

Dalla Costa/James and the Subversion of Marxism: A Critique

The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community

contains

"Women and the Subversion of the Community"
by Mariarosa Dalla Costa

"A Woman's Place" and "Introduction"
by Selma James

The pamphlet, "The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community," by Mariarosa Dalla Costa (published jointly by the Falling Wall Press and a group of individuals from the Women's Liberation Movement in England and Italy, 2nd edition, February 1973), with a lengthy introduction by Selma James, has been the source of much controversy within many women's organizations, particularly in Europe and England. (See for example the latest issues of *Radical America*, Vol. 7, Nos. 4 and 5, which are entirely devoted to the questions raised by it.)

"The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community" is basically an attempt to go beyond the simple "Third-World" redefinition of class—i.e., that the most oppressed, the "wretched of the earth," are the new revolutionary forces. Abandoning this line, which formerly sufficed for radical feminists, and citing Marx's analysis of capitalism, the pamphlet attempts to prove that women play a central role in capitalist production and must therefore play a central role in the proletarian revolution. In this attempt it fails miserably—or rather, succeeds only through totally distorting Marx's analysis of capitalist production.

In terms of its theoretical contributions, this pamphlet is unworthy of serious consideration by Marxists, but since many subjectively revolutionary women are now searching for ways in which their feminism can be integrated with Marxism through some programmatic "missing link," it is important to refute this work's fraudulent claim to be a Marxist analysis, which, if believed, will only lead women down one more blind alley. The fact is that there is no "missing link" between feminism and Marxism! The two outlooks are fundamentally and implacably counterposed!

In addition to this pamphlet, there are two other works which are important expositions of Dalla Costa/James's theories. "Women, the Unions and Work, or What is Not to be Done," by Selma James (first printed by Crest Press, London; reprinted by Canadian Women's Educational Press, Toronto), is an explicit attack on the left and particularly the trade unions as narrow, divisive organizations which must be opposed by women. "Wages for Housework," by Giuliana Pompei, with contributions from discussion at a feminist conference in Padova, 1972 (Cambridge

Women's Liberation, translated by Joan Hall and reprinted by Canadian Women's Educational Press, Toronto), takes up Dalla Costa's central theme of housewives as productive workers and emphasizes the demand "wages for housework" (which Dalla Costa herself does not stress).

It is rather frustrating for a Marxist to attempt to grapple with these works, because they are so full of internal contradictions. Despite this, however, we have attempted to summarize below some of the more important aspects of the theory. (Although James gives Dalla Costa credit for the new discovery, *both* developed it, and James has in fact arguments for it other than Dalla Costa's.)

The Theories of Dalla Costa and James

1. Women are vital producers for capitalism, even when they do not work outside the home. "What we meant precisely is that housework as work is *productive* in the Marxian sense, that is, is producing surplus value."

2. They produce a commodity "unique to capitalism: the living human being—"the labourer himself". This laborer, by selling his labor power to a capitalist, allows the capitalist to use his labor to produce more than his wage is worth, thus producing surplus value. But women are the ones who really produce this surplus value, because they produce the workers and their labor power.

"The ability to labor resides only in a human being whose life is consumed in the process of producing. First it must be nine months in the womb, must be fed, clothed and trained; then when it works its bed must be made, its floors swept, its lunchbox prepared, its sexuality not gratified but quietened, its dinner ready when it gets home, even if this is eight in the morning from the night shift. This is how labor power is produced and reproduced when it is daily consumed in the factory or the office. *To describe its basic production and reproduction is to describe women's work.*"

"The labourer himself" is thus equated with his "labour-power" as the commodity produced.

3. This discovery that the family is a center of capitalist production has been obscured because Marxists have traditionally concentrated on the working class (which James and Dalla Costa constantly equate with men). However, this vital role has also been obscured because women have not been paid a wage for their work. "Inside the home we have discovered our *invisible work*... the invisible—because unpaid—foundation upon which the whole pyramid of capitalist accumulation rests" (Pompei, "Wages for Housework"). This leads to the demand "wages for housework" as a way to expose women's role.

4. This division of the proletariat into waged (men) and unwaged (women) created by the transition from

feudalism to capitalism was the fundamental break between men and women and the alienation of both from their children. This waged versus unwaged distinction must be broken down.

5. "Capital established the family as the nuclear family and subordinated within it the woman to the man....Capital constructed the female role, and has made the man in the family the instrument of this reduction." The creation of wage labor completed the subordination of women, who appeared to be excluded from social production by not being paid a wage.

6. Women must refuse to accept this role any longer. James says, "if your production is vital to capitalism, refusing to produce, refusing to *work*, is a fundamental lever of social power."

7. Women must oppose membership in trade unions, because "like the family, these protect the class at her expense...." The unions, because they exclude non-wage-earners, divide the class against itself and make any common struggle impossible. Also, capitalism uses the unions specifically to hold down the workers' militancy.

8. The left, too, must be rejected because it is "male-dominated." Moreover, the left sees the solution for women as simply acquiring "trade-union consciousness" or adopting "the forms of struggle men have traditionally used," i.e., the forms of the organized labor movement.

9. James and Dalla Costa offer "social existence to housewives other than another job—we can offer them the struggle itself." So women must refuse to work outside the home, and inside the home as well, and instead participate in "the struggle itself." "Those who advocate that the liberation of the working class woman lies in her getting a job outside the home are

part of the problem, not the solution." How will women survive? The growth of the women's movement will provide their support.

Why Housewives Are Not Productive Workers

Two key concepts form the basis of Dalla Costa/James's theory of women as productive workers—their production of the laborer/labor power (i.e., child-raising and servicing the husband/worker) and their role in "consumption as part of production"—shopping, cooking, etc. The argument that these two aspects of housework are productive of surplus value ignores two crucial distinctions made by Marx. These are: 1) the difference between industrial and *private* consumption (i.e., family consumption) and 2) the difference between productive labor under capitalism, that is, wage labor for a capitalist generating surplus value, and simple work, which produces only use value.

James, after noting that "...so-called Marxists said that the capitalist family did not produce for capitalism, was not part of social production...", admits that "Marx himself does not seem to have said anywhere that it was." James is a classic revisionist; that is, she wants to use Marx's tremendous authority yet has the problem of trying to twist his words to fit her theories. She explains away his peculiar oversight in not explicitly stating her theory:

"Suffice it to say that, first, he is singular in seeing consumption as a phase of production: 'It is the production and reproduction of that means of production so indispensable to the capitalist: the labourer himself.' (*Capital*, Vol. 1, Moscow, 1958, p. 572). Second, he alone has given us the tools to make our own analysis. And finally, he never was guilty of the nonsense with which Engels, despite his many contributions, has saddled us."

Private Versus Industrial Consumption

There are two kinds of consumption under capitalism—industrial and private. Marx writes:

"The labourer consumes in a two-fold way. While producing he consumes by his labour the means of production....On the other hand, the labourer turns the money paid to him for his labour-power, into means of subsistence: this is his individual consumption. The labourer's productive consumption, and his individual consumption, are therefore totally distinct. In the former, he acts as the motive power of capital, and belongs to the capitalist. In the latter, he belongs to himself, and performs his necessary vital functions *outside the process of production*." [our emphasis]

—Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, Chapter 23

Of course this private consumption is taken into consideration by capitalists, as it is necessary in order to maintain and reproduce the labor force, without which capitalism could not exist, and as such it is considered to be "a necessary factor in the process of production." "But," as Marx noted, "the capitalist may safely leave its fulfilment to the labourer's instincts of self-preservation and of propagation." The fact that it is necessary to eat, to live and to reproduce does not make the family a "center of social

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production." These things take place *regardless* of the form of social production. Individual consumption in the home is not capitalist production, because the capitalist does not own the family. The worker *owns himself* and *sells* his labor power to the capitalist. The capitalist does not have to concern himself with how the worker reproduces and lives (except to ensure that workers will be forced to continue to sell their labor power). So, while in the broadest sense, this individual private consumption is a "factor" of production, i.e., is taken account of, mainly in the calculation of wages, it is in no sense capitalist production. That is why Marx said individual consumption takes place *outside the sphere of production*.

Productive Labor

The Marxist concept of "productive labor" is violently abused by Dalla Costa and James. It is not clear for *whom* this "productive labor" in the home is done, since the capitalist does not own the nuclear family. Clearly, Dalla Costa does not intend us to believe that the housewife is either a slave owner (since she "produces living human beings" which are commodities) or a mini-capitalist (since she owns the "means of production," her reproductive organs). Dalla Costa says women "produce" people. In the biological sense, this is true. But this "production" is not "productive labor" in the Marxist sense, as she claims.

James says that the commodity women produce is "the living human being." Elsewhere, this commodity is referred to as "labor power." But a distinction must be made. Under capitalism, human beings are not commodities (as they are in slave societies). Under capitalism workers are "free" to sell their labor power. It is precisely the alienation of the workers from their labor power and their sale of that labor power as a commodity on the market which characterize capitalist production:

"...labour-power can appear on the market as a commodity only if, and so far as, its producer, the individual whose labour-power it is, offers it for sale....In order that he may be able to do this, he must have it at his disposal, must be the untrammelled owner of his capacity for labour, i.e. of his person."

—Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, Chapter 6

But the other work women do in the home—the care, feeding and general maintenance of workers (husbands) is not Marxist productive labor either. The important question to ask about this domestic work is: Does this work produce value, and if so, how is the value of this "labor power" determined? Because if housewives' work produces value, it must be embodied in the commodity—labor power, according to Dalla Costa—which this housework supports.

The production of labor power is simple commodity production. Labor power is produced and sold in order to get use values in exchange, for the immediate satisfaction of human needs. Ira Gerstein, in "Domestic Work and Capitalism" (in *Radical America*, Vol. 7, Nos. 4 and 5), contrasts this simple commodity production to capitalist production:

"Production is limited, because the quantity produced is bounded by the finite human capacity, necessity and desire to consume. On the other hand, the aim of the capitalist is to continually increase his surplus-value. This has nothing to do with his personal consumption....Labor-power does not increase without limit as an independent way of piling up wealth."

Marx analyzes the value of labor power as follows:

"The value of labour-power is determined, as in the case of every other commodity, by the labour-time necessary for the production and consequently also the reproduction, of this special article. So far as it has value, it represents no more than a definite quantity of the average labour of society incorporated in it....the sum of the means of subsistence necessary for the production of labour-power must include the means necessary for the labourer's substitutes, i.e. his children, in order that this race of peculiar commodity-owners may perpetuate its appearance on the market....The value of labour-power resolves itself into the value of a definite quantity of the means of subsistence."

—Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, Chapter 6

Labor power is created by the consumption of material things (food, clothing) and of services (medical care, education). The sum of the value of these means of subsistence is the value of labor power. The domestic work done by housewives in processing these commodities is clearly *not* considered when adding up this total. Housework does *not add value* to the commodity labor power. This does not mean that women do not work inside the home—but this domestic drudgery is not *capitalist* production and is not considered therefore in analyzing capitalist productive relations.

The Production of Labor Power

According to Gerstein, "Labor-power is the single and unique commodity in capitalist society whose general production does not take place in a capitalist manner." However, there are other commodities which are not produced in "a capitalist manner" under capitalism; for example, natural raw materials such as fish caught from the sea. These exist and reproduce themselves, although not in a capitalist manner. And the production of human beings, who possess within themselves the capacity for labor, must be seen in the same way as these other natural products because the propagation of the human species is a natural act. The *self*-production of services and things consumed by the worker and his family lies *outside* capitalist political economy altogether. It is, moreover, a *universal* activity of living creatures ("the instincts for self-preservation" which Marx noted). James, by stubbornly insisting that "there is nothing in capitalism which is not capitalistic," covers up this crucial difference between the production of labor power and capitalist production.

In designating propagation a "natural act," it must be made clear, however, that the organization of the propagation of the family is not determined simply biologically, but socially.

Origins of the Family

1st How did women come to be enslaved in the home? This domestic slavery was not created by capitalism



Demonstration of Chilean housewives in 1972 against Allende government.

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but has far more ancient origins stemming from the development of private property and the social surplus accumulated by men from their work. According to Engels in *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*, land in the stone age belonged to all members of the tribe in common. While there was a division of labor between the sexes, there was also equality, for each took part in productive labor and contributed to the economy. With the eventual increase in the capacity of human beings to produce, it became profitable to employ slaves—the first form of private property. Herds, land and other forms of property also became privatized for the first time, bringing about a revolution within the family. Men had always been responsible for procuring the necessities of life, but now, although the division of labor within the family remained essentially unchanged, the domestic labor of women no longer counted for much alongside the economic power of men. Engels concluded that women could achieve equality with men only when they took part once again in general economic production on a par with men.

James claims that Marx was "never guilty of this nonsense" of Engels. But if this is true, it is simply because he died (1883) a year before Engels' completion of this book which was intended as a joint work. Engels in fact states in his preface to the first edition that, "The following chapters are... the execution of a bequest.... Karl Marx had made it one of his future tasks to present the results of Morgan's researches.... I have the critical notes which he made to his extensive extracts from Morgan, and as far as possible I reproduce them here."

Dalla Costa and James hold differing views of the question of the origins of women's oppression—and both are wrong. James claims that primordial sexism is the root cause of women's oppression. Dalla Costa, on the other hand, argues that it is the result of capitalist economic relationships, a thesis which leads her to assert that woman's position in feudal society was in some ways more progressive:

"To the extent that men had been the despotic heads of the patriarchal family... the experience of women, children, and men was a contradictory experience.... But in pre-capitalistic society, the work of each member of the community of serfs was seen to be directed to a purpose; either to the prosperity of the feudal lord or to our survival.... The passage from serfdom

to free labor power separated the male from the female proletariat...."

Dalla Costa/James's insistence on the importance of the productive labor of housewives as central to their revolutionary potential contradicts the assertions: 1) that women were forced out of productive labor with the transition from feudalism, and 2) that feudalism was *less oppressive* to women than capitalism, because women were recognized as productive workers under feudalism.

Capitalism in fact laid the basis for the liberation of women because: 1) it opened the way for the participation of women in social production once again, creating opportunities for the development of social consciousness and for organized struggle against oppression outside the isolated single-unit family structure; 2) the rise of the bourgeois concept of the free individual—as opposed to medieval notions of bloodlineage, aristocratic privilege and religious domination which codified the belief that women were inferior—laid the intellectual groundwork for the recognition of women as full human beings with rights equal to those of men, a concept totally foreign to the medieval mind (and apparently irrelevant to Dalla Costa).

Capitalism created the basis for the emancipation of women through the development of the productive forces, but it has long outlived its progressive historical role and is now a barrier both to the further development of the productive forces and to the emancipation of women. Women cannot be free until scarcity is eliminated, classes are abolished and the family is replaced. In other words, women cannot be free prior to the establishment of socialist society.

The Family Under Capitalism

The perpetuation of the monogamous family unit under advanced capitalist society is not the result of some fiendish capitalist plot to extract ever more profit from the working class. Even the family as it exists today costs the capitalist more in dollars and cents than it would if its functions were socialized. The value of the family for the bourgeoisie does not lie in its *efficiency* in producing labor power, but rather in its usefulness as a reservoir of small private property and petty production which serves as an

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ideological brake on social consciousness. It is for this reason, as well as to end women's enslavement to repetitious, dull and enervating housework, that one of the tasks of the socialist revolution must be to replace the family.

The original economic function of the monogamous family was to transmit private property through inheritance. This function is economically useful only for the propertied classes, not for the proletariat, which owns little of material value to pass on. It is therefore in the material interest of the working class to play the historically progressive role of socializing family functions after the revolution.

But aside from this, the reactionary ideology of the nuclear family also renders possible the organizing of working-class housewives for reactionary ends, since their consciousness tends to be centered around defending and extending whatever small private holdings the family has. Thus in 1971 in Chile the opposition Christian Democrats and the National Party were able to successfully organize large demonstrations of housewives (as housewives) against the Allende regime. There is nothing in the family structure which can lead one to assume, as do James and Dalla Costa, that "when it comes to a showdown, [housewives] just go ahead and do what they know is right" and that what they consider "right" is aimed at overthrowing capitalism and not at maintaining it.

Dalla Costa/James's answer to women's oppression is that women should withdraw from capitalist society entirely, thereby bringing about its collapse. If they are working in a factory they should get out, because the recruitment of women into the workforce is a capitalist plot designed to ward off revolution. "The government, acting in the interests of the capitalist class..., has created unemployment" so that "...we will be glad for the crumbs that the master lets fall from his table." This theory of history as a fiendish plot assumes that capitalists are totally free to do what they please regardless of the laws of motion of capitalist economy. The fact is, however, that it is impossible to provide full employment in conditions of decaying imperialist society, whether the capitalists want to or not!

And the workers—far from being simply dupes—have an economic compulsion to work! But James and Dalla Costa ignore this. Their conception of why people do things is grounded not in the material world but in an idealist conception of reality.

Trade Unions and the Left

Dalla Costa/James further argue that since working is exploitative and hence to be avoided, those organizations which center on organization at the workplace, i.e., the trade unions, are also bad. The trade unions are "divisive" because they take account only of wage workers and ignore the rest of the "proletariat" (such as old people, sick people, babies, housewives). This is nothing more than the old New Left practice of equating the most oppressed with the most revolutionary.

It was not the trade unions, however, which created

the hostilities among different social sectors—sexual, racial, employed/unemployed—which weaken the working class. These hostilities are part and parcel of *class society*—manifestations of bourgeois ideology which the trade unions do not create but (to the extent that they remain under conservative leadership) do reflect. Trade unions are basically defensive organizations of the working class to protect whatever economic gains it can wrest from the capitalist class. Marxists must therefore defend trade unions and seek to extend their protection to all workers. There is a crucial gap, which James ignores, between the appetites of the present-day trade-union bureaucracy, which serves as an agent of capital within the working class in order to maintain itself in power, and the ranks of the unions, who have neither soft jobs nor fancy pension plans to protect them nor the opportunity for class collaboration with the ruling class.

Marxists have never said that trade-union organization or "trade-union consciousness" is sufficient in itself to make a revolution. There would be no need for a revolutionary vanguard party if that were so. James misleads her audience when she writes:

"We are told that we must bring women to what is called a 'trade union consciousness.' This phrase is Lenin's and it comes from a pamphlet called 'What is to Be Done?'"

This clearly implies that for Lenin trade-union consciousness is "the answer." But the whole point of *What Is to Be Done?* is precisely the need to transcend simple trade-union consciousness! Lenin writes:

"The spontaneous working-class movement is by itself able to create (and inevitably does create) only trade-unionism, and working-class trade unionist politics is precisely working-class bourgeois politics."

—V.I. Lenin. *What Is to Be Done?*

It is true that some left and even ostensibly Trotskyist organizations opportunistically tail uncritically every "left" bureaucrat and adapt to the most backward aspects of working-class consciousness, but this is a betrayal of Marxism, which we in the Spartacist League have consistently exposed. Dalla Costa's blanket charge that "the left" is "male-dominated" is particularly insulting to female revolutionaries, for it assumes that men will automatically dominate any organization, that no matter what level of consciousness they attain, women are really incapable of speaking up for themselves. This accusation is also insulting to male revolutionaries, because it is predicated on their incapability of transcending a chauvinist worldview and making a common struggle with women. It all boils down again to a New Left dictum: that "only the oppressed can really understand their own oppression."

Conclusions

There exists in many women's organizations much confusion over the conclusions to be drawn from the works of Dalla Costa and James. This is because their rhetoric about "class struggle" partially obscures their real hatred of that struggle and their hostility to the proletariat. In truth, Dalla Costa and James have no program for women's liberation. Their "program" is solely one of rejection: women must reject work, must reject the left, must reject the

home, must reject their husbands, etc. And what substitutes do they propose? Only the purposely vague "struggle itself." Struggle for *what*? Pompei replies, "What we want is not to become more productive, not to go off and be exploited better somewhere else, but to work less and to have more opportunity for social and political experience." Certainly a legitimate desire, and one shared by all the oppressed and exploited. But to dream of its achievement apart from the smashing of capitalist class society is sheer utopianism. Without an understanding of how capitalism operates and of how it can be overthrown, all concrete programmatic demands become mere cosmetic reforms, whose effect is to buttress not overthrow the system.

At the heart of Dalla Costa/James's theses is the belief that women *can* withdraw from capitalist society, *can* find their own unique road to salvation outside capitalist relations. And why try to fit housewives into the capitalist economic system at all if their strength really lies outside it? This is the most glaring contradiction of all.

The reason Dalla Costa/James attempt to fit housewives into the mold of Marxist "productive workers" is simply because they cannot cope with the challenge of Marxism to their feminist worldview in any other way. This thin veneer of "Marxism" is simply a cover for the same old New Left ideology that anyone who *works* has already sold out, in total ignorance of the

iron necessity, faced by most of the world, of working or starving. It is a reflection of the worldview of those privileged few, the petty-bourgeois "radicals" who have glorified primitivism to the extent of hailing the starving, diseased subsistence farmers of the "Third World" as the new revolutionary force. And while these armchair radicals refine their theories in air-conditioned comfort, the peasants whom they idealize are slaughtered *because of* their primitive resources. While it is nice that James is trying to "get over this guilt about having wall-to-wall carpeting," that is not the problem of most women (and men), who face the struggle to eat, to eke out a living somehow and to find a way to overcome the real material oppression they face, an oppression created by a society from which they *cannot* escape. James tells these working-class women to stop working, to reject their husband's wages and live on—what? Air? Or are they all supposed to come and sleep on her wall-to-wall carpeting? Is this what she means by "the movement will support them"? All of Dalla Costa/James's theories are mere playing at revolution without any real intention of actively seeking to smash capitalism. As Marx said, "All the philosophers have done has been to *interpret* the world differently, what matters is to *alter* it." And the point is not to walk away from capitalism or to create an alternative for the petty-bourgeois drop-outs within it—but to smash it forever and begin the construction of socialist society. ■