# Patriarchy Theory

The theory of patriarchy, which says that there is a fundamental division between men and women from which men gain power, is accepted without question today by most of the left. The theory was developed by feminists such as Juliet Mitchell and Miriam Dixson who, in her book *The Real Matilda,* was inclined to blame Irish working class men for women’s oppression, using the theory of patriarchy as the basis for her argument. Anne Summers helped to popularise the ideas in her *book Damned Whores and God’s Police* in the early seventies. She wrote «Women are expected to be socially dependent and physically passive because this state is claimed to be necessary for their maternal role. In fact it is because it enhances the power of men.»

But there was some resistance to the idea that all men have power over women, especially from women and men influenced by the Marxist idea that class differences are fundamental in society. Heidi Hartmann, in her essay *The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union,* attempted to provide a bridge between what are fundamentally opposing views. Hartmann purported to provide a materialist analysis of patriarchy. While capitalists exploit the labour of workers at work, men gained control over women’s labour in the family. This has been the theoretical starting point for much of Australian feminist writing over the past ten to fifteen years. However, Hartmann did not challenge the central idea of Mitchell and others, which is that there is such an identifiable social relation as patriarchy. Patriarchy, Hartmann says, «largely organizes reproduction, sexuality, and childrearing.»

The arguments of patriarchy theory have been adequately dealt with by the British Socialist Workers’ Party. The purpose of this article is to begin the much-needed task of examining the theory of patriarchy by drawing on the Australian experience from the standpoint of revolutionary Marxism. I will briefly outline the theoretical method underlying Marxism and how it differs from the theory of patriarchy. It is necessary to do this because most feminist arguments against «Marxism» are in fact replies to the mechanical «Marxism» either of the Second International from the early 1890’s to 1914 or of Stalinism. Secondly I will show that the historical arguments made by feminists do not stand up to any objective examination. Their determination to make facts fit an untenable theory leads them to distortions and misinterpretation. So I will look at the origins of the family in Australia and the role of the concept of a family wage in the workplace.

Finally, but most importantly, I will show that the ideas of male power and patriarchy have led the women’s movement into an abyss. They have no answer to how women’s oppression can be fought. Rosemary Pringle, in her book *Secretaries Talk,* expresses a sentiment common in feminist literature today: «no one is at all clear what is involved in transforming the existing (gender stereotyped) categories». Is it any wonder the women’s movement is plagued by pessimism and hesitation? An analysis which says half the human race has power over the other half must in the end question whether this situation can be changed. A theory which says capitalism could be replaced by socialism, but women’s oppression could continue, ends up sliding into the idea that men naturally and inevitably oppress women.

The Marxist analysis is that the historical roots of women’s oppression lie in class society. The specific forms this oppression takes today are the result of the development of the capitalist family and the needs of capital. Therefore the struggle to end the rule of capital, the struggle for socialism, is also the struggle for women’s liberation. Because *class* is the fundamental division in society, when workers, both women and men, fight back against any aspect of capitalism they can begin to break down the sexism which divides them. Their struggle can begin to «transform the existing categories».

In *The German Ideology* Marx argued that social relations between people are determined by production. The various institutions of society can only be understood as developing out of this core, productive interaction. His argument applies as much to women’s oppression as to any other aspect of capitalist society.

The history of humanity is the history of changes to the way production is organised. The new economic relations established with each mode of production exert pressure on other social relations, making some obsolete, remoulding others. So any institution must be examined historically and in its relationship to other social relations. For instance, an analysis of the family needs to be rooted in its economic and social role and examine how it helps perpetuate the existing relations of production.

Today it is very popular for those influenced by Louis Althusser and others to brand this approach as «reductionist». It is useful to quote Lukács here again, as he can hardly be accused of covering his back after this objection was raised. «The category of totality does not reduce its various elements to an undifferentiated uniformity, to identity». And «the interaction we have in mind must be more than the interaction of otherwise unchanging objects.»

Marx’s proposition «men make their own history, but they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves», sums up the interaction we must look for between the ideas women and men use to justify their actions and responses to social events and the material and economic circumstances in which they operate. This differs radically from the theoretical framework of patriarchy theory. The most common versions take two forms. There are those like Juliet Mitchell who see patriarchy in psychological and ideological terms: «We are dealing with two autonomous areas, the economic mode of capitalism and the ideological mode of patriarchy.» If you make such a distinction between the economic and ideological, then you cannot explain anything about the development of society. Why do some ideas dominate? And why do some dominant ideas change?

However I do not intend answering these ideas more fully because the arguments which seem to offer a more serious challenge to Marxism are not these but the other version of patriarchy theory argued by writers like Heidi Hartmann. She criticised Juliet Mitchell: «Patriarchy operates, Mitchell seems to be saying, (in *Psyche/analysis and Feminism)* primarily in the psychological realm … She clearly presents patriarchy as the fundamental ideological structure, just as capital is the fundamental economic structure.» Hartmann concludes «although Mitchell discusses their interpenetration, her failure to give patriarchy a material base in the relation between women’s and men’s labour power, and her similar failure to note the material aspects of the process of personality formation and gender creation, limits the usefulness of her analysis.»

However, Hartmann’s own attempt at a materialist analysis is not grounded in the concept of society as a totality in which production forms the basis for all social relations.

This is a decidedly un-Marxist formulation, for all Hartmann’s pretension to Marxist categories. It has much more in common with structuralist and post-structuralist theories which take a mechanical view of society as a series of social structures which can exist side by side. They do not attempt to unite the social structures into a coherent whole. In fact, they are often hostile to the very concept of society as a totality, preferring a view of society as fragmented and chaotic. «All attempts to establish a working framework of ideas are regarded with the deepest suspicion.»

Hartmann, while at pains to distinguish herself from the feminists who tended towards a psychoanalytical explanation of women’s oppression, uses fundamentally the same approach.

This framework fits neatly with Hartmann’s view of society as both capitalism and patriarchy. And along with all those who have taken on board elements of this method, Hartmann downgrades class as the fundamental determinant – because in the end you can’t have two structures. One has to be primary, so her analysis does not treat patriarchy and capitalism as two systems in partnership. She argues that it was a conspiracy between male workers and capitalists which established women’s oppression under capitalism. In other words, patriarchy is more fundamental than capitalism. This is an inbuilt confusion in theories which claim to «marry» Marxism and patriarchy theory. Again and again, they have to read their own prejudice into historical facts to fit the abstract and mechanical notion of patriarchy.

We can agree with feminists such as Hartmann that the family is the source of women’s oppression today. But their analysis of how and why this came about is fundamentally flawed. Summers says «the institution (of the family) confers power on men». The argument goes that, because men supposedly wanted to have women service them in the home, they organised to keep women out of the best jobs. A conspiracy of all men was responsible for women being driven into the role of wife and mother, working in the worst paid and least skilled jobs – if they were able to work at all.

Actually, we don’t need a conspiracy theory of any kind to explain why women are oppressed under capitalism. Women have been oppressed since the division of society into classes. The capitalist family was established as the result of the particular development of capitalism. The effect of the industrial revolution on the working class family was devastating. Friedrich Engels painted a horrifying picture in *The Conditions of the Working Class in England.* Whole industries were built on the basis of cheap female and child labour during the industrial revolution in Britain. Engels gives figures for the 1840s: of 419,560 factory operatives in the British Empire, 242,296 were female, of whom almost half were under eighteen. Almost half the male workers were under eighteen. Women made up 56.25% of workers in the cotton factories, 69.5% in the woollen mills, 70.5% in flax-spinning mills.

Diseases such as typhus raged in industrial slums, drunkenness was widespread and there was a «general enfeeblement of the frame in the working class.» In Manchester, more than fifty-seven percent of working class children died before the age of five. These statistics disturbed the more far-sighted sections of the capitalist class.

The working class of the early industrial revolution was drawn from the peasantry, driven off the land by enclosures of the common lands and other measures. But as this source began to dry up, the bosses began to realise they needed to find a way to ensure the reproduction of a working class at least healthy and alert enough not to fall asleep at the machines. And more and more they needed an educated, skilled workforce.

The solution they came up with was the nuclear family. This is hardly surprising when we consider that the bourgeoisie themselves lived in the family. Workers fresh from the countryside were used to working and living in peasant families. It was accepted without question that women should be responsible for childcare and most domestic duties. The second half of the nineteenth century saw a massive ideological campaign by the middle and upper classes to reverse the trend away from the working class family and to force women more decisively into the roles of wife and mother. This was backed up by attempts to ameliorate at least the worst aspects of working class life, especially those which endangered women and their ability to produce healthy children.

The same process was repeated here in Australia. If anything, the family was even more severely disrupted because of the transportation of convicts and the general lawlessness of the frontier society in the first years of the nineteenth century. Shortages of labour were acute in the early years of the colony, because of the distance from the home country and lack of free settlers. This pushed the colonial ruling class to try to find a solution even earlier than in Britain.

They situate the attempts to confine women to the home, to establish the «feminine» stereotype, firmly in the ruling class’s drive to stamp their authority on the new colony. They argue that women «disappeared into domesticity in the age of the bourgeois ascendancy». From this time on we no longer see women entrepreneurs like Mary Reibey or Rosetta Terry who had run successful businesses and been prominent in other public ventures in the earlier years of the settlement.

Connell and Irving argue that «by the 1860s the lack of parental guidance and education among working-class children was recognised as a major problem of social control.» After the 1870s, living standards declined as the cities grew rapidly. In the 1880s, infant mortality rates were higher in Sydney than in London. So if anything, the campaign for the family was even more strident here than in Britain. And it certainly was not a campaign by all men, but by the ruling class, male and female, and its middle class supporters both male and female.

The idea that male workers joined in an alliance with their male bosses to carry out this scheme so they could get power over women is simply not borne out by the facts. Men did not rush into the family, chaining women to the kitchen sink and smothering them with babies’ nappies. As late as 1919, it was reported in the NSW Legislative Assembly that there was a high proportion of bachelors in Australia.

Anne Summers herself admits that «many women resisted being forced into full-time domesticity, just as men resented being forced to support a number of dependent and unproductive family members.» This goes some way to explaining why «the taming and domestication of the self-professed independent man became a standard theme in late nineteenth century fiction, especially that written by women». So men had to be cajoled and ideologically convinced of the benefits of home life – they did not go out to enforce it. Family desertions were very common. But just everyday, ordinary life meant for many workers – working on ships, moving around the country looking for work, doing itinerant and seasonal jobs such as cane cutting, droving, shearing, whaling and sealing – that they were not serviced by their wives’ labour in the home much at all.

In any case, when a man took on the responsibility of feeding a wife and children from the low and unreliable wage he earned, he actually faced a worsening of conditions. Stuart McIntyre has shown that working class families living at the turn of the century were most likely to suffer poverty during the years when they had small children.

Summers makes this point herself: «indeed they (men) will generally be better off if they remain single.» She dismisses it by assuming that a wife’s services, the emotional security of a relationship «as well as the feelings of pride and even aggrandizement associated with fathering and supporting children» outweigh the minor inconvenience of not having enough money to live on. This is a typically middle class attitude; that the ability to survive could be less important than «emotional security», or that it could reliably exist in a life of poverty and degradation. In any case, on both these criteria – emotional security and the pride of parenthood – it would have to be said women have a stake in the family. It is precisely the yearning to realise these often unattainable goals which does partly underpin the acceptance of the family as the ideal. They tell us nothing about whether the family bestows power on men or not.

This argument is not meant to idealise workers. Sexist ideas about women are as old as class society. So it is not surprising that male workers were sexist and accepted the standard stereotyped view of women. But that is not the same as being in an alliance with male bosses. And it did not mean they strove to establish the stifling, restrictive existence of the nuclear family. It simply means they were the product of given social relations not of their own making. «The sexism of English society was brought to Australia and then amplified by penal conditions.»

The fact is that it was the ruling class, via magazines produced for workers, who actually argued for women to become homemakers, wives and mothers above all else. That is why every mass circulation magazine, every middle class voice shouted the virtues of womanhood – a certain kind of womanhood that is (as they still do today). And it is clear that the overwhelming arguments for women to be primarily housewives came from women.

Connell and Irving rightly drew the connection between the establishment of bourgeois society in Australia and the fight to establish the «feminine» stereotype for women: «The women (in the social elite) … played an active role in maintaining class consciousness through their policing of gentility.»

Of course, these women were not feminists. But some of the most advanced women of the middle classes of the time, the suffragists as they were called, mouthed the honeyed phrases promising women the approval of respectable society if only they would devote themselves to the care of their husbands and children. Vida Goldstein was a famous feminist. In 1903 her paper, *Australian Woman’s Sphere* recommended that women’s education should include instruction on baby care. Goldstein defended the women’s movement from attacks that said emancipation meant women were refusing to have children by insisting that on the contrary, women were awakening to a truer sense of their maternal responsibility, and that most wanted a career in motherhood – hardly a departure from the sexist ideas of bourgeois society. Maybanke Anderson espoused women’s suffrage and higher education for women but also compulsory domestic science for schoolgirls, and sexual repression.

The bosses wanted the family and they had to fight for it. Workers, both men and women, had to be goaded, pushed and coaxed into accepting ruling class ideas of a «decent» life. The argument that women’s role in the family was somehow established by an alliance of all men simply ignores the influence of not only middle class and bourgeois respectable women, but also *the feminists* of the time who were vastly more influential – because of material wealth and organisation and ideological influence through newspapers and the like – than working class men.

Hartmann argues: «the development of family wages secured the material base for male domination in two ways. First, men have the better jobs in the labour market and earn higher wages than women.» This «encourages women to choose wifery as a career. Second, then, women do housework, childcare, and perform other services at home which benefit men directly. Women’s home responsibilities in turn reinforce their inferior labour market position.» The argument that the establishment of a family wage institutionalised women as housewives and mothers earning low wages if they went to work is widely accepted. Lindsey German and Tony Cliff accept that the working class supported the idea of a family wage in Britain. In August 1989, I wrote: «the family wage helped establish the connection between sex stereotypes and the workplace.» And the «gender divisions … in the Australian workforce … were codified and legitimised by the Harvester Judgement of 1907.» I am now much more sceptical about this argument.

Most feminist historians hold up the Harvester Judgement of 1907 as decisive in institutionalising the family wage and low wages for women in Australia. They argue it was a turning point in establishing the gender division in the work force and the idea that women don’t need to work, because they should have a breadwinner. Justice H.B. Higgins, as President of the Commonwealth Arbitration Court, heard a test case involving H.V. McKay, proprietor of the Sunshine Harvester works in Victoria. Higgins awarded what he called a «living wage» based on what a male worker with a wife and «about three children» needed to live on. He awarded 7s a day plus 3s for skill. Women’s wages were set at 54% of the male rate.

It may have been used as the rationale for lower wages for women, but it certainly did not instigate the concept. Nor did it initiate the gender divisions in the workplace. To prove that this judgement was decisive in establishing women’s position in the home and at work, it would have to be shown that it established lower pay for women than before and drove women out of the workforce. Neither is the case.

It is well known that convict women in the early years of settlement were always regarded as cheap labour. And as Connell and Irving point out, «a sex-segregated labour market was established» by 1810. In that year, of about 190 jobs advertised in the *Sydney Gazette,* only seven were for women. Of those, six were for positions as household servants. Most of the women immigrants brought to Australia by the efforts of Caroline Chisholm in the 1840s were employed as housekeepers and maids. By and large, women’s wages were lower than men’s from the earliest development of industry. In the 1860s, in the Victorian Woollen Mills, men earned 35s a week while women received 10s and girls 4s. In 1896, the Clothing Trades Wages Board in Melbourne fixed women’s wages at 44% of men’s – 3s 4d against 7s 6d for men. New South Wales didn’t even introduce a minimum wage until 1907. Its aim was «to prevent employment of young girls in millinery and dressmaking for nothing for periods of six months to two years»!

Any agitation for a family wage has to be seen in the context of the ruling class’s push to establish the family. Again and again, the ruling class has had to campaign around these ideas, partly because workers have not taken them up with the enthusiasm they wanted, but also because capitalism itself continually undermines the family. The slump of the 1890s disrupted family life, with men travelling around the country looking for work, or simply deserting their families in despair. By the early 1900s, birth rates had fallen to the lowest in the world. So it is not accidental that the ruling class looked for ways to strengthen the family and the ideas associated with it. It is in this light that we have to view the Harvester judgement and the general climate at the time which has led many feminists to identify this as the turning point for the position of women in Australia.

The feminist argument that decisions such as the Harvester judgement are the decisions of patriarchy, an alliance between male workers and male bosses, does not stand up any better. Leave aside that it made no appreciable difference to the material conditions of women, it certainly cannot be shown to have brought any great boon to male workers. The amount of 7s a week was not a living wage for a family of five. Higgins said he wanted to award «merely enough to keep body and soul together.» In fact, he left out any consideration of lighting, clothing, boots, furniture, utensils, rates, life insurance, unemployment, union dues, books and newspapers, tram and train fares, school requisites, leisure of any kind, intoxicating liquors, tobacco, sickness, religion or expenditure for contingencies. A confusion in the hearing resulted in the allowance for skill of 3s, one shilling less than members of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers got for the same work.

In the end, the decision was overturned a year later. But Higgins was still awarding 7s many years later, in spite of 27% inflation. No wonder Buckley and Wheelwright point out dryly that «trade unionists at the time (unlike historians later) showed little interest in the Harvester judgement.» If male workers were involved in some alliance with capital, they certainly got very little monetary reward for their part in it.

The idea that the capitalists were in some kind of alliance with working class men to get women into the home is ludicrous when we look at the conditions men worked under. In the depression of the 1890s, thousands were sacked, wages plummeted and most trade unions were either completely destroyed or reduced to a miserable rump. In 1905 there were 2500 to 3000 wharf labourers and coal lumpers in Sydney. At least 1500 of them could not earn enough to live on. And at this time male shop assistants, some of the few workers who consistently worked a full week, could not afford to marry unless their wife worked. Such «rewards» were hardly calculated to keep men on side for the dubious (and mostly unrealised) benefit of having a wife to wait on them. Furthermore, given that the bosses were in such a strong position, there is no reason why they needed an alliance with male workers. They got what they wanted anyway. A more reasonable explanation is that these conditions convinced men that the family wage would raise their living standards.

The concept of a family wage was then of some ideological importance. It strengthened the already prevalent conception about women’s role in the home, and how «decent» people should live. But a true family wage was never a reality for more than a small minority of workers. An important fact which shows that workers’ families couldn’t live on one wage was the huge number of married women who continued to work. In the half century from 1841 to 1891, the number of women in Britain’s textile mills grew by 221%. In Australia, the picture was much the same. Working class women have always worked in large numbers. In 1891, 40% of women aged 18–25 worked. And they continued to work in sizable numbers in the twentieth century, even before the massive growth in their numbers following the Second World War.

Men did take up sexist ideas about women’s role – this is hardly surprising given the ruling class campaign was backed up even by the feminists of the time. But it is not the case that men argued for the family wage or protective legislation and the like on the basis that they wanted women to be their unpaid chattels in the home. The situation is more complex than that.

We might not agree that the solution was for women to be confined to the home. But the man quoted does not talk of women making life easier for men. He says quite clearly that the family wage is seen as a way of alleviating the horrible conditions endured by women in the workplace.

This is an outrageous assertion with no facts to back it up. The only basis can be her own prejudice. She does not document any examples of male workers opposing pay rises for women, or arguing that they should service them in the home. The feminist interpretation misses the complexity of the relationship of ideas and material circumstances. Workers are products of this society, and the ideas of the ruling class dominate their thinking. But they are not empty vessels which simply take up every phrase and idea of the ruling class just as it is intended. Workers found their material circumstances unbearable. One response when trying to find a way out was to take up ideas propagated by the bosses and use them in their own way and to their own advantage. So the demand for women to be able to live in the family is at the same time repeating bourgeois ideas and an attempt to raise living standards.

Male workers, whether for exclusion of women, for a family wage, or for unionisation of women, were mostly worried about the use of women as cheap labour to undercut conditions and pay generally. Ray Markey, who has done a detailed study of the Australian working class in the latter half of last century, notes that «broadly, the labour movement’s response to female entry into the workforce was twofold: one of humanitarian concern and workers’ solidarity, and one of fear.» 1891–2, the New South Wales Trades and Labour Council maintained a strong campaign against sweating, particularly of women, and assisted in the formation of unions of unskilled workers, of which a sizable minority were women. In this case, male trade unionists were involved in organising women as workers – not driving them out of the workplace.

Hartmann implies that male workers supported protective factory legislation because this restricted the work women could do. This was the result of much protective legislation. But at least here in Australia, it does not seem to have been the motivating force behind union support for it. And once again, middle class reformers saw protective legislation as one way of improving the conditions of working women.

Carol Bacchi argues that «most suffragists favoured special factory legislation for factory women». She comments that few realised that this placed them under a competitive handicap. That is why I say the facts have to be distorted and misinterpreted to draw the conclusion that protective legislation was a deliberate ploy by males to limit women’s employment opportunities.

Markey says of the attitudes of workers: «Hopefully, it was the thin edge of the wedge: once protection for some workers was accepted on the statute books, it might be easier to extend it later.» Overall, protective legislation did improve working conditions. Children especially gained from restrictions on the hours they could be made to work.

Anne Summers criticises male trade unionists for only supporting unionisation of women for fear of their own conditions being undercut, not for the conditions of the women. Markey replies to this criticism; he says the maritime strike of 1890 taught many workers of the danger of having a mass of unorganised workers.

Similar fears had probably motivated the male tailors in encouraging the organisation of the tailoresses. However, far from denigrating the ‘class solidarity’ of the union movement, this merely emphasises the material basis of class organisation.

Markey makes an important point. Summers expresses a fundamental misunderstanding common not just among feminists: that is, a confusion between the material circumstances people react to and the ideas they use to justify their actions. Mostly people act because of their material situation, not simply because of ideas. Whatever the reasons given for trade union organisation, it is a progressive step. So while it is true that unions such as the Printers and the Engineering Union prior to World War II tried to exclude women, other Australian unions had quite a good record of defending women workers. In the early 1890s, a strike by women laundry workers over one worker being victimised at Pyrmont in Sydney got wide support, as did the Tailoresses’ Union in 1882 in Victoria. Neither the actions, nor even the arguments made for the worst positions, paint a picture of some united campaign by male workers in connivance with male capitalists to force women to be simply their domestic servants.

While the facts suggest that by and large workers did not show overwhelming enthusiasm for the family, it does seem that this campaign did not fall on completely barren soil. Workers gradually came to see the family as a haven in a cruel world. It offered the prospect of a home where children could have some care, where women could have their children away from the debilitating conditions of the factory. And gradually, the family took root, becoming one of the most important institutions for the maintenance of capitalism. In this way women’s oppression became structured into capitalism.

The family became absolutely central for the reproduction of the labour force – not a minor consideration for the system. It provided a cheap means of reproduction and socialisation of the next generation. Individual working class families were forced to take responsibility for child care, the health of their children, teaching them habits of conformity and respect for authority at minimal expense to the state or individual bosses. The existence of the family helps reinforce the relations of production; capitalists buy the labour power of workers like any other commodity, and its price is kept as low as possible by the role of the family. So labour performed in the home does not benefit other members of the family – itbenefits the capitalist class who buy the labour power of workers.

Apart from this economic role, the family plays an ideological role of central importance for the maintenance and stability of the society. The consolidation of the family entrenched the sexual stereotypes of man and woman, living in married bliss and raising happy, healthy children. This in turn provided an excuse for low wages for women. The assumption was more and more that they would have a male breadwinner. Each generation is socialised to expect marriage and family responsibilities, so getting a job and accepting the drudgery of work seems normal and unquestionable behaviour. At times it forces workers to accept poor conditions for fear of losing their job and not being able to provide for their family.

As the sex stereotypes became established, anyone who stepped outside this narrow view of life was seen as strange, as challenging the very fabric of society. This was no accident. It was part of the overall campaign to curtail the sexual relations of the «lower orders» and establish a unified, orderly capitalist society in Australia. As the cycle developed, it was increasingly perceived as «natural» for women to stay at home with the children. This was reinforced by the fact that their wages were inevitably lower than what men could earn. So women with small children were often forced out of the workforce and into the home.

Once we look at the development of the family as satisfying a very real need of capitalism itself, and the massive ideological offensive by the ruling class and their supporters, the picture is very different from that painted by the feminists. There was no conspiracy between male workers and capitalists. In as far as workers accepted the family, it was because they expected it to bring an improvement in their living standard. There is no separate power structure of patriarchy. The capitalists and their allies in the middle classes fought for and won very important changes in order to take the system forward. To workers at the time, it seemed like a gain for them too. And in some ways it was. Given the low level of production at the time, the poor methods of contraception and the absence of state welfare, it is ahistorical and utopian to expect that workers could have had expectations very different from those of the right to a family wage, and the supposed shelter of the family home.

Marx warned in his writings of three consequences of seeing society as an undifferentiated whole, of not putting production at the centre of our analysis. First it can lead to the view that society is unchanging, seeing society in an ahistorical way, with social relations governed by eternal laws. Second, it can lead to idealism, with the dynamic of society lying in some mystical force outside it. And third, it can lead to the view «that what exists today can only be grasped in its own terms, through its own language and ideas».

It is popular today to try to graft structuralist and post-structuralist theories onto Marxism. This has been the road to accepting the theory of patriarchy for many Marxists. However, all these theories display the problems Marx talked about. Foucault, who has become popular with many feminists, equates every relationship between humans with a power struggle, a completely ahistorical concept, and certainly not a new one. Thomas Hobbes, the bourgeois philosopher of the seventeenth century, was convinced that the basic drive in society was the «war of all against all».

The epitome of the problem is the fascination with «discourse» or language. It has taken on an explicitly idealist content. Chris Weedon, an American feminist makes these typical comments: «Feminist post-structuralist criticism can show how power is exercised through discourse.» And «power is invested in and exercised through her who speaks.» Consequently some feminists see literary criticism as their main area of struggle.

Rosemary Pringle takes up the theme here in Australia, illustrating what it means to accept what exists in its own terms, through its own language and ideas. She argues that we have to find a way to «privilege» the «feminine discourse». Women should find ways to use their femininity to «disempower» men. She doesn’t know how. But is it any wonder she can’t tell us how? Ideas do not come from out of the blue, they are not divorced from the material conditions which give rise to them:

The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men – the language of real life.

Femininity is part of the ideological baggage of capitalism and the family. It is part of the way women’s oppression is reinforced day in and day out. It cannot be used to undermine women’s oppression. The most apt reply to Pringle is that made by Marx to the idealist Young Hegelians in the 1840s:

This demand to change consciousness amounts to a demand to interpret the existing world in a different way, i.e., to recognise it by means of a different interpretation.

Women’s femininity means flirting, passiveness, being «sexy», available and yet chaste. Such behaviour reinforces the idea that women are trivial, passive and purely of decorative value. For it to «disempower» men (assuming they have power, which I don’t), women would have to somehow convince men to interpret such behaviour to mean women are serious, aggressive and valuable human beings. So instead of arguing to challenge the stereotypes, of fighting for *liberation* as the early women’s movement did, feminism has gone full circle to espouse a profoundly conservative outlook.

This is the dead end to which the ideas of male power and patriarchy have led. Feminist articles in journals and papers are very good at documenting the horrific conditions most women endure. But they have precious little to say about how to begin to change the society which creates them. Take *Gender at Work* by Ann Game and Rosemary Pringle. It catalogues very well the problems of women at work. It is very good at searching out offensive behaviour by male workers. But nowhere, not once, is there a mention of the possibility of solidarity between men and women in struggle to change the situation. In 1981, only two years before it was published, there was a strike of 200 women textile workers in Brunswick, Melbourne. The Kortex strike was a graphic and inspiring example of how class struggle can radically alter relations in the home. Husbands, brothers, sons and lovers willingly did housework, cooked and minded children so the women could more effectively fight for their $25 pay rise, which they won. Because they ignore such examples, Game and Pringle can offer no way out of the entrenched discrimination and gender stereotypes women suffer from.

Most feminists have abandoned any identification with socialism. This is not surprising, because if patriarchy is a power structure separate from capitalism the latter can be overthrown, leaving the former intact. This idea is given some credence by the Stalinism of most of the left, which has kept alive the ludicrous idea that the Stalinist countries arc socialist, in spite of the continuing oppression of women.

Because Marxism recognises that class divisions in society are fundamental, that women’s oppression arises from the particular way capitalism developed, it locates the way forward in the struggle against the very society itself. Men do behave badly, do act in sexist ways, do beat and rape women in the home. Feminists interpret this as the enactment of male power. The Marxist reply is not to simply say these are the actions of men shaped by the society they grow up in. That is only one side to the argument. The other is to point out, as Marx did, that «men make their own history». While humans are the products of society they are also conscious, thinking beings. As I showed, ideas propagated by the ruling class are not simply taken up by workers in a straightforward way. They are refracted through working class experience and interpreted in various ways. The middle class women who fought for the family did so by arguing that women should be «feminine» and restricted to the role of housewife and mother. Working class men saw in the family the prospect of improved living conditions, so they argued for a family wage on the grounds it would improve women’s lot.

Ruling class ideas are never completely hegemonic. In every class society, the exploited and oppressed have fought back against their rulers in one way or another. So no matter how tightly the ruling class try to organise their hold on society, they cannot completely wipe out the ideas and traditions of struggle and resistance which come down to each generation from the past.

Of course there is no iron rule that society will be seething with revolution at any particular point in time. In the last ten years, we have seen a massive shift to the right in the political ideas most current in society, continuing a drift which was identifiable from the mid-seventies. This change in the political climate is underpinned by the Labor government’s talk of «consensus», and demands that workers make sacrifices «in the national interest». As Labor has led the bosses’ attempts to cut living standards and reorganise their economy, workers have suffered a number of defeats and had their trade union organisation weakened. On the one hand we see affirmative action for some women, reflecting gains won during the period when the workers’ movement was on the offensive. On the other, we see no end in sight to violence in the home, as families struggle to cope with worsening living standards, the strain of unemployment, poor health care and the like.

In Britain and the United States and to a lesser extent here, we have seen attacks on abortion rights and gay and lesbian rights. The fact that they have met with a militant and vigorous response shows the situation can be reversed. All of history shows that the exploited and oppressed cannot be kept in submission indefinitely. And history also shows that it is when they begin to fight back that the horrible ideas of capitalism can begin to be broken down, precisely because the circumstances which perpetuate them are ripped asunder. Anyone who saw the women tramways workers on pickets, approaching shoppers for money and support in the lockout by the Victorian Labor government early in 1990 got a glimpse of what we mean.

Tony Cliff has shown the relationship of the high points in epic class struggles and the position of women and the struggle for liberation. A couple of examples will sketch the point here. In the revolution in China, 1925–27, led by the working class in the cities and supported with gusto by the peasantry in the countryside, there were moves to stop the barbarous practices such as foot binding which oppressed women so harshly. In revolutionary Spain, in 1936, a country dominated by the sexism of Catholicism, women could go about among male workers without fear of rape, and participate in the most untypical activities without derision. The very rise of the women’s liberation movement was related to the high level of struggle by the working class in the late sixties, as well as the entry into the workforce and out of the isolation of the home by greater numbers of women. And one of the first demands of the revolution in Romania in 1990 was abortion on demand for women.

Every time there has been a lull in the struggle, ideas of pessimism, ideas which say the working class cannot offer a way forward, are sung from the roof tops. But these kinds of struggles will break out again. The events in Eastern Europe are shaking the world system not just in the East. In every strike, every demonstration of protest, no matter how small, there lies the seed of struggles which could rip capitalism apart. It is not simply a matter of ideas, of education which convinces workers of different ideas. The struggle creates a material reason to change – the need for solidarity in opposition to their rulers can, in certain circumstances, quite rapidly break down the divisions which in other times hold workers back.

The fight for women’s liberation begins there. The idea that men have power over women can do nothing but get in the way. It reinforces the division of sexism. Men are sexist today. But women’s oppression does not equal male power. If we see the fight against sexism as separate from the class struggle, we can easily fall into seeing working class men as an enemy. In reality, they are potential allies. In the seventies when building workers were confident of their union strength the Builders’ Labourers’ Federation (BLF) supported women’s right to work on building sites. Every defence of abortion rights against the Right to Life has received support from large numbers of men. In the mass abortion campaign against Queensland’s Bjelke-Petersen government in 1979–80, men were able to be won to support the struggle, including transport workers at Email, who stopped work to join a picket. In 1986, BLF support for the nurses’ strike in Victoria challenged their sexist ideas about the role of women.

Once we understand that working class men have nothing to gain from women’s oppression, we can see the possibility of breaking them from sexist ideas. Then we can be confident that workers, women and men fighting side by side in solidarity, can begin to change the «existing categories». There is nothing automatic about changes in consciousness in struggle. But with an understanding of the roots of women’s oppression, socialists can intervene around these issues and relate them to the experience of workers’ struggles.

Women are better placed today to fight for liberation than in any time in history. They are no longer simply housewives. They are half the working class and able to exercise the power of that class alongside male workers. Ultimately, it is the struggle of the working class which can destroy the very social structures which gave rise to women’s oppression in the first place.