OF MARRIAGE AND THE MARKET: WOMEN'S SUBORDINATION IN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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Perhaps the most awkward problem facing any feminist analysis of gender relations arises from the fact that while sexual inequality is demonstrably not an inevitable fact of life, women's subordination to men has proved remarkably persistent, transcending the boundaries of societies which have quite distinct social and economic histories and cultural traditions. Many people have therefore assumed that male authority was in the natural order of things; and radical feminists have felt justified in seeking 'explanations' that are couched in terms of some basic and universal patriarchal order. The common underpinning of the ten essays in this collection, however, is a determined rejection of such easy solutions.

They insist firmly that 'relations between men and women are social relations' and are therefore neither universal nor immutable. They concentrate instead on developing systematic historical accounts of gender relations in a wide variety of social contexts: several countries situated in the capitalist 'periphery' of Africa and South East Asia; socialist states in the Soviet Bloc and the Third World; England; European migrant labour, etc. There are no quick and easy answers by this route, but at least I felt after reading these essays that I had been helped towards a clearer and deeper understanding of the issues.

Apart from the variety of source materials used the editors are keen to emphasise the diversity of viewpoints represented in these papers. Most of the contributors have been influenced by Marxism but none could be described as 'orthodox', and some of the contributors deny altogether the adequacy of historical materialism for analysing sexuality and gender relations. However, fragmentation and eclecticism have been successfully avoided partly, no doubt, because many of the contributors have been working together in the Subordination of Women Workshop. Indeed the book possesses a quite definite sense of unity and common purpose.

This undoubtedly has much to do with the undogmatic spirit with which the authors have approached their task. Despite their disagreements, often fundamental, they are not working separately, each within a closed system. Moreover, by coupling this openness with a genuine recognition of the need for rigorous, historical and ultimately empirical analysis, they avoid the kind of sterile, convoluted theorising to which too much Marx - and some femin - work has recently been prone.

The essays are also linked by a number of recurrent themes. For example, none of the contributors sees salvation coming solely through women acquiring full access to social production or the market. Concentrating exclusively on the process of production, they contend, ignores other and arguably more fundamental causes of gender subordination. An investigation of the position of women in state socialist societies highlights the inadequacy of economistic analyses of gender relations. The old assumption (held by most socialist as well as bourgeois economists) that resources within families are distributed according to individual needs is refuted in more than one of the essays. Feminists have been hammering away at this one for several years, the nails on this occasion being supplied mainly by Whitehead's survey of domestic budgeting arrangements in England and Ghana, and Maher's account of the effects of the market economy on Berber households in Morocco.

Family households, it is concluded, are hierarchical structures characterised by male dominance. Hence, the persistent reluctance of many traditional Marxists to explore power relations within the family and their tendency to bracket off questions of sexuality and procreation has to be challenged.

But above all the essays are held together by a concern with the processes by which social relations of gender come to be identified as natural attributes of sex. Olivia Harris shows how we continue to treat family and household as natural building blocks of society, even when we know that actual domestic arrangements vary enormously; Stolcke shows how bourgeois thought manages to justify social inequalities of gender by treating them as though they were inheritable qualities; while Elson and Pearson provide a powerful illustration of this process at work. They show how in Third World economies female skills acquired at home (such as sewing) can be ignored by employers and labour organisations when women enter the super-exploited labour markets of the world market factories. Domestic training does not qualify women for 'skilled work' because manual dexterity can be dismissed as an innate feminine attribute. The argument has a familiar ring. As Maureen Mackintosh writes:

Feminist analysis of sexual divisions starts from the premise that they are not "natural" ... Rather, we can turn such a proposition on its head: only in a society where men and women constitute unequal genders is there any reason why gender should be an important organising principle of the social division of labour, with the exception of the physical process of childbirth.' (p3)

Of Marriage and the Market joins a grow-
ing literature that is building carefully and systematically on the feminist revolution in theory. It is not, however, a book for beginners. Though it avoids unnecessary jargon and its arguments are mostly expressed clearly, few concessions are made to readers without some kind of social studies background. Unlike some of CSE's earlier publications, this collection has not gone out of its way to become accessible to a wide 'lay' public. Technical terms, for example, are generally left unexplained. This will certainly limit the book's avowed aim of making a contribution to the political struggle, but it is a valuable publication nonetheless, and should appear high on lists of recommended reading for many years to come.

Chris Middleton
The position of a woman in the seventeenth-century English marriage was dictated by the patriarchal nature of family relationships, with an emphasis on the subordination of women. Common law was strongly biased in favour of the husband/father. It was still a fact that a married woman had no financial rights independent of her husband. Traditional church law placed great emphasis on the sacredness of marriage and on its inseparability. Divorce in the modern sense of the word (i.e. termination of a valid marriage with the possibility of remarrying) was not recognised (van Dülmen 1999: 184). A substitute option was declaring the marriage invalid (i.e. stating that the bond had never been a proper marriage); to do this, it had to be proved that the marriage was defective in some way. 


Transformed by the advent of globalization, and the increasing movement of individuals and families across national borders, international family law has become a significant subject, bridging the traditional boundaries of public and private international law. (1) In the context of cross-border children's issues, the Hague Children's Conventions have established a new system of international law, largely embraced by American courts and lawmakers and implemented in federal legislation and uniform state laws. 