

patriarchy, Domestic Mode of Production, Gender, and Class

Translated by Diana Leonard

As classes, men and women are socially named, differentiated, and made pertinent through social practices. The patriarchal system which subordinates women to men in contemporary society is based in the economic relations of the domestic mode of production.

The analysis of patriarchy in our society that I have been developing for the last fifteen years has a history I would like to detail. I came to my use of the concept and to the model growing out of it by way of two projects whose theoretical concerns might seem unrelated. One project was to study the transmission of family property (patrimony), and the other was to reply to criticisms of the women's liberation movement that had come from the Left.

As it happened, when I started to do research on these two topics, I found that lack of relatedness was only apparent. This might have been predictable from the coherent commitment that had led me to these topics: I had wanted to work "on women," which is to say, for me, on women's oppression. Yet my director of studies at the time told me this was not possible, so I chose to study the inheritance of property instead, hoping eventually to get back to my initial interest by an indirect route. In my research I first discovered what a great quantity of goods change hands without passing through the market; instead, these goods were passed through the family, as gifts or "inheritance." I also discovered that the science of economics, which purports to concern itself with everything related to the exchange of goods in society, is in fact concerned with only *one* of the systems of production, circulation, and consumption of goods: the market.

At the time (between 1968 and 1970) I was also participating in the activities of one of the two groups that historically helped create the new feminist movement in France. I was very annoyed—and I was not alone, though like the hero of *Catch 22* I thought I was being personally got at!—by one of the men in this mixed group. He claimed that the oppression of women could not be as severe or as important as the oppression of the proletariat because although women were oppressed, they were not "exploited."

I was well aware that something was wrong with his position. In that group, at least, we recognized that women earned half as much as men and worked twice as hard, but apparently women's oppression nevertheless had, in theory, no economic dimension! While we knew at the time that housework existed, we saw it principally as a question of an unfair

division of boring tasks; and since we did not ask the relevant questions about the problem, not surprisingly we got no relevant answers. However, my work on patrimony—that is, on the economic aspects of the nonmarket sphere; or, to put it another way, on the nonmarket sphere of the economy—served to help me find and pose certain of these questions. Others, at the time, were also discovering the theoretical as well as the practical importance of housework, but they came to it by different routes and therefore arrived at rather different conclusions.

Analysis of gifts and the inheritance of property within the family allowed me to demystify the market. This prevented my getting caught in the classic trap of opposing exchange value and use value, an opposition that had lead the pioneers (Benston and Largaia), as well as those who came later, into a number of impasses, or, if you will, into a circular route from which they could find no way out. By showing that this opposition only makes sense if one adopts the viewpoint of the market, I was able to propose a theory in which nonmarket value, instead of being a *problem* in understanding housework, is one of the clues to elucidating the specific nature of housework. By taking this nonvalue as a constitutive element of housework, I was able to show that (a) housework's exclusion from the market was the cause, and not the consequence, of its not being paid for; (b) this exclusion involved not only housework, nor only particular types of work, but rather social *actors* as well, or, to be more precise, work done within certain social relations; and (c) in seeking to understand housework, it is a mistake to see it merely as a particular set of tasks, whether one is seeking to describe them or to explain them in terms of their "intrinsic usefulness." I have taken up all these points again in my recent work, but they were present, at least in germ, in "The Main Enemy."¹ From this time on I have been able to propose a theoretical rather than an empirical analysis of housework, which I see as a particular part of the much larger category of "domestic work," thanks to my initial creation of the concept of the "domestic mode of production."

Since 1970 I have also used the term "patriarchy," and in all my work I have tried to specify and delimit this word and to state precisely the relations between patriarchy and the domestic mode of production. I am still working on this. If I have used a fairly vague term, it has been so as to show from the start that I consider the oppression of women *to be a system*. But the question is, what are the system's components and how is it constituted? The notion has to be filled in, and this can only be done bit by bit.

I have, however, since entering the field, restricted the meaning I attach to the term "patriarchy." For many, it is synonymous with "the subordination of women." It carries this meaning for me, too, but with this qualification: I add the words "here and now." This makes a big difference. When I hear it said, as I often do, that "patriarchy has changed between the stone age and the present," I know that it is not "my" patriarchy that is being talked about. What I study is not an ahistoric concept that has wandered down through the centuries but something peculiar to contemporary industrial societies. I do not believe in the theory of survivals—and here I am in agreement with other Marxists. An institution that exists today cannot be explained by the fact that it existed in the past, even if this past is recent. I do not deny that certain elements of patriarchy today resemble elements of the patriarchy of one or two hundred years ago; what I deny is

that this *continuance*—insofar as it really concerns the same thing—in itself constitutes an explanation.

Many people think that when they have found the point of origin of an institution in the past, they hold the key to its present existence. But they have, in fact, explained neither its present existence nor even its birth (its past appearance), for one must explain its existence at each and every moment by the context prevailing at that time; and its persistence today (if it really is persistence) must be explained by the present context. Some so-called historical explanations are in fact ahistorical, precisely because they do not take account of the given conditions of each period. This is not History but mere dating. History is precious if it is well conducted, if each period is examined in the same way as the present period. A science of the past worthy of the name cannot be anything other than a series of synchronic analyses.

The search for origins is a caricature of this falsely historical procedure and is one of the reasons why I have denounced it, and why I shall continue to denounce it each and every time it surfaces—which is, alas, all too frequently. (The other reason why I denounce the search for origins is because of its hidden naturalistic presuppositions.) But from the scientific point of view, it is as illegitimate to seek keys to the present situation in the nineteenth century as in the Stone Age.

Since 1970, then, I have been saying that patriarchy is the system of subordination of women to men in contemporary industrial societies, that this system has an economic base, and that this base is the domestic mode of production. It is hardly worth saying that these three ideas have been, and remain, highly controversial.

Like all modes of production, the domestic mode of production is also a mode of circulation and consumption of goods. While it is difficult, at least at first sight, to identify in the capitalist mode of production the form of consumption that distinguishes the dominant from the dominated, since consumption is mediated by wage, things are very different in the domestic mode. Here consumption is of primary importance and has this power to serve as a basis for making discriminations, for one of the essential differences between the two modes of production is that domestic production is not paid but rather maintained. In this mode, therefore, consumption is not separated from production, and the unequal sharing of goods is not mediated by money. Consumption in the family has to be studied if we want not only to be able to evaluate the quantitative exploitation of various members but also to understand what upkeep consists of and how it differs from a wage. Too many people today still "translate" upkeep into its monetary equivalent, as if a woman who receives a coat receives the value of the coat. In so doing they abolish the crucial distinction between a wage and retribution in kind, produced by the presence or absence of a monetary transaction. This distinction creates the difference between self-selected and forced consumption and is independent of the value of the goods consumed.

Every mode of production is also a mode of circulation. The mode of circulation peculiar to the domestic mode of production is the transmission of patrimony, which is regulated in part by the rules of inheritance but is not limited to them. It is an area that has been fairly well studied in some sectors of our society (e.g., farming) but completely ignored in others. Here we can also see, on the one hand, the difference between

the abstract model and the concrete society and, on the other hand, the consequences of the fact that our social system (or more precisely the representation that has been made of it, i.e., the model of our social system) is composed of several subsystems.

The intergenerational circulation of goods is interesting in that it shows the mechanisms at work that produce complementary and antagonistic classes: the division between owners and nonowners of the means of production. The effect of the dispossession is clear in the agricultural world: those who do not inherit—women and younger siblings—work unpaid for their husbands and inheriting brothers. Domestic circulation (the rules of inheritance and succession) leads directly into patriarchal relations of production. But patrimonial transmission is equally important at another level in reconstituting, generation after generation, the capitalist mode of production. It not only creates possessors and nonpossessors within each family, but it also creates this division among families. This is the only aspect of patrimonial transmission that has really been studied to date. The former, the division into classes of a kin group, is passed over in silence by many sociologists and anthropologists, who pretend, against all the evidence—and in particular against all the evidence on the division of society into genders—that *all* the children in a family inherit equally the goods and status of the head of the family. But being the only effect of patrimonial transmission recognized by (traditional) sociology makes its reconstituting of capitalist classes no less real, and this is, indeed, one of the times when the domestic mode of production meets the capitalist mode and where they interpenetrate.

Depriving women of the means of production is not the only way in which women are dispossessed of direct access to their means of subsistence, if only because many families do not have any family property *not* to transmit to them. The same effect is produced by the systemic discrimination women face in the *wage-labor* market (let us for the moment call it the “dual labor” market). This too pushes women to enter domestic relations of production, mainly by getting married. The situation of women on the labor market has been well studied, and the only originality in my approach has been to invert the direction of the links usually established. While ordinarily it is seen as the family situation that influences the capacity of women to work outside, I have tried to show that it is the situation created for women on the labor market that constitutes an objective incentive to marry; hence, the labor market plays a role in the exploitation of women’s domestic work.

How should this fact be conceptualized? How should we interpret its meaning with regard to the relations between patriarchy and the domestic mode of production? Can we talk of capitalist mechanisms serving the domestic mode of production, or must we speak of domestic mechanisms at work in the labor market? Whatever the reply—and the question will stay open for a long time—one thing is clear: whether it concerns patrimonial transmission (which assists, if not creates, relations of production other than those that are strictly domestic) or the capitalist labor market (which assists, if not creates, relations of production other than capitalist ones), the two systems are tightly linked and have a relationship of mutual aid and assistance. Moreover, the relations between patriarchy and the domestic mode of production are not simple relations of superposition. The domestic mode

of production in places overruns patriarchy and in places is slighter. The same is true also of the capitalist mode of production: one of its institutions, the labor market, is in part ruled, or used, by patriarchy.

Thus, the domestic mode of production does not give a total account of even the economic dimension of women’s subordination. And it does not account for other dimensions of this subordination, in particular the oppressions that are just as material as economic exploitation, including all the varieties of sexual violence. Some of these forms of violence can be attached to the appropriation of women’s labor power. For example, C. Hennequin, E. deLesseps, and I attached them to the prohibition of abortion.² Since the bringing up of children is labor extorted from women, it could in fact be thought that men fear women will seek to escape from the labor of child-rearing, notably by limiting births, and that men therefore accord themselves the means to withdraw such control from women by prohibiting abortion. The constraint to be heterosexual and the “choice” within sexuality of practices that result in impregnation can also be seen as a means to withdraw control over fertility from women and give it to men. The same sort of reasoning has been applied to marital violence³ and rape.⁴ However, to be fair, the links so established are too abridged to be called full explanations. There remain whole sections of women’s oppression that are only very partially, if at all, explained by my theory. This can be seen as a shortcoming, but not an involuntary one; rather, it is a consequence of certain refusals and choices of a methodological kind which I have made.

I distrust theories that seek from the outset to explain as a totality all the aspects of the oppression of women. The first, general reason I distrust them is that such theories themselves remain particular. In being too glued to their object, to its specificity, they become specific, unable to locate their object among other similar things (e.g., among other oppressions), because they do not possess the tools to make it comparable. However, the explanatory power of a theory (or a concept or a hypothesis) is tied to its capacity to discover what is common to several phenomena of the same order, and hence to its capacity to go beyond the phenomenal reality (i.e., what is immediately present) of each case. The idea that the *raison d’être* of things is to be found beyond their appearance, that it is “hidden,” is part of scientific procedure (though it can, of course, be contested).

Thus, one of the objections that has been made to my use of the concepts “mode of production” and “class” has been that these concepts were created to describe other situations and that in using them I deny the specificity of our oppression. But analysis proceeds by a kind of logical “butchery.” To understand a phenomenon, one begins by breaking it down into bits, which are later reassembled. Why? So that the bits will be the same for all instances of the phenomenon studied. (Here the phenomenon under study is the subordination of one group by another, the oppression of women being one instance.) The recompositions later obtained are then comparable. With a few concepts a geographer can describe any landscape. To understand is first to compare. This is how all sciences proceed, and it is how we proceed in everyday life: how you and I describe a person, a place, a situation to people who are not able to have direct experience of them.

But these nonspecific concepts are made not so much to describe things as to explain them. (Although all description requires a classification

and, hence, at the start is an explanation, all explanation is also a description insofar as it can itself be further explained.) This is the ambition of analysis. The bits into which a phenomenon is broken are also not those of immediate perception. The economic dimension, for instance, is not an "obvious" category for thinking about the family today, but then it was also not an obvious one for thinking about any phenomenon whatsoever a few centuries ago, even those our current language now calls "the economy."

It follows that when the bits are gathered together, the assemblages so obtained are in no way restitutions of the objects initially treated but rather models: images of what it is suggested are the realities underlying and causing the objects. The initial "objects" are also not themselves "pure" facts but rather the immediate perception of things, informed in a nonexplicit fashion by a certain view of the world (what Feyerabend referred to as "natural evidences"). Thus, it could be said, on the one hand, that the more a theory pretends to be "general" (its object), the more it has descriptive power and the less it has explanatory power; and, on the other hand, the more it is intended to account for immediate perception, precisely because to have a descriptive power it must stick to the "facts," the more it is ideological.

The other reason for my distrust of theories that wish to be "total" is that even when they do not aim to "cover" everything, they still aim to explain everything by a single "cause"; and when their concern is women's oppression, this thirst for a single cause generally leads straight into the arms of naturalism. Naturalism is a major sin of which we are not responsible since it is the indigenous theory—the rationalization—for oppression. Today it is applied to the oppression of women and people "of color," but it was also used to explain the oppression of the proletariat scarcely a century ago. It is not sufficiently recognized that the exploitation of the working class was justified, in the nineteenth century, by the "natural" (today one would say "genetic") inferiority of its members. And naturalism continues to infect our thought. This is most obvious in antifeminist thinking, but it is still present, in large measure, in feminism itself.

Feminists have been shouting for more than a decade whenever they hear it said that the subordination of women is caused by the inferiority of our natural capacities. But, at the same time, the vast majority continue to think that "we must take account of biology." Why exactly? No one knows. Science has thrown out, one after another, all the "biological explanations" of the oppression of proletarians and nonwhites, so it might be thought that this type of account would be discredited. This century has seen the collapse of such racist theories, even though one-quarter of primatologists keep trying to save them from annihilation. But the role that biology never merited historically it does not merit logically either. Why should we, in trying to explain the division of society into hierarchical groups, attach ourselves to the anatomy of the individuals who compose, or are thought to compose, these groups? The pertinence of the *question* (not to speak of the pertinence of the replies furnished) still remains to be demonstrated as far as I am concerned.

Naturalist "explanations" always choose the most convenient biology of the moment. In the last century it was the (feeble) muscles of women; in the 1950s it was the (deleterious) influence of our hormones on our moods; today it is the (bad) lateralization of our brains. Feminists are

outraged by such "theories," but no one has yet explained to me how these theories differ fundamentally from the explanation in terms of women's ability to gestate which is so in favor today under the name of "reproduction."

One of the axioms, if not the fundamental axiom, of my approach is that women and men are *social* groups. I start from the incontestable fact that they are socially named, socially differentiated, and socially pertinent, and I question these social practices. How are they realized? What are they for? It may be (again, this remains to be proved) that women are (also) females and that men are (also) males, but it is women and men who interest me, not females and males. Even if one gives only minimal weight to the social construction of sexual difference, if one contents oneself with merely stating the pertinence of sex for society, then one is obliged to consider this pertinence as a social fact, which therefore requires an equally social explanation. (Just because Durkheim said it does not make this any less true.) This is why an important part of my work is devoted to denouncing approaches that seek a natural explanation for a social fact, and why I want to dislodge all approaches that implicitly bear the stamp of this reductionism.

A considerable theoretical step forward was taken ten years ago with the creation of the concept of "gender." The term is, however, unfortunately little used in French and not systematically used in English, with the result that we continue to get entangled by the different meanings of the word "sex" or are constrained to use paraphrases (e.g., "sexual divisions in society"). The concept of gender carries in one word both a recognition of the social dimension of the "sexual" dichotomy and the need to treat it as such, and its consequent detachment from the anatomical-biological aspect of sex. But it only partially detaches the social from the anatomical. If gender identifies a social construction, it is, however, not arbitrarily built on no matter what: it is constituted by anatomical sex, just as the beret is set on the head of the legendary Frenchman. And, since its creation, the concept of gender, far from taking wing, has seemed always to function in composite expressions such as "sex and gender" or "sex/gender"—the "and" or the slash serving to buttress rather than separate the two. When two words are always associated, they become redundant; when, in addition, the association is not reciprocal—when sex can happily dispense with gender—the optional addition of the second term seems but a cautious form of speech that lacks real meaning.

The concept of gender has thus not taken off as I would have wished, nor has it given rise to the theoretical development it carried in germ. Rather, gender now seems to be taken at its most minimal connotation. It is accepted that the "roles" of the sexes vary according to the society, but it is this *variability* that is taken to sum up the social aspect of sex. Gender is a content of which sex is the constraining container. The content may vary from society to society, but the container itself does not. Gayle Rubin, for example, maintains that sex inevitably gives birth to gender. In other words, the sexual dimorphism of the human species contains in itself not only the capacity but also the *necessity* of a social division. The very existence of genders—of different social positions for men and women (or, more correctly, for females or males)—is thus taken as given, as not

requiring explanation. Only the content of these positions and their (eventual, according to Rubin) hierarchy are a matter for investigation. Those who, like me, took gender seriously find themselves, today, pretty isolated.

I give above my reasons for mistrusting "specific" explanations. They may, perhaps, not totally explain for readers my use of the term "class." Beyond responding to the needs of analysis as described above—though, perhaps, no better than another concept might (namely, breaking down an object—here the oppression of women—into small sections, or, more precisely, into nonspecific *dimensions*)—the concept of class has the advantage of being the only one I know that at least partially responds to the strict requirements of a social explanation. It is perhaps not totally satisfying, but it is the least unsatisfying of all the terms used to analyze oppression.

The term "groups" says nothing about their mode of constitution. It can be thought that the groups—the dominant and the dominated—each have an origin that is *sui generis*; that having already come into existence, they later enter into a relationship; and that this relationship, at a still later time, becomes characterized by domination. The concept of class, however, inverts this scheme. It implies that each group cannot be considered separately from the other because they are bound together by a relationship of domination; nor can they even be considered together but independent of this relationship. Characterizing this relationship as one of economic exploitation, the concept of class additionally puts social domination at the heart of the explanation of hierarchy. The motives—the material profit in the wide sense—attributed to this domination can be discussed, and even challenged or changed, without changing the fundamental scheme.

Class is a dichotomous concept and thus has its limitations. But we can also see how class applies to the exhaustive, hierarchical, and precisely dichotomous classifications that are internal to a given society, such as the classification into men or women (adult/child, white/nonwhite, etc.). The concept of class starts from the idea of social construction and specifies its implications. Groups are no longer *sui generis*, constituted before coming into relations with one another. On the contrary, it is their relationship that constitutes them as such. It is, therefore, a question of discovering the social practices, the social relations that, in constituting the division by gender, create the groups of gender (called "of sex").

I put forward the hypothesis that the domestic relations of production constitute one such class relationship. But this relation does not account for the whole of the "gender" system, and it also concerns other categorizations (e.g., by age). I would put forward as another hypothesis that other systems of relationship constitutive of gender divisions also exist—and these remain to be discovered. If we think of each of these systems as a circle, then gender division is the zone illuminated by the projection of these circles onto one another. Each system of relations, taken separately, is not specific, either of gender division or of another categorization. But these systems of relations do combine in various ways, each of which is unique. According to this hypothesis, it is the particular combination of several systems of relationships, of which none is specific, that gives singularity to the division.

Is it the specificity of this combination that is meant when we say that patriarchy is a system? Or does this combination, in addition to

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being unique and noncontingent possess a *meaning*? And is it this meaning that makes patriarchy a system? Above all, *what* are the other systems that articulate with the domestic mode of production to form patriarchy? These are some of the questions I think we must pursue.

Notes

- 1 Originally published in 1970, "The Main Enemy" is reprinted in Christine Delphy, *Close to Home: A Materialist Analysis of Women's Oppression* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984).
- 2 C. Hennequin, E. Lesseps, and C. Delphy, "L'interdiction de l'avortement: Exploitation économique," *Partisans* (1970), no. 54-5.
- 3 J. Hanmer, "Violence and the Social Control of Women," in G. Littlejohn et al., eds., *Power and the State* (London: Croom Helm, 1978).
- 4 On the issue of rape, see the mimeographed paper "Patriarchal Justice and the Fear of Rape," issued by *Féministes Revolutionnaires* in 1976.