

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!

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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

“tar them all with the same brush.” To the extent that the book was presented as a collective endeavour I did make general comments about its self-proclaimed task. Yet with little help from them or the editor I attempted to tease out some of the differences among them in a way that few readers would have the patience or will to do. These differences, while not trivial, are rarely considered by authors or editor. I am, therefore, disappointed that Curtis did not use his reply as an opportunity to explicate and draw them out. In a review of *Hidden in the Household* Lise Vogel concluded that:

as it stands readers...must expect to thread their way as best they can through material that is often insightful and sometimes significant, even as it is by turns repetitive, dense or internally contradictory.¹

That is the kindest way possible of putting it. Why didn't the authors have a good go at each other? That might have produced a genuinely critical debate. And, in any case, what do we have here? An extension of the ideology that families should not wash their dirty linen in public? If so, the real question then becomes: are Curtis' collaborators grateful for his defence of them? Or do they feel a certain hesitation, like the old man the two Boy Scouts took so long to help across the road “because he did not want to go?”

The Theoretical and the Empirical: The Mystification of Marx

Let us examine the validity of Curtis' assumption that the theoretical and the empirical are two distinct (almost opposing) practices. Raymond Williams in *Keywords* defines theory as an “explanatory scheme.”² Theory is “always in active relation to practice: an interaction between things done, things observed and (systematic) explanation of these.” There is no moment when the observation ceases and the explanation begins: indeed when that happens the explanation is cut off from that which it is called upon to

explain. Marx wrote that “economic categories are only the theoretical expressions, the abstractions of the social relations of production.”³ He criticizes Proudhon for sharing “the illusions of speculative philosophy” by transforming such categories through “his twaddle into pre-existing eternal ideas.”⁴ There seems little point in emulating Proudhon.

To turn to the empirical: Williams defines it this way: “The simplest general modern senses indicate a reliance on observed experience, but almost everything depends on how experience is understood.”⁵ As we live our lives we constantly seek to make sense of them. Luxton's respondents in *Flin Flon* do not furnish her with simple observations but with explanations, interpretations, questions and speculation about themselves and their relationships with others. Indeed the very process of developing language, of using symbols to represent things, feelings, ideas, events, of having to constantly make selections among words, stands in contradiction to some notion of ‘mere’ description or simple observation.

The important area of convergence between the theoretical and the empirical emerging from these definitions is clear: both involve the continuing quest for understanding and explanation; both seek to make sense of the world as it has been received and as it is experienced. What we call Marx' theory actually involves a great range of overlapping practices from observations on the factory system through complex philosophical discussions. It was through an ongoing dialectical analysis that included critiques of previously offered explanations, historical analysis and continuing observations/interpretations that he was able to strip away the apparent naturalness from the developing relations of capitalism.

Why then do the theoretical and the empirical so often seem to be, as they do to Curtis, two distinct practices? Most importantly because the

processes through which the theory developed are forgotten. Marx' dialectical method is left to lie fallow; his historical analysis is frozen; his observations on the world are shunted off, leaving the concepts and categories which he derived *through* the analysis and observations to stand alone. Given this historical amnesia the theory appears as a reified and closed system of ideas, concepts and interpretations. Curtis states candidly that this was the starting point of the authors of *Hidden in the Household*:

We did not consider it practicable or necessary to retrace the particular processes whereby we had come to this theoretical orientation.

This decision is especially ironical because however much we can learn from *what* Marx found out, we can learn more from *how* he found it. For the processes he elaborated and used are transferable and continue to be creatively developed. On the other hand, the march of history has produced ever changing situations which, in his absence, we must observe and interpret for ourselves.

In this task no realm of knowledge should be privileged; there can be no sanctuaries where systems of ideas and concepts rest safe from scrutiny. By Curtis' admission the authors *did* protect their theoretical orientation (the received system of ideas and concepts) in precisely this way. The consequences are clear. By virtue of this decision the historically specific analysis, when it was engaged in at all, was put primarily at the service of fleshing out the theory rather than of revealing the particular nature of women's oppression in capitalist society. Furthermore, the "theory" that was intended to help unravel the way things work, itself became part of the mystification process as the memory of its own historical development was blocked. Instead of being used to help explore and prise out the meaning and implications of our social relationships, instead of being called upon to help formulate questions

and in the process being reformulated itself, it is required to produce ready-made answers. It is the equivalent of only talking to oneself. Or to quote Marx: "Criticism with a completely uncritical attitude to itself."⁶

Naive Empiricism: Curtis' Mystification of Luxton

This leads to a discussion of a fourth issue advanced by Curtis: his assertion that I liked *More than a Labour of Love* because it was a literate version of a coffee klatch. Curtis' burlesque account of my comments about this book illustrates the nonsense of his theory/empirical division. To understand the world he argued one must "pose theoretical questions." To do this we must abstract and select from the real. The conclusion he draws is bizarre at best. "This process of abstraction can proceed incorrectly or in the wrong direction but to understand the world one must do it." I assume that he does not mean what he seems to be saying: that to understand the world we must proceed in the wrong direction! More fundamentally, however, selecting out from the "real" is not just a theoretical prerogative in the way Curtis suggests. All our comments on the world are selective emerging from the ongoing accumulation of experiences, interests and previous understandings.

Now Luxton went to Flin Flon with a particular set of interests, ideas and questions that overlapped with those shared by many others, including me. If most of her book had described the clothing and manners of the people she would have reached a different audience:

Gregory B., personnel manager, (she might have written) was wearing a double-breasted suit, a pretty print tie and a lovely pale yellow shirt. His warm handshake and admiring eyes told me that he approved of my slightly faded but well-cut blue jeans and the plaid shirt I had picked up on sale just the week before.

This account too is based on selection, but the criteria are different. Furthermore there is little attempt to provide any context for, or interpretation of this encounter in terms of class or gender relations.

But in my review of *More than a Labour of Love* I made it clear that Luxton's challenge was to prise out the nature, meaning and implications of the social relationships she studied: she seeks "to lay bare the particular, often the contradictory interests between capitalists and workers, husbands and wives, capitalists and wives." I did not imply that this was an atheoretical undertaking. Luxton did not parachute herself into Flin Flon with an empty head and a few pencils in her pocket. Nor, despite Curtis' sarcasm about anti-abortion and Amway products, did I suggest she should have. Somewhere between Curtis' theoreticism and the naive empiricism which he offers as its only alternative is surely another way. In his discussion of the sociology of culture Raymond Williams suggests the broad outlines of such a path:

An adequate sociology of culture...cannot avoid the informing presence of existing empirical studies and existing theoretical and quasi-theoretical positions. But it must be prepared to rework and reconsider all received material and concepts and to present its own contributions within the open interaction of evidence and interpretation which is the true condition of its adequacy.⁷

In my review I suggested that Luxton had worked in this way: that as social historian, anthropologist and feminist she had broached a far broader area of questions and concerns than she would have had she remained within the framework of her express theoretical commitment. Still, my one stated criticism of her work, ironically enough considering Curtis' charge, was that she did not allow the feminist literature on patriarchal relations to sufficiently inform her analysis. That criticism alone contradicts

Curtis' assertion that I applauded her for arriving in Flin Flon as a blank slate. But despite this important absence in what she *took* to Flin Flon she was able, through a process of moving from developed concepts to observations and back again to weave together a detailed understanding of some of the ways in which capitalist and patriarchal relations intersect in the lives of working class men and women. This was scarcely an attempt (nor did I suggest that it was) to celebrate "the world of the oppressed while ignoring their defeats." What Luxton's study did offer, which Curtis perhaps finds objectionable, was an interpretation of how men and women, as subjects, create their own lives within a particular historical and social setting. This included the complex reasons why women choose to remain within, and how they handle, the family relations that socialist-feminists identify as oppressive.

From this Luxton drew out some of the contradictions in the lives of the women which might lead to struggle and change. On the other hand, the only implication we can draw for the future from the Curtis account of "domestic slavery" is that there will be more of the same:

...we can see that the domestic worker is reproduced under conditions of domestic slavery.... She is incarcerated in an isolated, technically backwards and stagnant unit.

Curtis could profit from Thompson's admonition to those who evaluate life solely in terms of the inevitable and eventual attainment of working class power:

...history cannot be compared to a tunnel through which an express races until it brings its freight of passengers out into sunlit plains. Or, if it can be, then generation upon generation of passengers are born, live in the dark, and die while the train is still within the tunnel. An historian must surely be more interested than the

teleologists allow him to be in the quality of life, the sufferings and satisfactions, of those who live and die in unredeemed time.⁸

To Curtis this may smack of romanticism; furthermore, for him, the romantic and the empirical appear as equivalent. Nevertheless, before writing such prose again, laboured in tone and content, perhaps he will pause, with us, to remember that Luxton's housewives have only one life to live; we should not, therefore, be surprised to find that each is prepared to give it what she's got, despite its unfortunately premature timing.

History as Done by Curtis: How to Reach Foregone Conclusions

Finally let us look at Curtis' defence of his own historical analysis. I am especially puzzled about his insistence that theoretical knowledge be privileged in light of his own assumption that *if* there was a family wage it was because it had developed through struggles mediated by the state, between the working class and the capitalist class. This I think, can be demonstrated through a wide-ranging historical analysis, and this is not a point of contention between us. My quarrel with him is not this starting point. It is rather with the partial and distorted way in which he proceeded, on the one hand, and with his conclusions, on the other.

First he developed a one-sided case: "that the struggle of the worker's movement for the possibility of domestic life must be seen as a progressive one." At the very least the struggle was far more contradictory. Even Jane Humphries who made a similar argument to Curtis in 1977 produced some conflicting evidence.⁹ While he complains that he did the best job he could, given the available evidence, this plea can scarcely be sustained. Sheila Lewenhak and Sheila Rowbotham have discussed this question. Dorothy Thompson's article "Women and Nineteenth-

Century Radical Politics: A lost Dimension" is extremely suggestive, while Sally Alexander provides a broader context for looking at women's work in this period.¹⁰ But it was Curtis' task to ferret out the evidence, to have done the research, not mine. The point is that Curtis raises a complex historical question and deals with it in a cavalier fashion. His hit-and-miss method is reminiscent of what Thompson described as The Kangaroo Factor. This is a method of "theoretical practice" which:

prohibits any actual empirical engagements with social reality.... Hence the theoretical practitioner proceeds in gigantic bounds through the conceptual elements.... But every so often (since the law of gravity cannot be disregarded forever) he comes down: *bump!* What he comes down upon is an assumption about the world. But he does not linger on this assumption, sniff it, taste the grass. *Hop!* He is off into the air again.¹¹

While some of the evidence I cited in my review was only available in unpublished form before *Hidden in the Household* went to press, this did not prevent Secombe, who had a far more sophisticated understanding of this question, from using it to advantage.

However, I faulted Curtis not just for having constructed a shaky case about this particular historical process, but also for insisting it support his pre-existing prejudices. The "progressive nature of the struggle for a domestic life" proves for him that:

The separation of household and industry under capitalism and the sex-based division of labour which it involves forms the basis of the division of the working class along sex lines...working class men and women share a common position of opposition to the capitalist state.

This leap earned him my charge that his object was to let working class men off the hook. I do not, however, attribute his desire to sexism, but rather to his *a priori* decision to sustain his theory. This can be seen clearly because he states his conclusion before he presents his historical research: asking rhetorically “is the source of the barbarity to which many housewives are subject to be found in the figure of the working class husband?,” he responds “surely the ultimate source of this barbarity is capitalist exploitation!” What happens to the overwhelming evidence that women are subject to their husbands in precapitalist and in socialist countries, albeit in very different forms? He ignores it. Curtis’ theoretical blinkers (can we demystify this and call it prejudice: “an unreasoning predilection”?) save him from many time-consuming historical excursions.

In the end Curtis simply cannot expect feminists to appreciate his work when he so categorically rejects their concerns. His ossified rendition of Marxism permits him to remain blissfully unhampered and untouched by fifteen years of socialist-feminist inquiry.

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NOTES

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1. Lise Vogel, *Science and Society*, Spring 1982, pp.94-7.
2. Raymond Williams, *Keywords*, (Fontana, 1976), p.267.
3. Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, (International Publishers, New York), p.109.
4. Marx to J.B. Schweitzer *Ibid.*, p. 197.
5. Williams, *op.cit.*, p.99.
6. Karl Marx, “Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic and Philosophy as a Whole,” *The Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, (International Publishers, New York, 1964), p.172.
7. Raymond Williams, *Culture*, (Fontana, 1981), p.35.
8. E.P. Thompson, “The Peculiarities of the English,” *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, (Monthly Review Press, 1978), p.296.
9. Jane Humphries, “The Working Class Family, Women’s Liberation and Class Struggle,” *The Review of Radical Political Economists*, 9 (3) Fall, 1977, pp.25-41.

10. Sheila Lewenhak, *Women and Trade Unions: An Outline History of Women in the British Trade Union Movement*, (Ernest Benn Ltd., 1977); Sheila Rowbotham, *Women, Resistance and Revolution*, (Penguin Books, 1974); Dorothy Thompson, “Women and Nineteenth-Century Radical Politics: A Lost Dimension,” *The Rights and Wrongs of Women*, ed., Anne Oakley and Juliet Mitchell, (Penguin Books, 1976), pp.112-138; Sally Alexander, “Women’s Work in Nineteenth-Century London; A Study of the Years 1820-50,” *Ibid.*, pp.59-111.
11. E.P. Thompson, “The Poverty of Theory” in Thompson *op.cit.*, p.124.