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The Oppression of Women
A Structuralist Marxist View

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Modern feminism has led to the emergence of an ever-growing body of literature seeking to ascertain, using social science and Marxist theories, the origin of the oppression of women, the reasons for its perpetuation throughout history, its functions in contemporary society, and the conditions that would lead to its demise. The heterogeneous class and ethnic composition of the women's movement as well as the differences in the academic training of individual writers are reflected in the political splits within the movement and in the theoretical and methodological heterogeneity of these writings. More importantly, as intellectual productions rooted in a historically specific political and ideological conjuncture, these writings have been affected by the hegemony of idealist and empiricist assumptions underlying current common-sense views of the world, social science paradigms, and dominant interpretations of Marxism. Indeed, idealist (i.e., Hegelian, phenomenological, humanistic, existentialist, psychological, voluntaristic) versions of Marxism seem to be more acceptable and respectable within feminist, Marxist, and non-Marxist academic and nonacademic circles in the United States. On the other hand, theoretical developments that claim to maintain the dialectical materialist outlook of classical Marxism and stress the nonsubjective dimension of social processes are generally ignored or criticized and dismissed on the grounds of their alleged determinism, economism, or functionalism.

An interesting case in point that highlights the nature of the parameters governing intellectual production in the United States today is the absence of Structuralist Marxism from American feminist theory. Neither non-Marxist social scientists seeking new ideas for theory construction nor feminists sympathetic to Marxism seem to have found Structuralist Marxism compelling enough to warrant some consideration.
STRUCTURALIST MARXISM: THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

Structuralist Marxism is not a fully developed theory; it is a descriptive label which, although rejected by those to whom it is applied, is currently used to indicate the heterogeneous production of Marxists who have introduced structuralist terminology in their writings and have acknowledged some degree of overlap between structuralist and Marxist principles. The most important representatives are Louis Althusser and Maurice Godelier, and it is with their work that this essay will be primarily concerned.

The reason why Structuralist Marxism has had a deep impact in the development of Marxist scholarship is because it articulates fundamental methodological principles and theoretical constructs that were largely tacit in classical Marxist works. Godelier convincingly argues that the two main principles of structuralism were discovered by Marx, who can thus be considered “a forerunner of the modern structuralist movement” (Godelier 1970, 343).

The first principle is that “a structure is part of social reality but not of visible relationships” (Godelier 1970, 347). This principle has the following implications:

A. There are two levels of social reality: the level of visible social relationships and the level of invisible structures whose laws of functioning and transformation account for changes at the observable level.

B. The aim of scientific study is to discover those hidden structures. Marx’s scientific project was precisely the discovery of the structure and laws of motion of the capitalist mode of production concealed by the visible reality created by its functioning.

C. The systematic study of appearances cannot provide a scientific knowledge of social reality.

D. This failure to attain knowledge taking appearances as starting point is not a cognitive failure. The concealment of the structure by appearance is inherent in the nature of the structure itself. Structures are made up of social relations which cannot be directly apprehended, for they vanish behind forms of physical or social objectification. For example, capital appears as machines, money, etc.

E. To each structure corresponds a form of appearance. And scientific study must take into account both, explaining the appearance in terms of the structure.

F. To each structure corresponds a form of consciousness or spontaneous representations held by individuals whose activities reproduce the structure. The systematic study of those representations, far from disclosing the underlying logic of the structure, can only reproduce, at the level of theory, the mystifications created by the very functioning of the structure.

The second principle of structuralism is that “the study of the internal functioning of a structure must precede and will throw light on the study of its coming to being and subsequent evolution” (Godelier 1970, 347). The historical analysis of the emergence of the constituent elements of a structure and their interrelations presupposes a prior knowledge of the structure and its processes. Thus Marx presents his brief historical discussion of the genesis of primitive accumulation after the basic structure, processes,
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and contradictions of capitalism have been identified (Godelier 1970, 348–50). After the structural level of social reality has been discovered, the next step is establishing the articulation between that structure and its observable manifestations which can now be defined according to their “real function in the system and their internal compatibility with the essential structures already studied.” This process amounts to the description of “the ideal birth of the various elements of a system on the basis of its internal laws of composition” (Godelier 1970, 352). This “ideal birth” or “ideal genesis” of categories cannot be confused with their historical or real genesis. Godelier argues that Marx’s stress on the priority of structural over historical analysis “is total and anticipates by more than half a century the radical rethinking in linguistics and sociology which led de Saussure and Lowie to reject the evolutionist approach of the 19th century” (Godelier 1970, 353). Marx is very specific in this respect:

It would be impractical and wrong to arrange the economic categories in the order in which they were the determining factors in the course of history. Their order of sequence is rather determined by the relation which they bear to one another in modern bourgeois society, and which is the exact opposite of what seems to be their natural order or the order of their historical development. . . . We are interested in their organic connections within modern bourgeois society. (Marx 1972, 41–42)

This is an important principle which establishes the difference between Marxist historical analysis and history as chronology or as the study of arbitrary periodizations based, for example, on the dominance of specific ideas or of “great men.” It indicates the methodological priority of the theoretical investigation of the mode of production as a whole over the historical investigation of the real (i.e., chronological) origin of its isolated elements.

The two main methodological principles of Structuralist Marxism have been presented. It is now necessary to examine the Structuralist Marxist contribution to the analysis of historical phenomena: the concepts of mode of production and social formation. Mode of production is a theoretical construct that denotes the historically specific combination of the elements of the production process (laborers, non-laborers, and means of production) in the context of structurally compatible political, legal, and ideological structures. These elements are combined in two kinds of relations: relations of “real or material appropriation” or technical relations of production (e.g., cooperation, manufacturing, modern industry, automation); and “property connections” or social relations of production, which are the relationships between laborers and non-laborers mediated through their property relations to the means of production. In the capitalist mode of production, these are the relations between capitalists and wage workers (Althusser and Balibar 1970, 215). The forces of production, which cannot be considered as things or techniques taken in themselves, are all the factors of production in their historically specific combination within the process of production, considered from the standpoint of their actual and potential productivity (Althusser and Balibar 1970, 233–41). Modes of production differ qualitatively from one another in the way in which unpaid surplus labor is extracted from the direct producers. The mode of surplus extraction corresponds to the level of development of the productive forces and the nature of the relations of production and constitutes the unifying principle of the mode of production as a whole (Marx 1968, 791–92).
The concept mode of production is an abstract one that captures the fundamental features that constitute the organizing principle of the economic, legal, political, and ideological structures that characterize different historical epochs. Empirically, in a given social formation, modes of production are always found in varied combinations with other modes of production. In the structuralist reading of Marx, the alternative to the abstract notion of society is the concept of social formation, a "complex structured whole where the mode of production is determinant 'in the last instance' and the superstructure (legal, political, and ideological structures) is relatively autonomous" (Althusser 1970, 111). In all social formations it is possible to identify the following: a complex economic base formed by the historically specific articulation of several modes of production, one of which is always dominant; and a complex superstructure whose elements have forms and functions the origins of which can be traced to the different modes of production that make up the economic base (Godelier 1978, 63).

Scientific analysis must be aimed at establishing first the nature of the hierarchical articulation of modes of production (i.e., the specific ways in which the dominant mode of production subjects the others to its own requirements and transforms them into conditions of its own reproduction) and, second, the nature of the hierarchical articulation among the elements of the superstructure which is also constituted as a set of conditions for the reproduction of the dominant mode of production (Godelier 1978, 63). The structure of the superstructure reflects the articulation of the economic base; it overdetermines the base as it reproduces it in historically specific ways—ways peculiar to the characteristics of the social formation being considered. On the other hand, the economic base determines the superstructure "in the last instance," through a system of internal constraints which has its origins in the material conditions of production and expresses the conditions of reproduction for the dominant mode of production. The structural compatibility between the form and content of the elements of the superstructure and the system of constraints is itself a structural effect of the system of constraints which ensures the reproduction of the mode of production. The structure of the superstructure reverts the articulation of the economic base; it overdetermines the base as it reproduces it in historically specific ways—ways peculiar to the characteristics of the social formation being considered. On the other hand, the economic base determines the superstructure "in the last instance," through a system of internal constraints which has its origins in the material conditions of production and expresses the conditions of reproduction for the dominant mode of production. The structural compatibility between the form and content of the elements of the superstructure and the system of constraints is itself a structural effect of the system of constraints which ensures the reproduction of the mode of production. The structure of the superstructure reverts the articulation of the economic base; it overdetermines the base as it reproduces it in historically specific ways—ways peculiar to the characteristics of the social formation being considered. On the other hand, the economic base determines the superstructure "in the last instance," through a system of internal constraints which has its origins in the material conditions of production and expresses the conditions of reproduction for the dominant mode of production. The structural compatibility between the form and content of the elements of the superstructure and the system of constraints is itself a structural effect of the system of constraints which ensures the reproduction of the mode of production. 

From the standpoint of scientific analysis, the invisible processes that manifest themselves in the process of production and the reproduction of the capitalist society are not accidental. By means of an analytical framework that elaborates on the capitalist mode of production, the Marxian concept of determination by making explicit the relative autonomy and causal efficacy of the other instances of the social formation which, in turn, "overdetermine" the base (Althusser 1976, 177; see also Althusser 1970, 89–128).

Modes of production based on the private ownership of the means of production are inherently contradictory and subject to qualitative changes brought about by the operation of those contradictions. Given that the mode of production is the locus of the two main contradictions of capitalism (the contradiction between capital and labor and the contradiction between the forces and the relations of production), the fact that the mode of production is "overdetermined by the superstructure means that those contradictions are never found 'active in the pure state, on the contrary,' overdetermined... always specified by the historically concrete forms and circumstances in which it is exercised" (Althusser 1970, 106).

This process of specification operates from
the different elements of the social formation and includes the national and international circumstances affecting the social formation at a given time. Whatever the nature of those processes, "in the last instance" it is in the internal and contradictory properties of the mode of production that the crucial source of change is to be found.

THE STRUCTURALIST MARXIST ALTERNATIVE

From the standpoint of Structuralist Marxism, the key to developing an adequate explanation of sexual inequality is to be found not in individual biology or psychology, in the organization of parenting, in ahistorical accounts about the origins of human society, or in abstract processes of functional adaptation and structural differentiation. Instead, regardless of its ubiquitousness, sexual inequality should be investigated, in each instance, as a historically specific phenomenon with historically specific roots located in the invisible levels of social reality; namely, in structures concealed by those visible processes which are, in fact, the effects through which the existence of those structures manifests itself. This concept of structure corresponds to social relations which evolve in the process through which people produce their material and social existence and which are independent from individuals' will (Marx 1970a, 20). Production has a twofold nature: "on the one side, the production of the means of existence ... on the other side, the production of human beings themselves" (Engels 1972, 71). The variety of visible, institutionalized ways that "men oppress women" are effects, at the levels of "society" and "market relations," of the articulation between the two aspects of the mode of production which determine relations between men and women that are independent of their will: i.e., relations determined not by what individuals think, believe, want, or need—consciously or unconsciously—or by whatever social constraints the "market" or society imposes upon them; instead, they are relations mediated by the historically specific relation of men and women to the material conditions of production and of physical and social reproduction (Althusser 1976, 200–207). The general methodological principle is that the material basis of sexual inequality is to be sought in the articulation between class relations or relations of production and the relations of physical and social reproduction valid within a historically specific mode of production. I shall limit my analysis of the capitalist mode of production in an effort to delineate, following the second structuralist methodological principle, the capitalist basis of sexual inequality.

By mode of physical and social reproduction is meant the historically specific combination of labor and means of reproduction (the material basis for the performance of reproductive tasks: the tools, goods, utensils, raw materials, foodstuffs, etc.) with relations between men and women. Such a combination reproduces the present and future members of social groups by procreation, physical care (cleaning, food preparation, etc.), and nurturant and supportive services (sexual relations, socialization of children, cooperation, etc.). Such groups have different locations in the productive process. (For a detailed discussion of these concepts see, for example, Gimenez 1978; Secombe 1974.) The dominant visible forms taken by modes of physical and social reproduction throughout history have been family and kinship structures as well as kinship-structured groups (groups in which adults and children are not related by blood). In capitalist social formations, the nuclear family emerges as the dominant but not exclusive context in which social classes are reproduced; empirical variations documenting...
not only the existence of other forms (e.g., single-parent households), but also the conditions under which nuclear families remain to a greater or lesser extent embedded in broader kinship networks, must be understood in terms of underlying relations of physical and social reproduction that are determined, for each class, by the capitalist organization of production, distribution, and consumption.

Capitalist families live off profits from capital and are surrounded by extensive kinship networks which are also economic networks through which wealth is preserved, increased, and circulated. Men and women own the means of production and are free from the necessity of selling their labor to survive; they are the "bearers" or "supports" of the capitalist class (cf. Althusser 1976, 206) and reproduce it under legal and ideological conditions that ensure the preservation of property and its transmission to legitimate heirs, the future bearers of the class. Given the different biological roles of men and women in procreation, these superstructural conditions involve control over women's sexuality and reproductive capacity; the precapitalist relationship between private ownership of the means of production and class control over women as producers of the future members of the class is preserved and reproduced under capitalism through superstructural conditions (legal, ethical, religious, ideological, etc.) that universalize it for all classes, obscuring the qualitative differences between classes in the process of defining everyone as a legal, political, ethical subject (Althusser 1971, 162–86). These superstructural conditions (the legal apparatus surrounding marriage, divorce, and inheritance; bourgeois morality; ideologies about abortion, contraception, etc.) contribute to create the circumstances in which the control exerted by the capitalist class over the conditions for the reproduction of all classes, including itself, appears, at the level of visible relations, as control exerted by men over women. Class control over the means of production and over the conditions for its own reproduction as a class places capitalist men and women into social relations independent of their will. They are unequal relations in which, at the level of "society," men appear in control of capital, female sexuality, and reproductive capacity. On the other hand, within capitalist households, labor and means of reproduction are brought together through a division of labor or technical relations of reproduction that ensure women's complete freedom from the routine and menial dimensions of reproduction as well as partial freedom from social reproduction. Paid domestic workers (most of whom are likely to be women) do housework, child care, and some aspects of child socialization. Working-class families live off the sale of the labor power of their adult members and rely on the domestic labor of women for the daily and generational reproduction of labor power. The dominant pattern is one in which men are the only or most important wage earners and women contribute to the reproduction of labor power through unpaid domestic work.
tant wage earners and wives are the primary domestic workers, whether or not they are also employed. The mutually reinforcing relationship between women's domestic responsibilities and their social and economic oppression has been discussed and documented in great lengths and need not be reexamined here. Also, I am not going to dwell on the debate about the nature of domestic labor: whether it is paid or unpaid labor and whether or not it produces surplus value (see, for example, Secombe 1974; Coulson et al. 1975; Gardiner 1975). What is relevant here is that domestic labor is a form of socially necessary labor that expands the goods and services available to the working class beyond what it would be possible to purchase with wages. Domestic labor is thus an important component of the standard of living of the working class and a source of use values which enter in the process through which labor power is produced and reproduced on a daily and generational basis. On the other hand, domestic labor benefits the capitalist class because its presence lowers the overall level of wages, thus increasing the amount of surplus that can be extorted from the direct producers. But neither the division of labor within the home and its impact on the status of women, nor the relationship between domestic labor and the level of wages, can explain the existence of sexual inequality within the working class. To find the specifically capitalist material basis of sexual inequality it is necessary to examine the material conditions leading to family formation within the working class.

Capitalism, as a historically specific mode of production, rests upon a class structure based on the private ownership of the means of production and the concomitant expropriation of the direct producers who, as free laborers owning nothing but their labor power, must sell it to the owners of capital to get access to the means of subsistence necessary for themselves and their children. Hence, there is inherent in capitalism a tendency toward the universalization of commodity production generated by the separation of the direct producers from the conditions of production and reproduction which affects not only capital goods and consumer goods but also an ever-growing variety of services. An important exception to this trend is labor power, a crucial commodity that is not produced on a capitalist basis although its daily and generational reproduction requires a constant flow of market goods and services and is, consequently, shaped by the requirements of capitalist production. Within the working class household, goods and services purchased with the means of exchange obtained through the sale of labor power are combined with domestic labor in the context of relations of reproduction that presuppose the employment, as a wage laborer, of at least one member of the household. Domestic labor produces use values for the consumption of all the members of the family (Benston 1969); this is "consumptive production" because persons produce their own body, and, I may add, their own physical and intellectual capacities, through the consumption of goods and services (Marx 1970, 195). The consumption of the use values produced at home is thus, simultaneously, the production and reproduction of the present and future members of the working class. The capitalist mode of producing material goods produces consumption, i.e., consumptive production "by providing the material of consumption . . . by creating in the consumer a need for the objects which it first presents as products and by determining the mode of consumption (Marx 1970a, 197; my emphasis). Crucial for the understanding of sexual inequality in the working class is the determination exerted by the mode of production upon the mode of consumption or, which is the same, the mode of consumptive production or physical and social reproduction.
Under capitalist conditions, the production of surplus and its extraction from the direct producers is concealed by the appearances of the market and social relations; this is the sphere of Freedom, Equality, Property, and Bentham (Marx 1970b, 196). At this level, individuals meet and engage in equitable exchanges that result in the distribution of the product: rent, profits, interest, and wages are allocated to different individuals on the basis of their function in the production process. This level is an intermediate phase between production and distribution (Marx 1970a, 204). It is both a structural effect of the underlying relation of production and a crucial condition for the reproduction—over time—of the capitalist mode of production as a whole. It mystifies the nature of the production process by hiding class rule and its effects under the guise of unmanageable laws (e.g., supply and demand, the Malthusian population principle) and other "social facts."

The relations of structural compatibility between these phases or moments of the mode of production as a whole—i.e., production, exchange, and distribution—set structural limitations to the possible forms in which labor power can be reproduced. The mode of consumption or consumptive production cannot itself be isomorphic with the mode of production: the reproduction of labor power on a capitalist basis would destroy the material basis for the production of free individuals, autonomous and responsible for their own success or failure, who constitute the cornerstone of capitalist social and market relations. On the other hand, the lack of isomorphism between the mode of production and the mode of reproduction of labor power is not the product of design but the complex structural effect of the relations of production, exchange, and distribution, overdetermined by the superstructure and mediated by the biological level and by the class struggle.

At the level of production, the creation of a propertyless class, bound to capital for its survival in a context of chronic unemployment and periodic economic crises, has created an objective situation of job scarcity and fierce competition among the members of the working class. This situation is exacerbated by the tendency toward the universalization of commodity production and the concomitant transformation of all social relations into market relations.

At the level of exchange, this objectively competitive situation is ideologically understood and experienced in terms of visible and "obvious" cleavages based on sex, age, racial, or ethnic differences or differences in national origin, religion, and so forth. It is in the interest of capital to have a divided labor force, and sexual antagonism is one among the many divisions that capital uses and reinforces among the members of the working class. This situation is exacerbated by the tendency toward the universalization of commodity production and the concomitant transformation of all social relations into market relations.

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These objective conditions place men and women in antagonistic and competitive relations. At the biological level, on the other hand, men and women are placed in complementary sexual and procreative roles; this is the material basis for the fact that, at the levels of distribution, exchange, and visible social relations, they also confront each other as potential sexual partners and potential parents—i.e., as potential agents of reproduction. While other cleavages within the working class can be overcome through unionization and other forms of collective organization, the family—the major locus of the reproduction of labor power—emerges as the most important institution bringing the sexes and generations together. At this level of analysis, men and women freely meet and enter into apparently free relationships; this is the sphere not
only of Freedom, Equality, Property, and Bentham but also of Love, Motherhood, ideologies about femininity and masculinity, and other forms of legitimation. These "freely" entered family relations create bonds of interdependence between men and women and between families; kinship relations become an important source of economic support for unemployed workers as well as for those unable to work because of age, illness, or other circumstances (see, for example, Humphries 1977).

But the interdependence between families and between men and women rests upon underlying relations of personal economic dependence. The relations of production, exchange, and distribution place those who earn wages in a position to gain access to the material conditions of reproduction and, consequently, in a position of power over those with little or no access to those conditions. Kinship relations legitimize the claims of the latter upon the former while the absence of such bonds place people in an objective situation of dependence leading to the emergence of forms of political control (e.g., welfare) and personal dependence. Sexual inequality is one among the many forms of inequality thus generated by the mode of production within the working class. The overall effect of the capitalist relations of production, exchange, and distribution is to recruit men and women for the positions of agents of reproduction within the mode of physical and social reproduction, in a context that places those agents of reproduction who are also wage earners in a position of power over those who are only domestic workers, and that turns the position of domestic worker into a structural alternative to that of wage worker. These conditions are outside the control of individuals, whatever their sex may be, and express the rule of the capitalist class—mediated by the anarchy of the market and the relations of dependence thereby generated at the level of distribution. Under such conditions, domestic labor becomes an unavoidable economic "option" for women that places them in a dependent position with respect to men and that is independent of their will.

It may be argued that this account does not explain why women, rather than men, are expected to become domestic workers and that an answer to this question would have to rely on arguments such as those discussed in the previous section, which seek the origins of sexual inequality outside the mode of production (on biological or psychological differences between men and women or on precapitalist "patriarchal" ideologies, division of labor, power relations, etc.). My answer to those arguments is that pre-existing structural and superstructural instances do indeed overdetermine the relations between the sexes within and outside the family. Pre-existing ideologies and practices set the parameters for the way men and women—at the level of visible relations—have perceived their options and the nature of their relationships from the very beginning of capitalism. But one must "distinguish between the material transformation of the conditions of production . . . and the legal, political, philosophical . . . ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out" (Marx 1970, 21). The transformation of the conditions of production and reproduction (the mode of producing and distributing goods and its impact upon the reproduction of life) places working-class men and women in different locations which imply unequal access to the conditions of reproduction. This unequal access, which is the basis for their asymmetrical relations at the level of visible relations, stems from their relationship to the conditions of production as propertyless workers, and to the conditions of procreation and reproduction as agents involved in the daily and generational reproduction of labor power. Precapitalist sexist patterns can persist, new ones
can develop, and all of them can overdetermine the relationship between the sexes because the material conditions that place men and women in an unequal relationship determine, in the last instance, the efficacy of those patterns. These material conditions are the outcome of the combined effects of the relations of production, exchange, and distribution mediated by the biological level of sexuality and procreation and by the class struggle and overdetermined by precapitalist and capitalist superstructures.

Mediation is a mode of determination according to which a given social process or a given set of material conditions shape the consequences of other processes (Wright 1976, 25). To acknowledge biology as an important mediating condition is neither "vulgar materialism" nor biological determinism; it simply means to take into account the effect of the biological level in itself, which cannot be reduced to its social construction or production nor to a moment in the subject-nature dialectic (Timpanaro 1975, 34). Biology shapes the consequences of capitalist relations of production, exchange, and distribution which place all individual workers in competition for scarce jobs by establishing the material conditions for the development of relations of cooperation between male and female workers based on sexuality and procreation. The class struggle, in turn, modifies the impact of the capitalist organization of production by reinforcing the working-class family as a locus of resistance. Humphries (1977) has convincingly argued that the persistence of the working-class family and its changing fortunes cannot be purely explained in terms of the sexism of male workers or the needs of capital accumulation, as an institution passively reflecting such needs while fulfilling ideological functions supporting the hegemony of the capitalist class. An adequate explanation should also take into account the state of the class struggle and its relative success in securing a family wage and other benefits.

The mode of production sets structural limitations on the possible modes of reproducing labor power that could be structurally compatible with capitalism and on the possible survival strategies that working-class people could develop to overcome their fragmentation and vulnerability to the vagaries of the labor market and to changing forms of surplus extraction. The class struggle, on the other hand, modifies and challenges those limitations in manifold ways. Through the combined mediation of the biological level and the class struggle, the working-class family emerges as the dominant survival strategy open to male and female workers. It should then be clear that it is not the power of working-class men (or women's reproductive roles) that keeps women as the primary agents of reproduction within working-class households, nor is it the power of men that creates segregated labor markets and other barriers to equality between the sexes. It is the power of capital which establishes structural limitations to the possible ways in which the propertyless class can have access to the conditions necessary for its daily and generational reproduction, and it is the relative powerlessness of working-class men and women as individuals struggling for survival, that forces them into these relations of reproduction, which are both relations of cooperation and unequal relations of personal economic dependence. The contradiction between capital and labor, between production and reproduction, and the protracted class struggle thereby generated are the determinants of the contradictory nature of the relations between working-class men and women. The mode of reproducing labor power can thus be accurately understood as a unity of opposites, where bonds of cooperation and solidarity are also bonds of dependency grounded in the set of structural possibilities open to male and female members of the working class under capitalist conditions.
CONCLUSION

Capitalist and working-class relations of physical and social reproduction are subject to similar structural constraints in all capitalist social formations. On the other hand, their empirically observable manifestations will reflect the unique characteristics of each social formation, such as, for example, the specific form in which capitalist and precapitalist modes of production are articulated; the characteristics of the superstructure that reflect the complexity of the base and overdetermine it; and the internal characteristics of the social formation itself as well as its location in the international structure.

The essence of my argument is that, in capitalist social formations, the observable forms of sexual inequality are determined, in the last instance, by the historically specific way in which the mode of production (conceived as a complex structured whole in which the capitalist mode of production is dominant) affects the access of the laboring and nonlaboring members of the subordinate classes (wage and salaried workers, peasants, agricultural workers, the unemployed, etc.) to the material conditions necessary for their daily and generational reproduction. While the actual effects of the mode of production upon the mode of physical and social reproduction among those classes is always modified or overdetermined by the class struggle and other mediations, the maintenance of capitalist relations of production sets structural limits to such modifications and may even reverse them on occasion, depending on the nature of the crises affecting the social formation at a given time. Moreover, in any social formation the level of social stratification reflects the complexity of the base; consequently the empirical study of sexual inequality must rest upon the previous theoretical work of developing propositions about the underlying relations of production and reproduction that determine the observable relations between men and women within classes, fractions of classes, and “contradictory class locations” (see Wright 1977 for a definition of that concept).

It should be clear, then, that from the standpoint of Structuralist Marxism, the issues of whether “class” or “sex” is primary or what forms their “mutual interdependence” may take are oversimplifications of very complex matters that cannot be resolved by a priori political commitments or by automatically reacting against the ghost of the “economism” of “orthodox Marxism” that seems to haunt the American intellectual scene. A straightforward analysis of the capitalist mode of production in all its moments (production, exchange, distribution, and consumption) clearly shows that the mode of production determines the mode of consumptive production or physical and social reproduction. The control exerted by the capitalist class over its own conditions of reproduction and over the conditions necessary for the reproduction of the laboring classes determines, in the last instance, the nature of the relations between the sexes and the relative significance of the family within social classes. The major theoretical task becomes, therefore, that of unraveling the specific parameters within which the reproduction of different classes and fractions of classes takes place under capitalism and, in so doing, mapping out the historically possible relations between the sexes that those parameters regulate. From this standpoint, all explanations of the observable forms of sexual inequality within capitalist social formations based on various analyses of the biological, psychological, or social differences between the sexes, or an analysis of
the mode of reproduction in isolation from, but "interacting" with, the mode of production, are overlooking the historically specific determinants of the phenomena they attempt to explain. On the other hand, sociological analyses of sex differentiation and sex stratification and feminist analyses of sexuality, reproductive oppression, psychological oppression, etc., could be critically—not eclectically—integrated with the Structuralist Marxist analysis of their specifically capitalist structural and superstructural determinants. The main theoretical assumption underlying such critical integration is the following: the capitalist relations of production and the relations of physical and social reproduction (relations into which men and women enter independently of their will) impose historically specific structural limits to the range of empirical variations in sexual inequality in capitalist social formations which feminist scholarship has abundantly documented. Theoretical and empirical investigation of the specific articulation between the visible forms of sexual inequality and their underlying structural determinants would presuppose the investigation of the most important mediating and overdetermining instances. This would not only heighten the scientific understanding of sexual inequality but would also give feminists a sound basis for the evaluation of short- and long-run political and economic objectives.

The analysis of sexual inequality developed in this essay is a preliminary contribution to the work of others similarly engaged in the task of elaborating a Marxist theory of the oppression of women, asking Marxist questions, and developing Marxist answers (see for example, Vogel 1979; Chinchilla 1980; Dixon 1979). Structuralist Marxism is not indispensable for this project, but greatly facilitates it; Structuralist Marxism formulates important methodological considerations and key analytical distinctions that are not clearly and systematically stated in the works of the classics. Given the nature of the present historical conjuncture, Structuralist Marxism is not likely to have noticeable impact in the development of American feminist theory. But what is at stake is more than an academic debate about the explanatory power of different theories. Theories inform policies and political struggles, and the success of the struggle against sexual inequality depends on the extent to which the factors that produce it and reproduce it through time are correctly identified. From the standpoint of Structuralist Marxism, the development of theories that acknowledge the determinant role of the mode of production are more likely to succeed in identifying those determinants and in generating effective political strategies.

NOTE

1. The use of domestic servants is not restricted to the capitalist class; at certain levels of income, middle-class and upper-middle-class women do purchase domestic labor. The qualitative differences between the capitalist use of servants and the practice of hiring household "help" with varying degrees of regularity is a matter that cannot be fully explored at this time. It is important to point out, however, that the existence of differences in class and socioeconomic status that allow some women to purchase their full or partial freedom from the "drudgery of housework" contributes to the maintenance of class relations and of sexual inequality within the working class.