

On Labor Day in the US: Looking for Women

September 6, 2009

On this (US) Labor Day, let's consider the continuing, glaring hole in what's written about labor, including by socialists, about women and gender. We really need to fix this because changes to work and social relations over the past twenty years caused by neoliberalism make women an ever more critical element of the work force. Writing on "Women, care, and the public good: a dialogue," Ann Ferguson and Nancy Folbre, ("Not for sale. In defense of public goods," Westview Press, 2000), started a conversation about what's happened to and with gender under neoliberalism. Another exception to what seems widespread disinterest about gender under neoliberalism is the work of Raewyn Connell, a researcher at the University of Sydney. * She proposes several dynamics that have emerged in the past two decades. One change in the lower classes is to "incorporate, indeed prioritise, wage labour over care work." In contrast, capitalism's "sharpened competition, and very high pay-offs for the successful, in the deregulated corporate world promotes a renewal of aggressive, work-focussed masculinities in the dominant classes." In other words, neoliberalism is indeed "the man." Given these enormous social changes, the Left's lack of interest in probing cultural shifts in regard to gender - and sexuality - is obviously wrongheaded. What explains the lacuna about women and gender? One answer is Marxism's legacy. Writing on "Socialism and Homosexuality" (<http://newpol.org/?p=60>) Tom Harrison takes up the challenge of exploring Marxism's limitations, and I think his defense of Marxism is on-target. We should credit Marxism for being "a method of historical analysis and a theory of democratic revolution from below," that "created the tools for understanding the relation of gay oppression to misogyny and compulsory heterosexuality, and for pointing the way toward liberation." As a "body of theory, it has proved capable of cumulative development and of incorporating, eventually, all aspects of human emancipation. Its utopian — and later anarchist — rivals did not, despite their often more enlightened attitudes toward homosexuality, and sex in general." <http://newpol.org/?p=79>). But as Harrison's description of the Left's disappointing history and traditions in regard to supporting sexual emancipation demonstrates, Marxism's legacy is flawed. No where is this Marxist myopia more apparent than in the otherwise brilliant "Democracy Against Capitalism (1995, New York: Cambridge University Press) by Ellen Meiksins Wood. Wood notes that capitalism can and does exploit gender oppression for its ends, but she criticizes a focus on "extra-economic goods," like "gender emancipation, racial equality, peace, ecological health, democratic citizenship." These aims are a distraction because "the socialist project of class emancipation always has been, or should have been, a means to the larger end of human emancipation" (p. 264). She concludes that "capitalism could survive the eradication of all oppressions specific to women as women while it would not, by definition, survive the eradication of class exploitation" (p. 270). Wood's argument, (advanced by many others), ignores the very dynamic she vigorously defends elsewhere in her analysis, the necessity of understanding capitalist social relations, as a system, in a specific historic context. Even if we grant her presumption that capitalism could, theoretically exist as a social system without gender and race oppression, we can still propose that "extra-economic" forms of oppression are so deeply embedded in existing capitalist social relations that it is impossible to understand existing institutional arrangements - and formation of class identity — without reference to gender and other "extra-economic" considerations. Perhaps capitalism could have developed forms of social organization that were not gendered and did not subordinate women. However, that's not what happened. It is possible that capitalism might have developed without work being constructed as men's responsibility, and women's sphere of influence being the home. But it did not. For a persuasive analysis of work that incorporates gender, take a look at Ursula Huws', "The making of a cybertariat. Virtual work in a real world"(2003, Monthly Review Press: NY). Her work deserves far more attention than it has received, especially given its close attention to the ways new

technologies have transformed work, the workforce, and the workplace. She suggests that manufacturing for “past 250 years or so can be seen, very crudely, as the removal, one after another, of tasks performed for nothing in the home to the marketplace, where they become paid... performed not for use but for exchange. This process is described as the socialization of domestic labor.” (p. 24). Writing in 2003, Huws predicted that “With cheap methods of transmitting information, whether by cable or satellite, distance ceases to be an important factor in the location of terminals in relation to their parent computers. Information can be input or retrieved wherever it is convenient...This could be a distant office or the workers’ own home” (p. 49). She points out the gendered nature of this shift to homework, justified by the notion that information technology is “ ‘good for the family’ ... providing the means whereby women workers can be returned to the home, and to the dominion of their husbands, without the loss of their services as a cheap form of clerical labor” (p. 49). Huws also details the ways in which changes in work are accompanied by the worker’s loss of control, atomization of the work force, and a tightening of the leash by which workers are attached to capital. Unions have to take a close look at the way gender fits in with alterations to the global workforce. The brunt of these changes have been experienced by working women in the global South. And as David Lier and Kristian Stokke (Antipode, September 2006) point out, the traditional model of union membership effectively excludes a huge proportion of the working population and consolidates union membership that is unrepresentative in terms of gender and ethnicity. They call the challenge of casualization of labor the “litmus test of the continued relevance of the trade unions to the world’s workers today” and call for the “dual and interrelated transgression of borders: going global and going social” (p. 806). “Going social” means looking for and at gender. Writing in a special section of New Politics on “Gays and the Left,” Peter Drucker contends that the left itself needs to be transformed: “It needs to reclaim the almost forgotten liberatory impulses of the 1960s and 70s, when radical politics embraced the whole of human experience, including its most intimate aspects, and the most despised of society’s outcasts. And the left needs to purge its own culture of heteronormative attitudes and habits so that queers, for the first time, will feel equally and fully at home in its ranks. (<http://newpol.org/reinventingqueerleft>) Drucker’s advice sounds right to me and applies to women every bit as much as it does to gays. We are incapable of understanding neoliberalism’s continued resilience, let alone effectively challenging its program, unless we understand more about the “extra-economic goods” that (some) Marxists say we should ignore. * Connell’s contact information: <http://fdp.edsw.usyd.edu.au/users/raewyn>). The speech is “The neoliberal parent. Mothers and fathers in the making of global market society,” a plenary address to international conference “Mütter-Väter: Elternschaft zwischen medialer Inszenierung und sozialer Praxis”, University of Hannover, 4-6 October 2007