

CLASS STRUGGLE ON THE HOME FRONT

WORK, CONFLICT, AND
EXPLOITATION IN THE HOUSEHOLD

Edited by Graham Cassano

WITH AN AFTERWORD BY
ARLIE RUSSELL HOCHSCHILD



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**Work, Conflict and Exploitation in
the Household**

Edited by

Graham Cassano

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Oakland University, USA

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For Bia. May her future be better than our collective past.

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Preface

Other Households Are Possible!

J. K. Gibson-Graham

When the essay by Harriet Fraad, Stephen Resnick, and Richard Wolff in *Home Front* was first published, it was heralded by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as an “opening,” “a new way of looking at the household,” one that could give “impetus to struggles within and about households” (Fraad et al. 1994: ix). Spivak envisioned that the theory and concepts of class articulated in the essay would be “set to work” by those who recognized their analytical potential and political uses. And, here, in *Home Front*, some of the many fruits of this “setting to work” are collected, providing a rich sense of the field of possibility that Spivak preliminarily charted.

Home Front foregrounds exploitation in households using a Marxian language of class. Stated in these bald and somewhat uninviting terms, the project of the book may seem simple, contained, and even backward-looking. But the book is radically antireductionist and complex in its theoretical grounding, offering an approach to Marxism that is relevant to the politics of everyday life and contemporary crises. Likewise, its epistemological stance is radically interventionist, embracing a view of theory and research as performatively participating in creating “other worlds.” New analyses of households will contribute to new social possibilities and potential avenues of transformative action. These are what Spivak detected looming in the mist, and what we would like to pursue in this essay.

By bringing a language of class to the understanding of households, *Home Front* redresses the longstanding, invidious distinction between work spaces outside the household, where capitalist relations are presumed to prevail, and domestic spaces where (women’s) work is invisible or undervalued, and subsumed to capitalism as “capitalist reproduction.” In this way, the book joins with the groundbreaking work of other feminist scholars who see the household as a distinct (noncapitalist) site of production, one in which hours, output, and even value produced are comparable to those in the monetized sector (see, for example, Ironmonger 1996). What *Home Front* adds to that feminist tradition is the central recognition that household production may take place within a variety of exploitative or nonexploitative relations (just as production in the so-called workplace may) and that these class relations are subject to struggle and transformation just as those in the workplace are, though the presumption of capitalist hegemony makes the latter seem unlikely. In the light of this radical revisioning, the terms “capitalist society” and “capitalist economy” become visible as acts of discursive cleansing, obliterating from view the class and labor processes in which more hours are spent over the course of a lifetime than any other.

Bringing household class processes into language redresses another invidious distinction—that between “less advanced” societies in the majority world which are seen as still being home to feudal or other noncapitalist relations and the wealthy “advanced” societies where feudalism is presumed to have vanished and capitalism reigns uncontested (Spivak 1994). The recognition of feudal, communal, independent, and slave class processes in so-called capitalist societies undermines the global hierarchy of economic evolution and brings out the commonality among all societies, each of them with a “mixed” or diverse economy, subject to change in multiple sites and multiple directions.¹

What we wish to highlight about the analysis offered here are the possibilities it opens up for the politics of class. Many time-honored ideas that shaped traditional class politics no longer “make sense” in the ontological space of *Home Front* and its class analytics. We are offered in their stead a more proximate and expansive sense of political possibility:

- (1) The vision of diverse class processes coexisting in a social formation displaces the notion of a unitary capitalist economy coextensive with the nation state, radically shifting the spatiality and temporality of class politics and undermining the “capitalocentrism” of political activism (Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff 2000, 2001). We recognize that economies may be transformed here and now, gradually or piecemeal, in various directions simultaneously, and at the micro, regional, sectoral, or national levels.
- (2) Class processes are no longer ranged in a pre-ordained sequence of development with capitalism (or perhaps a now discredited communism) at the pinnacle of evolution, thus opening class politics to unpredictability and contingency.
- (3) Class identities are multiple and shifting, with individuals and collectivities potentially participating in a number of class processes at any one time. Rather than building a mass collective movement of similarly classed individuals, class politics involves forging connections across differences to transform or inaugurate class relations. No privileged “working class” subject carries the burden of history, and class politics is any politics that focuses upon or transforms class processes. Class becomes the object rather than the subject of class politics.
- (4) The historical argument for the primacy of class exploitation over oppressive relations of race, gender, sexuality and other dimensions of social difference is no longer tenable (if it ever was) given the mutual constitution of social identities. The question of which kind of politics should come first is rendered irrelevant as Rio (2000) and Cameron (2001) demonstrate, respectively, in their work on African American domestic workers whose class politics transforms their identities as black women, and on domestic partners whose performances of gender and sexuality render them independent rather than exploited class subjects.

- (5) Academic and nonacademic research have an active and performative role to play in a politics of class, identifying openings for class politics, designing and tracking class experiments, providing analytic and process technologies for innovative class enactments, and contributing to the viability and credibility of new class initiatives, sites, formations, and subjects. Theory and research are an aspect of rather than a prelude to a politics of class.

The pathbreaking theoretical research informing *Home Front* operates as a spur to the political imagination. As we have seen, the antiessentialist approach to class “as a process” transforms the domestic landscape and performs a very different economy. Suddenly the home/family/domestic sphere/domicile/caring environment/residence/living quarters opens to analytical view in novel and enticing ways. We can see the necessary and surplus labor of household maintenance and caring as part of a diverse economic space inhabited by many distinct relations of exploitation. Not only do diverse processes of exploitation come into view but we can also begin to see the household as a site of potentially revolutionary economic transformations.

As researchers we are enticed to look for examples of collective living where nonexploitative class processes have taken root. History provides us with myriad concrete experiments of living communally in industrial societies, and all around us we see the accelerated proliferation of experiments in living together and in our biosphere differently. We are drawn to these micro-revolutions as we contemplate the legacy of Fraad, Resnick, and Wolff’s pioneering work on class in the household.

Certainly it seems that times of crisis and transition create openings for innovation in the dimension of class, as people are constrained or inspired by events to change familiar ways of working and living. In their book on class in the USSR, Resnick and Wolff (2002) offer a fascinating description of experiments in collective living during the early years after the Bolshevik revolution. They theorize these struggles to reshape living arrangements as attempts to establish a household-based communist class process, though this is not how these projects were understood at the time. From 1918 to 1931–32 rural and urban household communes were officially supported by the Soviet Union, and communist class processes thrived in a number of these sites during this period. By the early 1930s, however, the movement to establish household communes had unfortunately died out, undernourished by the state and party and undermined by the lack of a language of class that could focus political energies. It remains an irony that the actual communist revolution that took place in the Soviet Union was largely household-based, short-lived and unheralded though it might have been (2002: 186–87).

This disappointing story not only illustrates the opportunities available at critical and transitional moments² but also brings home the role of theory and

language in promoting or undermining a politics of social transformation. It also alerts us to the choices we make as theorists to foreground or elevate certain phenomena, and to obscure or devalue others. Marx, for example, “clearly saw [worker] cooperatives as shining examples of the organization of life under socialism” (Mellor, Hannah, and Stirling 1988: 22) and viewed the “cooperative factories raised by the unassisted efforts of a few ‘bold’ hands” as “great social experiments” (Mellor et al. 1988: 23, quoting Marx). But his overarching theoretical and political project led him to demote these experiments as “dwarfish forms,” unable to survive independently or transform capitalist societies (22). It is left for us to imagine what might have transpired if he had been interested in learning from these experiments and devoted his theoretical and empirical talents to their study and promotion.

An overdeterminist ontology allows for “class as an ‘entry point’ to be seen as both *constituting* and entirely *constituted* by its conditions of existence” (Gibson-Graham 2004: 40). This formulation suggests that fostering the conditions of existence of communal class processes might be just as effective as attempting to influence class struggles in the household directly. It is here that we can see a political role for research, producing knowledge of existing class experiments as a condition of their viability and expansion. As we confront the ecological crisis of climate change and the pressing need to reduce our carbon footprint, widespread rethinking of our ways of living together is taking place. This rethinking focuses primarily on the consumption of environmental goods—water, energy, air, soil—and is resulting in a proliferation of ecovillages, retrofitted eco-houses, and neighborhood-based environmental projects. In households where a feudal class process prevails the extra work involved in waste recycling, water conserving, energy monitoring, and self-provisioning is, no doubt, experienced as adding yet another burden to an already overloaded laborer. But in many others, heightened environmental consciousness is leading to a return to more communal ways of organizing domestic labor and neighborhood work. Opportunities for the spread of communal class processes abound as people begin to reclaim their lives and economies as sites of ethical practice.

Pioneer communal urban dwellers in Melbourne, Australia, are working hard to create a built environment that could foster sharing and replenishment of the earth’s gifts (especially water and soils) and living arrangements that would find “the limits between connectedness and the need for retreat” (WestWyck cofounder Lorna Pitt, quoted in Dolan 2008: 61). In an old school building saved from demolition by community action, this group of committed communalists have established an ecovillage in which organic and human waste is treated on-site, gray water is recycled, rain water caught and used, and solar power captured for heating and power (58). The converted school site of WestWyck includes a shared bike shed, clotheslines, and a vegetable garden along with private living space in 12 townhouses and apartments. Shared yards provide space for collective childcare, and residents learn

to maintain the complex water and waste treatment systems they rely upon. WestWyck planners have made sure that one of the conditions of existence for communal domestic class processes, the built environment, has been designed to encourage this equitable form of economic interdependence.

The current economic crisis is also provoking a communal response among US baby boomers whose income and retirement prospects have been drastically affected by the simultaneous collapse of the housing and stock markets. Many individuals in their 50s who previously lived separately are seeking housemates, and prospective retirees are purchasing houses jointly with groups of friends. Laird Schaub, executive director of the Fellowship for Intentional Community, notes a growing interest in all kinds of residential communities (Zaitchik 2009), including “ecovillages, cohousing, residential land trusts, communes, student co-ops, urban housing cooperatives, alternative communities, and other projects where people strive together with a common vision” (<http://www.ic.org/>, accessed March 10, 2009). Each of these householding projects is a potential site of communist class processes, which are liable to flourish in experimental environments.

As academic researchers, we view our theoretical and empirical research as one of the conditions of existence of commun(al)ism. Alongside nonacademic knowledge producers, we are engaged in conversations and experimental actions that are building community economies in which our interdependence around issues of necessity, surplus, consumption, and the commons is brought to the fore. Ethical negotiations involved in maintaining, replenishing, and sharing a commons; meeting human and non-human needs; deciding what and how much to consume; and producing, appropriating, and distributing surplus take place in households and residential communities as well as in formal and informal enterprises (Gibson-Graham 2006). The language of class is one of the clarifying framings that can help make communal initiatives more intelligible, showcase their egalitarian aspects, and pinpoint their blind spots and inequities. Researchers—including all participants in experimental projects—can bring visibility and credibility to communal experiments. We can also contribute to making these experiments more viable by assisting, for example, with experimental design, governance structures, assessment protocols, legal and technical issues, and knowledge dissemination; chronicling and codifying development, including setbacks and successes; making connections among allies and formulating recommendations for policy support. If we are interested in class transformation, *Home Front* alerts us to multiple entry points for research action. “Setting to work” the theory and concepts of class elaborated in this book will not only make other households possible but also contribute to the becoming of “other worlds.”

1. Spivak (1994) sees the delinking of history and theory involved in theorizing a feudal class process in contemporary households of the “north” as a major achievement of this theoretical project.

2. Crises and transitions need not be society-wide to provoke experimentation. In her chapter in *Home Front*, Maliha Safri points to the unique conditions under which communal households (and perhaps communist class processes) emerged among groups of Mexican men who had migrated alone to the US before 1965. By force of circumstance, these men lived collectively in apartment complexes, shared household work and learned “new” domestic skills. Even when reunited with their families they continued to perform their newly learned roles in a domestic division of labor. This story shows that while collectivity might not be “freely” chosen, once experienced, many people welcome the changes it offers.

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Acknowledgments

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Since I am a sociologist, I understand that no individual belongs entirely to her/himself. Therefore the list of names deserving thanks is too long for this volume. Nonetheless, I wish to thank Rosalind Hartigan, Jay Meehan, David Fasenfest, Jennifer Klein, George Sanders, Kathy Barrett, Nadia Sadik, my students and colleagues at Oakland University, David Ruccio, and Taiba Batool of Palgrave Press, for providing support or inspiration for this project.

1

Introduction: Method(s), Narrative, and Scientific “Truth”

Graham Cassano

Recently I was asked by a student organization to talk about “white privilege” in America. For 45 minutes I did nothing more than narrate the history of the Federal Housing Authority and the state-sponsored racialization of property during the twentieth century. My audience consisted, for the most part, of African American college students and administrators. And, as I told this tale of “redlining,” “blockbusting,” and the slow transition from de jure to de facto residential segregation after the Second World War, I caught their attention, until they were literally leaning forward in their seats, anticipating each sentence. I’d like to say that their enthusiasm was due to my gifts as an orator. But I don’t think that’s an altogether accurate interpretation. After the talk, a young woman, an administrator at another state university, came forward. Holding her 10-year-old son’s hand, she recounted her experiences with racism, and her son’s, whose learning disability went undiagnosed, she believed, for racist reasons. She then said about the story I’d just told: “You know, I always knew something was wrong. I just didn’t have the language to express it. Now I have the words.” Here we have both an explanation of the students’ rapt attention to a rather dry institutional and political history and an illustration of the power of narrative, the power of theory. Narrative, the story we use to explain events, gives us a power over those events—the power of meaning. By endowing events with a sense, an interpretation, the historian gives her audience the ability to understand themselves in a new way. And since history is an interpretation, a form giving narration, it is a theorizing (or re-theorizing) of reality. Every history, and, indeed, any narrative, depends upon explicit or, more often, implicit criteria for what counts as an “event” and what counts as an “explanation” of that event. Theory reflects upon, creates, and refines those criteria. Like narrative, theory itself is a language for giving form to an overdetermined reality. What form theory gives and what form it takes depends upon the interests of the theorist, not upon some external index of truth. Truth is a function of any given theoretical logic. For liberation theorists, like the contributors to this collection, *one* measure of an adequate theory lay in its ability to give its students

a language to describe, narrate, and confront the forces of exploitation and domination that govern their everyday lives.

Twenty years ago, Arlie Russell Hochschild's *The Second Shift* (1989) called the attention of readers to the hidden exploitation of women in contemporary America. For instance, she found that in many married couples where both partners express an "egalitarian" gender ideology, women nonetheless perform the majority of household labor after finishing their shift in the formal economy. With the passage of time, very little has changed. If anything, the forces of global competition have intensified the exploitation of women in the household. Arlie Hochschild's work gave us a new language for understanding ourselves, our world, our marriages, our partnerships, our conflicts, and our separations and our divorces. But she doesn't systematically elaborate a theory of exploitation in her description of the second shift. As a sociologist, she thinks through the domination and oppression of women, but not necessarily in the language of exploitation, the language of Marxian political economy. Our task in this collection is to bring that language of political economy to bear upon both the exploitation and the oppression of women and men by our dominant gender ideologies and economic practices.

When Harriet Fraad, Rick Wolff, and Steve Resnick published their collection, *Bringing It All Back Home: Class, Gender & Power in the Modern Household* (1994), they brought new, postmodern Marxian analytic tools to the study of the division of labor and forms of exploitation that inform contemporary household labor and contemporary domestic life.¹ The essays in this collection expand upon the first steps taken by Fraad, Resnick, and Wolff in the mid-1990s. We use Marxism not to supplant feminism and the rich tradition of feminist literature that informs our critique; rather, we hope to add a new perspective that enriches the language we use to confront the forces of power and exploitation.

I

I'd like to begin this introduction to a collective endeavor with a personal reminiscence and say something about my first meeting with Rick Wolff, since it was through Rick that I discovered the work of Fraad, Resnick, and Wolff. I'd finished graduate school in the early 1990s and, after a few years of casual labor in the academy as a lecturer, I became a full time stay-at-home father, caring for and schooling my daughter, Bia. I mention my occupation as "homemaker" because this gender transgression gave me a new perspective on the division of household labor and class struggles within a domestic partnership. I was lucky. I had a loving and supportive partner. She was a contract laborer in the computer industry. While this meant we had no health insurance, she did control her own time and had a flexible schedule. With my partner's support and through her work, I was

able to participate in the struggles of Yale University's organized workers. The Connecticut Center for a New Economy, an organization affiliated with UNITE-HERE, was attempting to build a labor–community partnership based upon the notion that New Haven, Connecticut, was a kind of “company town” almost entirely dependent upon the one remaining major employer in our “post-industrial” city, Yale University.

Through this struggle I met several other unaffiliated academics, and we decided to begin a political economy research project, exploring the consequences of Yale's economic domination of New Haven's urban landscape. We'd heard stories of a Marxist economist who ran for Mayor on the Green Party ticket in the 1980s and won 10 percent of the city's vote. During his campaign, he pursued a similar agenda and so we arranged a meeting. Rick Wolff spent several hours with us, providing a detailed picture of New Haven's political economy. He struck me as a hard-edged Marxist in the tradition of Paul Sweezy, uncompromising in his critique, insisting upon the necessity for radical transformation rather than palliatives and liberal platitudes.

In graduate school, I was trained in the critical Marxist tradition and seduced by the beauty and acumen of thinkers like Foucault, Deleuze, Kristeva, and Lacan. But this was a volatile combination of texts. My reading of post-structuralism, together with my engagement with so-called classical sociological theorists like Max Weber, Georg Simmel, and Thorstein Veblen, made traditional Marxism problematic. I was a radical. I was an anti-capitalist. Yet despite my great affection for texts by Sweezy, Braverman, Lukacs, and others in the Marxian tradition, I couldn't call myself a Marxist. I couldn't accept Marxian determinism. Even the soft determinism of the Frankfurt School no longer seemed tenable. Apart from the Marxian emphasis upon determinism, another factor, perhaps peculiar to sociology as a profession, affected my sense of distance from Marxism. In sociology, self-described Marxists often use their theoretical energies to explain away social movements as epiphenomena, as useless attempts at change, inevitably co-opted by an all-powerful capitalist engine. (Here the Frankfurt School's influence on sociology has been particularly pernicious.) At worst, critical Marxists within sociology are openly anti-radical; at best, they often sit in their libraries, waiting for that inevitable crisis of capitalist accumulation.

But Rick was different. He was actively engaged in a social movement. Despite his radical analysis, or, more properly, because of it, he understood the necessity for organized struggle. And he was a self-described “postmodernist,” a Marxist who rejected determinism. Before I cracked the binding of *Knowledge and Class* (Resnick and Wolff 1987), I rediscovered Marxism, and its possibilities, through my early conversations with Rick. His was a Marxism I could claim as my own; a Marxism that traded determinism for “overdetermination”; a Marxism that was epistemologically sophisticated, drawing equally on the careful analyses of Lukacs, Sweezy, and Althusser

on the one hand, and American pragmatism on the other; a Marxism that *enabled* social struggle and supported concrete activism; and a Marxism that emerged in dialogue with the new social movements of the late twentieth century, including, especially, feminism.

II

Steve Resnick and Rick Wolff are sometimes called “Althusserian” Marxists. That’s a misnomer. While Resnick and Wolff learned much from Althusser, and, like Althusser, “returned” to Marx in order to generate a new social theory, they find that “even in the work of Althusser ... determinism is more present than absent” (Resnick and Wolff 2006: 5). Their work is informed by Althusser, and also by Foucault, Freud, Lacan, and, most remarkably, by epistemological relativists like Richard Rorty, W. V. O. Quine, and Nelson Goodman (Resnick and Wolff 1987). Resnick and Wolff reject determinism both because it is epistemologically untenable, and “politically dangerous” as well as “fundamentally unnecessary for and counterproductive to the Marxist project.” But this new perspective does not disable a Marxian critique. Resnick and Wolff, “were never persuaded to see Marxism as so hopelessly mired in determinism that a rejection of determinism requires the rejection of Marxism” (Resnick and Wolff 2006: 5).

Before reading Resnick and Wolff, I was familiar with the Freudian/Lacanian sense of “overdetermination.” For Freud, and later for Lacan, every text (or act or event) is an unstable field of forces and multiple, overlapping, and contradictory intention. Texts have multiple meanings, unconscious senses, hidden possibilities. But for Resnick and Wolff, “overdetermination” is itself overdetermined by multiple meanings. Following Althusser, they extend the use of “overdetermination,” producing a kind of holistic social systems theory in which any social process interacts with and affects all other processes in a social formation. With this new use of “overdetermination,” Resnick and Wolff reject stabilized, reified, functionalist metaphors. “Society” is not a thing, fixed and constant. Rather, it is a perpetually ongoing fabrication, a set of interacting, living processes.

A number of other social theories show a superficial resemblance to Resnick and Wolff’s distinctive project. Even classical Parsonian sociology has a place for mutual, reciprocal determination of interacting social “functions.” But either consciously, or, more usually, unconsciously, these social theories represent social formations as closed totalities and posit a privileged standpoint for the theorist, as if he or she stands above social forces. The theorist becomes a transcendental observer of a (closed) system.

Resnick and Wolff don’t reject the notion of “totality.” After all, a social formation is an interlocking and mutually constituting set of processes. But their totality has no closure. There’s no theoretical standpoint beyond or above these processes. And the social theorist’s perspective is always limited,

partial, fragmentary. This acknowledgment of the partial perspective of the theorist leads to their epistemological assertion: "Truth is not absolute, but rather relative" (Resnick and Wolff 2006: 5).

Like a social formation, a theory itself is an interlocking set of propositions, tropes, and logics. It is a kind of machine and the "truth" it produces is always limited (and made possible) by its mechanisms. Different theoretical machines produce different pictures of the world, and there is no standpoint outside the theory that allows a reader to judge its absolute accuracy. A theory is *not* a mirror of reality. Through its representations and its logics, theory transforms reality. "Alternative theoretical frameworks yield alternative understandings; truths vary with (are relative to) the internally contradictory and differentiated social contexts that produce them. Different theories produce not only their respective substantive propositions but also the criteria by which each theory deems its ... propositions true or false" (Resnick and Wolff 2006: 5). Consequently, Marxism has no inherent privilege, no special access to the truth of the world. It is a perspective among perspectives, and generates its own set of "truths," based upon its basic "entry point" into a social formation's complex, open totality. For Resnick and Wolff, that "entry point" is the class struggle over the production and distribution of social surplus.

Resnick and Wolff offer a rather unique definition of "class." Beginning in the eighteenth century, political economists used the word "class" to designate a group of social actors. This use harkened back to the philosophical origins of the term, "class," as a category or group of similar things. Today, most social scientists continue to utilize this notion of "class." A "class" of social actors is defined based upon their relation to or possession of property, wealth, authority, power, or some composite of these elements. Thus, in some pictures of the world, the "working class" is defined in terms of income levels or wealth; in others, the "working class" is defined based upon levels of authority or power; in still others, the "working class" is defined both in terms of power and property; etc. In their "return" to Marx, Resnick and Wolff "discover" (or produce) a new definition of class. For them, class is never a noun, never the description of a substantive group of social actors (Resnick and Wolff 1987). Rather, class is always an adjective, a term that describes a process, the process of the production and distribution of a social surplus. This non-substantive definition of class proves particularly useful for describing a complex, differentiated social formation in which social actors participate in different class processes at different social sites. For instance, a social actor may be exploited in the workplace, where her or his surplus labor is appropriated, while at home, she or he *appropriates* the surplus produced by other family members. The same individual personifies two separate class positions at two different social sites. In their contribution to this collection, Resnick and Wolff will expand and expound upon both their non-deterministic Marxism and their non-substantive definition

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