less often", women had greater care responsibilities: "care for the few but therefore emotionally and materially expensive children increased sharply, especially when their education became the gateway to social success". According to sociologist Viviana Zelizer, by the late nineteenth century, children became priceless among the middle and professional classes, no longer valued for their immediate earnings or future potential to support aging parents. Proper socialization could secure the social position of the household. Despite increased labor force participation, mothers continued to carry the bulk of the load in the unpaid work of rearing their children, often to the detriment of their lifetime

⁵⁷Vapnek, "The Labor of Infant Feeding", p. 114; Andrea Freeman, *Skimmed: Breastfeeding, Race, and Injustice* (Stanford, CA, 2021); Laura Harrison, "Milk Money: Race, Gender, and Breast Milk 'Donation'", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 44:2 (2019), pp. 281–306. We are playing off Jennifer Nash's "Black Gold" in *Birthing Black Mothers* (Durham, NC, 2021), pp. 31–68, where breast milk circulates to sustain life (in this case, Black lives) and thus gains value against the anti-Black necropolitics that have spawned a prison-industrial industry. See also Martine Paris, "Why the Baby Formula Shortage Continues in the US", *Washington Post*, 22 July 2022. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/why-the-baby-formula-shortage-continues-in-the-us/2022/07/15/090cfa8-0461-11ed-8beb-2b4e481b1500_story.html; last accessed 23 March 2023.

⁵⁸Richard Wertz and Dorothy Wertz, *Lying-In: A History of Childbirth in America* (New Haven, CT, 1977); Judith Walzer Leavitt, *Brought to Bed: Childbearing in America, 1750–1950* (New York, 1986); Sarah Knott, *Mother Is a Verb: An Unconventional History* (London, 2019); Jennifer Nelson, *More than Medicine: A History of the Feminist Women's Health Movement* (New York, 2015); Nash, *Birthing Black Mothers*.

earnings, even as they paid for childcare, an occupation increasingly stratified between home-based neighbors and family babysitters, educational institutions, and corporate centers.⁵⁹

Invading the Household

Unpaid housework, including the tasks of cooking and cleaning, was also re-forged in the long nineteenth-century development of industrial capitalism. The actual labor often remained the same, aided by new tools, but shifted meaning from its subsistence and use-value in a household economy to a hybridized mix that layered use value, commodified consumption, and rationalized mechanization on top of each other. Women continued to garden and can foods, ease the aches of the ailing, and tidy living spaces. Home gardens helped ensure basic food provisioning. In coal-mining Appalachia in the US, the “captured garden”, as environmental historian Steven Stoll has termed it, helped employers keep wages low and profits high while piling labor on the household.⁶⁰ The provision grounds under plantation systems similarly reduced the cost of sustenance, allowing for greater capital accumulation.⁶¹ Feminist labor historian Christine Stansell tracked the resourceful (and time consuming) scavenging of nineteenth-century urban wives, demonstrating its importance to family survival.⁶² The Research Working Group on Households, Labor-Force Formation, and the World-Economy further drew attention to ongoing, unwaged, and subsistence-generating labors rooted in the household, such as bartering, underground childcare exchanges, and garage sales.⁶³ Household maintenance through activities unrecognized as work invisibilized the ways that sustenance labor enhanced profitability.

Industrial modes penetrated the daily activity of non-waged housework. As Boydston compellingly argued for the antebellum US, northeast industrialization reorganized labor *within* the household. “What is most striking”, she pointed out, was “how closely the reorganization of [housework and paid labor] [...] were replicating each other”. New capitalist products like the sewing machine and the cast-iron stove altered the structure and rhythm of women’s daily work in working- and middle-class households alike. In essence, the home and housework offered a vast and expansive market for investment through appliances and architectural

⁵⁹Lucassen, *The Story of Work*, p. 333; Viviana Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (New York, 1985); Tilly and Scott, *Women, Work, and Family*; Sonya Michel, *Children’s Interests/Mothers’ Rights: The Shaping of America’s Child Care Policy* (New Haven, CT, 1999).

⁶⁰Steven Stoll, *Ramp Hollow: The Ordeal of Appalachia* (New York, 2017).

⁶¹For example, Verena Stolcke, “The Labors of Coffee in Latin America: The Hidden Charm of Family Labor and Self-Provisioning”, in William Roseberry, Lowell Gudmundson, and Mario Samper Kutschbach (eds), *Coffee, Society, and Power in Latin America* (Baltimore, MD, 1995), pp. 65–93; Angela Davis, “Reflections on the Black Women’s Role in the Community of Slaves”, *The Massachusetts Review*, 13 (1972), pp. 86–87.

⁶²Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789–1860* (Urbana, IL, 1987).

⁶³Smith, Wallerstein, and Evers, *Households and the World-Economy*; Smith and Wallerstein, *Creating and Transforming Households*.

innovations, a field for capitalist expansion that did not necessarily mean less work for mother.⁶⁴

Commodified goods systematically eased some domestic work (fewer hot summer afternoons of canning tomatoes, less wringing of laundry) while expanding the labor of consumption and raising the bar on domestic cleanliness. In heterosexual households, housewives performed alchemy, turning money and raw materials procured on the market into food and domestic comforts. They ran sewing machines, often bought on installment plans, or commissioned seamstresses and milliners to dress the household. They repurposed textiles of all sorts. The advent of department stores and mail order catalogs led to ready-made clothing, stitched by a legion of women workers, which often required alteration. Home sewing persisted as an art and craft but also as a way to stretch earnings, generating its own industry.⁶⁵

Developments Since 1900

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the commodification of socially reproductive labor accelerated, intensified, and deepened, whether we look inside the household or at the externalization of that labor as employment beyond the household's walls. These processes tracked with the expansion of female waged labor: women's domestic work that had remained unwaged and tied to family needs increasingly became waged, as women continued to perform that labor in a variety of locations. Within the home, paid daily domestic work, child-minding, and cleaning services grew to compensate for the many women whose working hours were then spent in paid employment outside the household.⁶⁶

In the post-World War II years, ILO Experts on Women's Work underscored the connection between women's home responsibilities, that is, their unpaid reproductive labors, and the need for their labor power in capitalist economies, particularly to meet worker shortages in women-dominated professions like teaching, nursing, and social work, the very kinds of employments that replicated previously unwaged labors. ILO officials proposed commodifying and externalizing reproductive labor by alleviating privately located household labor through public supports like creches, elder care programs, and rationalized housekeeping since domestic workers were hard to find.

⁶⁴Boydston, *Home and Work*, pp. 100–101; Ruth Schwartz Cohen, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York, 1985); Susan Strasser, *Never Done: A History of American Housework* (New York, 1982).

⁶⁵Wendy Gamber, *The Female Economy: The Millinery and Dressmaking Trades, 1860–1930* (Urbana, IL, 1997); Susan Levine, "Workers' Wives, Gender, Class, and Consumerism in the 1920s US", *Gender and History*, 3 (1991), pp. 45–64; Sarah A. Gordon, *"Make it Yourself": Home Sewing, Gender, and Culture, 1890–1930* (New York, 2007).

⁶⁶This literature is vast. One place to begin is Dirk Hoerder, Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, and Silke Neunsinger (eds), *Towards A Global History of Domestic and Caregiving Workers* (Leiden, 2015). See also, Glenn, "From Servitude to Service Work"; David M. Katzman, *Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America* (Urbana, IL, 1978); Premilla Nadasen, *Household Workers Unite: The Untold Story of African American Women Who Built a Movement* (Boston, MA, 2015); Mignon Duffy, *Making Care Count: A Century of Gender, Race, and Paid Care Work* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2011); and Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* (New York, 2001), pp. 51–120.

When objecting to changes in the 1965 immigration law, private employment agencies in the US argued that business and professional women needed live-in maids and could not rely on day workers, that is, on Black women from inner cities whom agency staff deemed unreliable from having to tend to their own households and whom their clients often rejected out of racist prejudices. These concerns not only led to immigration law that encouraged domestic-worker migration to fill care and household jobs that Black women rejected as part of the civil rights struggle but also fueled further commodification of reproductive labor.⁶⁷

Women have been drawn from across the globe into domestic services, counted upon for the remittances they send back home. In the contemporary United Arab Emirates, for example, many migrant Filipina domestic workers allowed to work on employer-sponsored visas experience degrees of unfreedom and face employers unconstrained by labor laws.⁶⁸ Paid domestic work illuminates how dissecting capitalism with the household as a starting point clarifies the blurred line between waged and unwaged, free and not quite free labor.

The development of the welfare state during the first half of the twentieth century in Europe and the United States helped accommodate social reproductive work to capitalism in two crucial ways. On the one hand, with provision of services like family allowances, childcare, and food supports, welfare states facilitated the reproduction of a reserve army of labor by providing a floor below which people could not fall. On the other hand, while direct public provision of social reproduction partially forestalled commodification of life and generation-sustaining care, state supports solidified social hierarchies and existing labor markets. At a very basic level, direct welfare payments to mothers ensured that even poor women could carry out the necessary unpaid reproductive labor to feed and nurture the next generation – often with stigma and with just enough to get by. The desire to incorporate mothers into wage labor regimes after World War II was a prime factor driving expansion of infant childcare and publicly funded preschool; public education notoriously trained children to fit employers' needs for workers, even from a young age, often funneling poor, working-class, and racialized minorities into vocational and other programs that were pathways into low-wage work. Since the 1970s, conservatives in Anglo-American nations have not only squeezed public welfare supports but also stressed use of market-based providers over direct public funding, as by contracting with private, for-profit childcare companies to deliver preschool "services".⁶⁹

⁶⁷Eileen Boris, "Regulating Women's Labors: Between Family and Market", paper for "Care and Capitalism Workshop", Fordham University, 20–22 October 2022; Eileen Boris, "Never Obsolete: Private Household Workers and the Transaction of Domestic Work", *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 9 March 2023. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547922000151>; last accessed 19 September 2022.

⁶⁸Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, *Unfree: Migrant Domestic Work in Arab States* (Stanford, CA, 2021).

⁶⁹The literature here also is vast. Firstly, Gøsta Esping-Andersen, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (Cambridge, 1990); Christopher Deeming, "The Lost and the New 'Liberal World' of Welfare Capitalism: A Critical Assessment of Gøsta Esping-Andersen's *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* a Quarter Century Later", *Social Policy and Society*, 16 (2017), pp. 405–422; Maxine Eichner, *The Free-Market Family: How the Market Crushed the American Dream (and How It Can be Restored)* (New York, 2020); Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (New York, 2017); Premilla

In the same vein, provision of domestic and reproductive labor outside domiciles burgeoned as part of the dramatic expansion of the service sector during the twentieth century, so that by the late twentieth century neoliberal capitalism had absorbed vast quantities of socially reproductive work, transmuting it into commodified services and waged labor. As political theorist Fraser has astutely observed, this system has “externaliz[ed] care work onto families and communities while diminishing their capacity to perform it”.⁷⁰ She points out that a persistent tension exists between the necessity for humans to reproduce themselves and the insatiability of capitalist accumulation which saps up even the energies necessary for generational continuity.⁷¹ In the Global North, as families confront greater hours of waged labor per household because of falling real wages, they scramble to find others to provide care. The solutions have been recycled (with some updating) from previous eras: reliance on low-paid care workers, often women of color and migrants from poorer regions (as part of “global care chains”) and dependence on technologies like egg freezing and breast pumps to delay or minimize the work of human reproduction.⁷²

Gestational surrogacy and the selling of genes and body parts also show the expansive colonization of bodies as sites of capital investment, circulation of value, and profits that highlight reproductive labor as a frontier of capitalist globalization in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Confined to dormitories, with their persons closely surveilled, surrogates rent their wombs as well as lives. These women contractually must leave their own households for contemporary baby farms to protect the product or investment of buyers but also lest they be accused of extramarital sex and shunned by their communities. Their condition falls between the cracks of labor standards in so far as their labor remains unrecognized as work, much like other forms of sexual labor.⁷³

This expansion of the service economy reflected the transfer of racial stratification from private household employment to formal sectors, with women of color pushed into the lowest status and “dirtiest” jobs. Sociologist Evelyn Nakano Glenn has emphasized that “poor people, people of color, and noncitizens are charged with a greater share of the menial, physical, and hands-on work of care. Thus, the low

Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States* (New York, 2005); “3-K and Pre-K”, *Inside Schools*. Available at: <https://insideschools.org/pre-kindergarten>; last accessed 29 March 2023.

⁷⁰Nancy Fraser, “Crisis of Care? On the Social Reproductive Contradictions of Contemporary Capitalism”, in Bhattacharya (ed) *Social Reproduction Theory*, p. 32.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, pp. 22–25.

⁷²Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild (eds), *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy* (New York, 2002); Premilla Nadasen “Rethinking Care Work: (Dis) Affection and the Politics of Caring”, *Feminist Formations*, 33:1 (2021), pp. 165–188.

⁷³Kalindi Vora, *Life Support* (Minneapolis, MN, 2015); Melinda Cooper and Catherine Waldby, *Clinical Labor: Tissue Donors and Research Subjects in the Global Bioeconomy* (Durham, NC, 2014); Mahua Sarkar, “When Maternity is Paid Work: Commercial Gestational Surrogacy at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century”, in Eileen Boris, Dorothea Hoehfker, and Susan Zimmermann (eds), *Women’s ILO: Transnational Networks, Global Labour Standards and Gender Equity, 1919 to Present* (Leiden, 2018), pp. 340–364; Sophie Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against Family* (London, 2019), pp. 84–140.

status of caring work and the low status of care workers are mutually reinforced”.⁷⁴ Recent accounting by feminist economists and sociologists puts the paid work force in a new “care economy” at ten to twenty-five per cent of total employment in the United States. Historian Premilla Nadasen, a major scholar of Black women and welfare justice, has argued that “waged social reproduction is increasingly important to capitalist profit and functions to some degree as an engine of the economy”.⁷⁵ Much labor that was once internal to the household and defined by use and subsistence has now been fully externalized from the household and commodified, while retaining many of its essential gendered and racialized characteristics. That is, it is still performed by women, and very often women of color, with the low wages and precarity associated with female employment generally in capitalism.

Sex itself remained intertwined with capitalism in multiple ways. Sex is work, a way to earn a living, as the rich global history of prostitution and sexual labors has shown for female, male, gender queer, and transgender people. This sector was ever-expanding, including brothels, strip clubs, masseuses, pornographic media, websites, and camming.⁷⁶ In mid-twentieth-century US, regulating sex allowed for urban gentrification when municipal governments cleaned up red light districts to attract tourists and suburban consumers, containing sexual entertainments to designated blocks.⁷⁷ The internet has opened vast arenas for consuming pornography while sex tourism remains a thriving industry.⁷⁸ Sex and its restriction could be good business.

Capitalism might also be good for sex, though perhaps we should take historical anthropologist Kristen Ghodsee’s claim seriously that “women have better sex under socialism” because of greater economic independence from men.⁷⁹ The old adage “city air makes you free” certainly applied to new household formations and sexualities that occurred under industrial capitalism with migration of youth for employment. To the extent that people left families of origin, they could escape watchful eyes if not the obligation to send back remittances. Waged autonomy, however precarious it was, enabled young women to defy parents, make their way to dance halls and other commercial entertainments, and, by the late twentieth

⁷⁴Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Forced to Care: Coercion and Caregiving in America* (Cambridge, MA, 2010), p. 184; Dorothy E. Roberts, “Spiritual and Menial Housework”, *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism*, 9:1 (1997), pp. 51–80.

⁷⁵Nancy Folbre (ed.), *For Love and Money: Care Provision in the United States* (New York, 2012), p. 66; Duffy, *Making Care Count*, pp. 18, 77–80. See also Eileen Boris and Jennifer Klein, *Caring for America: Home Health Workers in the Shadow of the Welfare State* (New York, 2012); Nadasen, *Household Workers Unite*; Nadasen, “Rethinking Care Work”.

⁷⁶Rodríguez García et al. (eds), *Selling Sex in the City*; Becki Ross, “Sex and (Evacuation from) the City: The Moral and Legal Regulation of Sex Workers in Vancouver’s West End, 1975–1985”, *Sexualities*, 13:2 (2020), pp. 197–218; Lin Lean Lim (ed.), *The Sex Sector: The Economic and Social Bases of Prostitution in Southeast Asia* (Geneva, 1998).

⁷⁷Anne Gray Fischer, *The Streets Belong to Us: Sex, Race, and Police Power from Segregation to Gentrification* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2022).

⁷⁸Heather Berg, *Porn Work: Sex, Labor, and Late Capitalism* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2021); Natalie West and Tina Horn (eds), *We Too: Essays on Sex Work and Survival* (New York, 2021).

⁷⁹Kristen Ghodsee, *Why Women Have Better Sex Under Socialism: And Other Arguments for Economic Independence* (New York, 2020).

century, to form self-sustaining households where they weren't bound to men. While it could be a double-edged sword as low-waged service work led to the feminization of poverty, it freed women to leave abusive partners or simply to choose lives of their own design.⁸⁰

People could be liberated from marital, heteronormative behavior. They could risk living together without marriage once each might secure a wage to support him or herself.⁸¹ Queer identities and communities could emerge – and flourish. As historian of sexuality John D'Emilio explained: “In divesting the household of its economic independence and fostering the separation of sexuality from procreation, capitalism has created conditions that allow some men and women to organize a personal life around their erotic/emotional attraction to their own sex.” In fostering individualism, capitalism allowed for “personal identity” – transforming same-sex acts into same-sex identities – and thus encouraged new gender formations. Wartime mobilizations further brought people together in sex segregated institutions and spaces, encouraging new gay communities. While D'Emilio focuses on the US, a rich literature has expanded his insight on how capitalism may have liberated sexualities even as it enmeshed people in other unfreedoms.⁸²

Towards a New Research Agenda

The account we have sketched here is exploratory, intended to generate questions and new inquiry rather than to be definitive. Continuing a long line of feminist analyses, we have focused on the centrality of social reproductive labor rooted in the household to capitalism. Most basically, this history reinforces the point that unwaged and waged domestic labor nourishes humans while reproducing labor power. Beyond that, a household-centered history of capitalism reveals how capitalist labor relations have been present as much *inside* the home as outside of it. Commodification, it becomes clear, also penetrated intimate relations, the goods for daily living, and the bodily processes of reproduction – never wholly so, for although capitalism is voracious, the household has also remained a site of resistance to its logics.

Future research should consider a number of themes. First, a more expansive examination of capitalism that begins with the household would also need to discuss how capitalism has fractured, destabilized, and reshaped the household. For

⁸⁰Joanne Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880–1930* (Chicago, IL, 1988); Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in New York City, 1880 to 1820* (Philadelphia, PA, 1986); Carol Schmid, “The ‘New Woman’ Gender Roles and Urban Modernism in Interwar Berlin and Shanghai”, *Journal of International Women’s Studies*, 15:1 (2014), pp. 1–16; Alys Eve Weinberg, Lynn M. Tomas, et al., *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization* (Durham, NC, 2008).

⁸¹Elizabeth H. Pleck, *Not Just Roommates: Cohabitation After the Sexual Revolution* (Chicago, IL, 2012).

⁸²John D'Emilio, “Capitalism and Gay Identity”, in Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin, *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (New York, 1993), pp. 470–472; for example, Annalisa Martin, “Cleaning Up the Cityscape: Managing Commercial Sex and City Space in Cologne, 1956–1972”, pp. 311–330, and Nicolaos Papadogiannis, “Greek Trans Women Selling Sex, Space and Mobilities, 1960s–80s”, pp. 331–362, both in *European Review of History*, 29:2 (2022). See also George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York, 1994).

example, mass incarceration, a product of Jim Crow economic policies and decline in manufacturing jobs during the last decades of the twentieth century, stripped African American households of family members in the prime of life, making these men and women more profitable for capital as prisoners and prison workers than as wage laborers.⁸³ So, too, histories of migration to escape dispossession and for jobs forced new household formation and remade kinship in many parts of the world.⁸⁴

Second, comparing national histories will deepen insights from the household. Close scrutiny of how patterns shift over time across the globe would help reveal where distinctions lie and when convergences come to the fore in relation to transnational exchanges and parallel developments. Additional research might explore how households rooted much longer in agricultural subsistence have been caught up in the processes we describe. Our discussion stays closest to the Global North, but parallel inquiries into the global South and the former state socialist East are already underway and will spark new conceptualizations and chronologies.⁸⁵

Third, agency and constraint offer complicated frameworks to probe households, which are, after all, arenas of resistance as well as compliance to hierarchies of power and systems of exploitation. Workers who could return to the countryside and households with access to growing their own food carved out a space of autonomy. Whether nominally free or not, such workers gained control over surpluses to create their own market exchanges and sometimes engaged in slowdowns and other labor actions. In demands to value social reproduction, feminists similarly sought to control their lives. Those in the wages for housework movement rejected labor exploitation. By issuing domestic workers' bills of rights or simply refusing to live in, domestic and care workers have challenged the terms of their employment while asserting dignity and worth. Staying home, disability rights protestors have practiced what feminist scholar Akemi Nishida named "bed activism" against the commodification of care that has accompanied for-profit health systems.⁸⁶ Mutual aid has emerged as a counter to capitalist consumption. In these "chosen families", mutual aid groups as well as queer people and other marginalized groups have built relationships of love, intimacy, and support beyond the heterosexual, marital household to provide care apart from capitalist imperatives and refuse the conscription into the waged labor productivity expected of married adult couples.⁸⁷ In building intimate relationships on values and emotional connections that stand apart from market logics, household members continue to resist capitalism's

⁸³Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis and Opposition to Globalizing California* (Berkeley, CA, 2007).

⁸⁴Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York, 1991); Lisa Levenstein, *A Movement Without Marches: African American Women and the Politics of Poverty in Postwar Philadelphia* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2009).

⁸⁵See, for example, "ZARAH: Women's Labour Activism in Eastern Europe and transnationally, from the Age of Empires to the late 20th Century", Susan Zimmermann, PI at <https://zarah-ceu.org/>; "Revaluing Care in the Global Economy: Global Perspectives on Metrics, Governance, and Social Practices", Jocelyn Olcott and Tania Rispoli, directors. Available at: <https://www.revaluingcare.org/>.

⁸⁶Akemi Nishida, *Just Care: Messy Entanglements of Disability, Dependency, and Desire* (Philadelphia, PA, 2022).

⁸⁷Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)* (London, 2020); Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York, 1991); Daniel Winunwe Rivers, *Radical*

intrusive commodification. Future research beckons for a “counter-history” of the household as a distinctive and essential site of opposition to capitalism, especially for the working classes. Moreover, reading across the bias of official documents and much scholarship can unpack the gender binary that pervades accounting of households and work – and perhaps uncover a queerer past that both rebelled against and offered release from the heteronormative economic and social status quo.⁸⁸

An engendered social history of capitalism built from the labor of social reproduction underscores the tension between capitalism’s need for the labor of workers and workers’ need to sustain themselves generationally. The household stands as both a site of exploitation and a space of empowerment; its contradictions beckon the historian to unravel its possibilities as well as chart its burdens.

Relations: Lesbian Mothers, Gay Fathers, and Their Children in the United States Since World War II (Chapel Hill, NC, 2013).

⁸⁸Margot Canaday has begun that task: see *Queer Career: Sexuality and Work in Modern America* (Princeton, NJ, 2023); Miriam Frank, *Out in the Union: A Labor History of Queer America* (Philadelphia, PA, 2014).

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