

Rejecting Working at Home

In "Working at Home" (*Atlantis*, 7, 1, pp. 112-126) Roberta Hamilton reviews Meg Luxton's *More than a Labour of Love* and the essays edited by Bonnie Fox in *Hidden in the Household*. As a contributor to *Hidden in the Household*, and as a teacher who has used Meg Luxton's book in two courses in the Sociology of Women, I am compelled to reply. My task is made difficult by the lack of agreement amongst the contributors to *Hidden in the Household* and also by the nature of Hamilton's review.

The contributors to *Hidden in the Household* shared only two general positions. First, the socialist feminist attempt to locate women's oppression under capitalism in the household, in the responsibility of women for domestic labour in the broad sense and in the separation of household and industry, was an attempt we all took more or less as a point of departure. Second, we all agreed that Marxism was a useful theoretical framework from within which to pose questions about the nature of women's oppression. The lack of a broader agreement amongst the contributors limits me in my response to Hamilton to a general defence of our collective project. I happen to disagree with many of the positions taken by my fellow contributors. However, since Hamilton tars us all with the same brush, I will respond to her general criticism by reference to my work.

The second problem I confront is constituted by the internal weaknesses of Hamilton's review. Hamilton seems to feel herself exempt from the requirement to support her key propositions with that intellectual nicety known as evidence, preferring rather broad assurances seasoned with calumny and innuendo. Because of this she fails ever to address squarely or satisfactorily the two main issues her review raises: the relation between and relative merits of theory and description, on

the one hand, and the role of class and gender in women's oppression on the other.

Hamilton begins her review by pointing to the guilty associations of the two works in question. These works, we are told, were produced in the context of the domestic labour debate. This debate is not about combatting or even understanding women's oppression. On the contrary, the domestic labour debate is an attempt on the part of dogmatic Marxists to preserve the sanctity of the gospels of St. Karl from criticism by forcing women into Marxist categories. Contributors to the domestic labour debate are infamous for their predilection to eschew "the untidy and painstaking process of encountering the social world," finding it rather more pleasant to cram the world into the prefabricated theoretical boxes which the gospels provide. Dirty work at the theoretical crossroads!

Hidden in the Household, in Hamilton's view, is guilty of all the theoretical sins of the debate: it uses the "laws of motion" of capital, it assumes Marx was correct in his social analysis, its contributors falsify or ignore the historical record to preserve their conceptions and categories, and the book is full of tortuous reasoning.

Fortunately, *More than a Labour of Love* seems to have remained more or less unsullied, despite the fall of its sibling. Here we get the real stuff, uncluttered with arguments or theoretical boxes (most of the time): women talking, struggling, fighting and compromising in their lives, hampered only by a few "parameters," and even these are broken down if they get too much in the way. Hamilton sees Luxton's accomplishment as that of giving us real grade-A gritty oppression without having to go beyond description. Here the world is easy to understand. Here

women always win. Here “careful descriptions” make “convoluted arguments” unnecessary.

In effect, Hamilton confronts what she has learned to identify as the poverty of theory with the romance of the empirical. In so doing she does both the theoretical and the empirical a disservice and does not help us in our attempt to come to grips with women’s oppression under capitalism.

Hamilton rejects the *legitimacy* of the theoretical in the case of *Hidden in the Household* and apparently on three main grounds. First, Hamilton rejects the book’s attempt (and, I think, the general attempt) to understand the basis of women’s oppression in a socialist feminist way. Locating the roots of oppression in capitalist class relations and in the separation of production and reproduction, according to Hamilton, means that “a whole range of historical, sociological, psychological and literary evidence is cut off prior to its interrogation.”

In my opinion quite correctly, the contributors to *Hidden in the Household* made no apology for their theoretical orientation. We did not consider it practicable or necessary to retrace the particular processes whereby we had come to this theoretical orientation. Hamilton assumes in her review, on the basis of no evidence that she shares with her readers, that we took this position because we ignored or wanted to ignore a whole host of other positions. We are accused from the outset of being unscientific merely because of our theoretical orientation. This, in my opinion, tells us more about Hamilton’s intellectual prejudices than it does about the book in question. Further, if Hamilton indeed claims that socialist feminists by definition ignore lots of other perspectives on their problems, she has only to pose to us a more satisfactory theoretical position. However, in her review, the alternative to the supposedly pre-cut theoretical boxes of Marxism is no boxes at all. I, for one,

do not find the lure of the empirical quite so seductive.

Clearly, if we are not to spend all of our time describing the world or, as seems more common in anti-theoretical circles, celebrating the world of the oppressed while ignoring their defeats - we must pose theoretical questions. This means, inescapably, abstracting and selecting from the real. This process of abstraction can proceed incorrectly or in the wrong direction, but to understand the world one must do it. I would be pleased to be convinced that the theoretical project of *Hidden in the Household* proceeds incorrectly, and if there is a better way of proceeding, I would be happy to learn of it. Hamilton claims that this is the case, but why and what alternatives exist she does not deign to share with us.

Hamilton’s second ground for rejecting *Hidden in the Household* is the slavish dogmatism of Marxists. Using Marxism means setting in motion a “set of categories into which social reality must then be pummelled and squeezed.” The authors of *Hidden in the Household* are charged with believing that “Marx must have been right”; not, mind you, that Marx might have been right, could have been right or might allow us to pose an important question. Oh no! “Marx *must* have been right”; slavish and snivelling dogmatism of the worst kind. One can only counter such charges, I think, by inviting Hamilton to demonstrate that the authors have neglected evidence which any reasonable person would see as convincing out of an intention to preserve their theoretical position. In the absence of such a demonstration, Hamilton is merely making unfounded but not inoffensive allegations.

The third ground upon which Hamilton rejects the general project of *Hidden in the Household* is potentially the most serious. Not only do we, the Marxist marionettes, dance to Marx’s (?) statement that “all commodities (including labour power) are exchanged for those

of a similar (sic) value," but also, "the historical record...refutes both" this proposition and the notion of a family wage. I'm sure everyone breathed a sigh of relief upon learning that these troublesome debates had been solved once and for all by the historical record. Hamilton seems to have forgotten to mention where we could find this historical record. Really, though, this seems rather unfortunate, for had she been so kind as to indicate, perhaps just by a hint or an oblique reference where the records are kept we could all finally get rid of those old copies of *Capital* which take up so much space.

I cannot conclude my remarks on Hamilton's treatment of *Hidden in the Household* without responding briefly to the comments she makes on my own article. I make the argument that the origins of the domestic sphere under capitalism may be understood through examining the struggles of working class women and men for a domestic life. I attempt to refute the argument, quite common at the time I was writing, that men or men of all classes had incarcerated women in the household. This position seemed to me to underplay the significance of the role of class divisions in the development of women's oppression. Using the English case, I examined the ways in which capitalist development had produced changes in the organization of domestic life, and I pointed to the existence in mid-nineteenth century England of a socialist struggle. This struggle was quite broad in its objectives, seeking among other things a domestic sphere for workers, political rights for women, universal education, and the abolition of what its partisans called "domestic slavery." Hamilton claims that I made this argument purely *with the aim(!)* "to let working class men off the hook" and that to do so I skimmed over the historical evidence, ignoring the crucial parts which show working class men trying to get women out of the labour force for sexist reasons. I am also castigated for not being familiar with literature published after my article had gone to press.

When my article in *Hidden in the Household* was written, the recent explosion of research into the history of the household and its origins was just beginning. Given that many people were arguing in print that the household arose out of a plot on the part of men, I think that my attempt to consider the possibility of class differences between women and of a class alliance between working class men and women was a useful contribution. It is one whose limitations will increasingly become apparent as the literature on family history continues to blossom, and perhaps I will be shown to be wrong or misguided. That is as it should be. But what is the state of criticism, I wonder, when attempts to discuss class in historical development are regarded by feminist critics as motivated simply by sexism?

To one charge of Hamilton's I must plead guilty. It is true that my article neglects the role of the trade-unions (most of them, mind you, not in existence until after the period I treated), which were male-dominated, in excluding women from industrial production. Hamilton does not mention that my article also fails to discuss the role of the maternal feminists, concerned to get their sisters under the patriarchal thumb so that race purity and good domestic servants would continue. I wonder which of Hamilton's prejudices is revealed by the fact that I am charged with aiming to let working class men, rather than bourgeois women, off the hook?

Insofar as Hamilton points to the accessibility and lucidity of *More than a Labour of Love* I am in more or less complete agreement with her. I suspect that anyone who has used this as an undergraduate coursebook will have had experiences similar to my own: students quickly and often delightedly make contact with the book. It dispells much of the romantic claptrap about domesticity that people who have not experienced it as adults carry about in their heads. It presents a clear picture of the day to day struggles women encounter and sets these struggles in a

context of social class. As an instrument of political education Luxton's book is quite remarkable.

However, Hamilton's concern to romanticise the empirical mystifies Luxton's accomplishments. Luxton's book isn't a good book because it makes theory unnecessary, or because it makes convoluted arguments clear. It is not a substitute for theory! It is a good book because it presents reality in a light which contains all the political forcefulness of its truth. It is a good book not because people can do away with theory if they have got Luxton, but because the book and the truth it contains forces people to reflect on social reality, on the reality of women's oppression and on the reality of class exploitation. This is a good book because it is a path for people into the dialectic of theory and description, of struggle and reflection on struggle, which alone (if we are able to do both) has the potential to lead us to the destruction of exploitation and oppression.

In my view, Hamilton's review seeks to prevent that possibility by vilifying the theoretical while glorifying reality. I call on Hamilton, if she wishes to reject the legitimacy of *Hidden in the Household* while glorifying *More than a Labour of Love* to present us with the solutions to the problems with which we have tried to grapple. What is the role of theory in the struggle against women's oppression? What theory (or theories) should we use for our guide? What is the relation between, and relative importance of, gender and class? How can you claim that empirical description absolves us from theory? Shall we then describe the heroic day to day struggles of American women to make abortion murder while selling Amway's products? Tell us!

Bruce Curtis
McMaster University

Reply to Curtis

Curtis' reply to my review (*Atlantis* 7, 1, pp.114-126) has bolstered my original criticisms of *Hidden in the Household*. Rather than using the review as a take-off for a genuine debate he has chosen to erect fences, proclaim absolutes and construct false polarities. I take exception to almost everything he says, and how he says it. My response is organized under five headings: 1. Language, 2. Uncovering Differences, 3. The Theoretical and the Empirical, 4. Naive Empiricism and 5. Curtis' Research.

Language: A Contemporary Morality Play

Those readers who are upset by the words that Curtis attributes to me should turn to the original review. Certainly my analysis was intended to be direct and critical, an attempt to convince people, including the authors, to reconsider arguments and expand the range of questions considered important. But *I* did not use such unbecoming phrases as "slavish and snivelling dogmatism," "Marxist marionettes," "guilty associations," "the gospels of St. Karl" or "dirty work at the theoretical crossroads." These are Curtis' epithets and I wonder why he chose to put into circulation language that purports to describe himself and his colleagues in such disrespectful tones. He may think that we are engaged in a struggle between good and evil, but for my part I do not wish to confuse the writing of criticism with the production of a morality play. As to charges that my review was seasoned with calumny and innuendo, I can only (in this one instance and in keeping within the terms of that play) plead innocent. "Innuendo: an oblique hint or suggestion." Hardly. "Calumny: false and malicious misrepresentation." Not really.

Uncovering Differences

The second issue refers to Curtis' decision to defend the whole book "despite the lack of agreement amongst the contributors" because I