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Capital, Gender and the Machine

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Abstract:

This essay provides a close reading of *Capital, Volume I*, Chapter 15: “Machinery and Large-Scale Industry.” Part one examines Marx’s theory of the capitalist machine. Under capitalist conditions of production, the machine appropriates the worker’s skill, transforming that worker into an interchangeable adjunct or appendage. At the same time, machine driven industry employs women and children in ever-greater numbers, displacing male hands, and feminizing production. Finally, the machine emasculates the workingman and turns the world upside down. To dramatize this emasculation, Marx uses health and safety reports that rely upon gendered anxieties and masculine fears of the social disorder brought about by liberated women. Thus, I argue, Marx utilizes the gendered anxieties of his audience in order to construct an argument against capitalism. The second part of the paper examines the “invisible threads” that bind factory production to domestic, sweated labor. Marx provides an analysis of sweated labor that connects severe forms of economic exploitation to gender ideology, and he takes great pains to render visible the otherwise concealed labor of women in sweatshops. In telling the story of sweatshops, Marx once again finds women’s labor to be a fundamentally important force in capitalist development. Sweating allows some capitalists to accumulate excess profits through artificially cheapened labor. This early accumulation puts those firms in a position to succeed once factory legislation forces them to centralize production and eliminate their

“outworkers.” Thus, for Marx, women workers are central to the story of capitalists’ accumulation and capitalism’s development. Yet, at the same, *Capital* offers a normative vision of labor that assumes the masculinity of the working population and represses the political agency of women workers. The paper ends by comparing Marx’s fundamental ambivalence toward women workers with the more straightforward “radical paternalism” and gender essentialism of Marx’s contemporary, the U.S. labor leader, William Sylvis. While this comparison highlights Marx’s difference with gender essentialists, nonetheless Marx’s fundamental ambivalence toward the necessity of women industrial laborers leads him to a theoretical blindness regarding the possible militancy of women workers. Even as he rendered visible women’s work in the formal economy, he was unable to see their militancy as workers.

Keywords: Marx, Karl; Sylvis, William; Marxian political economy; labor history; gender; machinery; reification; radical paternalism

Introduction

To write about Marx’s *Capital* is daunting. To write about *Capital* in commemoration of its 150th anniversary, all the more so. My aims, therefore, will be modest. This paper will not address *Capital* in its entirety, its versions and translations, its overdetermined multiplicity of meanings, its historical importance, its influence upon this scholar or that school of thought.¹ Instead, I offer a close reading of one chapter, “Chapter 15: Machinery and Large-scale Industry.” With this reading, I have confined myself to a narrow set of representational, or poetic, problems. Perhaps foremost among them, what V.N. Volosinov calls “the problem of reported speech.”²

“Machinery and Large-scale Industry” provides one of Marx’s most sustained and wide-ranging discussions of working women and the social and economic relations between working class women, men, and children. Near the chapter’s end, Marx theorizes gender construction. Gender identity is not a fixed thing, but an evolving social relation shaped by material cultural transformations: “large-scale industry, by assigning an important part in socially organized processes of production, outside the sphere of the domestic economy, to women, young persons and children of both sexes, ...[creates] a new economic foundation for a higher form of the family and of relations between the sexes....”³ Changes in work life and social experience, Marx argues, transform masculinity and femininity and the relations between these genders. Thus, while he is unable to think beyond the gender binary

masculine/feminine, Marx nonetheless eschews essentialism and proposes a radically constructivist theory of gender relations. But Marx's explicit gender anti-essentialism has a shadow.

In his war against capitalist exploitation, Marx reaches for a variety of rhetorical weapons to capture both the intellect and the affect of his audience. Among the most powerful of these are the health and safety reports written by physicians, social reformers, and government functionaries. But these bourgeois commentators are Nineteenth Century gender essentialists who employ an anxious and misogynistic rhetoric to diagnosis the moral degradations produced by wage-labor. Marx, in turn, uses these reports, and their gendered rhetoric, to underscore capitalism's moral cost. Wage labor makes women independent, gives them control over their sexuality and their leisure time, and generally unsettles "natural" gender relations. In short, despite their incompatibility with his constructivist theory, Marx employs these reports to appeal to the "radical paternalism" that animates his imagined audience.

Labor historian Christine Stansell identifies "radical paternalism" as the ideology that shaped the mid-Nineteenth Century American federation, the National Trades' Union, during deliberations about whether women could be full members of the organization. Although women unionists were active and often militant members of the labor force, the trade federation decided to exclude them.

Thus gender entered working-class politics, woven into a vision of a working-class home supported by men's wages, where women could be free "to perform the duties of the household." ... In other words, the workingmen envisioned a nineteenth-century household not unlike the bourgeois ideal...⁴

But radical paternalism wasn't simply a patriarchal attitude on the part of workingmen. Nor was the working class ideology of domesticity an exact replica of bourgeois attitudes toward women. Rather, industrial experience, poverty, and wage labor influenced the proletarian version of patriarchy.

[It] would be too simple to see the workingmen as emulating genteel ideals of domesticity. ...These men were radicals. They offered a fiery critique of the entire system of capitalist relations. They sought working-class dignity, not

bourgeois respectability.... Their opposition to women's labor...was not a capitulation to bourgeois society but a protest against it.⁵

Because of their own experience of exploitation, Nineteenth Century workingmen resisted the idea that their wives and children would also face the factory. It cut into their hearts, while, at the same time, challenging their masculinity. For them, women factory hands meant the failure of men as husbands, fathers, and protectors. While Stansell situates the origin of this ideology in the anxieties of workingmen, she emphasizes its self-destructive impact on the labor movement, and on the working conditions for women wage laborers. By excluding women unionists from active participation, men reduced the power of their organizations at the very time when women were becoming an increasingly important part of the factory system.

Marx contested gender essentialism, just as he rejected white supremacy. But even as he forged a dialectical view of gender and gender relations, he remained conditioned by the pathologies of his Age. In his chapter on the machine, he charts the emergence of large-scale manufacturing from earlier forms of production, and with that emergence, the displacement of working class masculinity. The machine appropriates the worker's skill, and replaces the "hand itself." Women workers displace male labor; and new working relations disrupt conventions of gender and sexuality. The machine, and large-scale industry, reduce the male worker to the status of a servile slave dealer, while, paradoxically, liberating women from the near slavery of domestic production. But, Marx argues, even as wage labor makes women too independent, they remain, somehow, "pliant and docile," and thus a threat to the labor movement.

This paper is divided into two parts. The first examines Marx's theory of the capitalist machine. Under capitalist conditions of production, the machine appropriates the worker's skill, transforming that worker into an interchangeable adjunct or appendage. At the same time, machine driven industry employs women and children in ever-greater numbers, displacing male hands, and feminizing production. Finally, the machine emasculates the workingman and turns the world upside down. To dramatize this emasculation, Marx uses health and safety reports that rely upon gendered anxieties and masculine fears of the social disorder brought about by liberated women. The second part of the paper examines the "invisible

threads” that bind factory production to domestic, sweated labor. Marx provides an analysis of sweated labor that connects severe forms of economic exploitation to gender ideology, and he takes great pains to render visible the otherwise concealed labor of women in sweatshops. In telling the story of sweatshops, Marx once again finds women’s labor to be a fundamentally important force in capitalist development. Sweating allows some capitalists to accumulate excess profits through artificially cheapened labor. This early accumulation puts those firms in a position to succeed once factory legislation forces them to centralize production and eliminate their “outworkers.”⁶

I end my discussion of *Capital* with the paradoxical fact that while Marx makes women workers central to his narrative of capitalist accumulation and development, he never thinks through the implication of that idea. In *Capital*, “the worker” as a kind of ideal type or intellectual construct, remains, primarily, male. Women are a deviation from type. That being said, Marx was neither a simple gender essentialist, nor a radical paternalist. I thus conclude by comparing Marx with his contemporary, the American labor leader William Sylvis. Sylvis’s critique of capitalism expresses radical paternalism in its purest form. While Marx’s gender politics are not so simple, nonetheless his ambivalence had an impact upon his work. In particular, Marx’s blindness to the centrality of women workers that his own theory identifies, leaves him equally blind to a potentially revolutionary agent of history.

‘the mechanical automaton’⁷

In formal terms, *Capital*’s “Chapter 15: Machinery and Large-Scale Industry”⁸ represents a mirror image of “Chapter 1: The Commodity.”⁹ That earlier discussion begins by introducing elements for the analysis of the commodity – use-value, exchange-value, the money form, – proceeds through logical foreshadowing and development, and concludes with Marx’s masterful discussion of reification, “The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret.” However, in the machine chapter, Marx begins with the reification of human labor (in the form of the machine), and then examines the elements that constitute the material form of that reification. In the details and in the overdetermined effects of the machine system, Marx finds conditions for capitalist development. Perhaps most important, he argues that in contrast to early manufacturing, machine driven “large scale industry” develops through a de-skilling process that brings women and children into the labor force. In fact, Marx’s chapter on the machine makes a two-fold argument, one explicitly

stated, and a second that emerges from his rhetoric and his use of sources. Explicitly, Marx argues that machines represent the reification of human labor power; machines are tools that master their creators. But Marx constructs that former proposition using a set of gendered assumptions and a gendered rhetoric through which the machine emerges as a direct threat to the supposedly masculine character of labor, and to 'normal' gender relations and normalized forms of gender expression.¹⁰ The discussion of the machine thus combines the radical critique of industrial capitalism with gendered anxieties absorbed from bourgeois commentators and from male workers within the labor movement.

Throughout "Machinery and Large-scale Industry," Marx searches for appropriate tropes to capture the machine's sublime power. Some terms he adopts from political economy, some from the mythological canon, others from early science fiction. Thus, in *Capital*, the machine system becomes a "vast automaton" of "Cyclopean dimensions" with monstrous intent.¹¹

An organized system of machines...is the most developed form of production by machinery. Here we have, in place of the isolated machine, a mechanical monster whose body fills whole factories, and whose demonic power, at first hidden by the slow and measured motions of its gigantic members¹², finally bursts forth in the fast and feverish whirl of its countless working organs.¹³

When Marx describes the "slow and measured motions" of giant limbs, until its demonic force "finally bursts forth," this imagery anchors the machine's meaning in the relationship between sexuality and power, and foreshadows the argument of the chapter. Machines absorb worker skill; but more than that, they absorb the vitality of the worker. Marx genders that vitality. Machines absorb worker masculinity, remake men (into drones), and disrupt the normative relationship between the genders.¹⁴

The machine is "a means for producing surplus-value."¹⁵ But machinery produces surplus value in a particular way, by displacing "the hand of man."¹⁶ Marx distinguishes the machinery used by large-scale industry from the tools used in handicraft, domestic production, and early manufacturing. "From the moment that the tool proper is taken from man and fitted into a mechanism, a machine takes the place of mere implement."¹⁷ And once machine production emerges, the mechanical apparatus becomes a fundamental condition for the industrial revolution:

The machine, which is the starting-point of the industrial revolution, replaces the worker, who handles a single tool, by a mechanism operating with a number of similar tools and set in motion by a single motive power, whatever the form of that power.¹⁸

Machine driven large-scale industry produces a new phase in capitalist development. "Manufacture produced the machinery with which large-scale industry abolished the handicraft and manufacturing systems in the spheres of production it first seized hold of."¹⁹ Indeed, "large-scale industry" was crippled as long as manufacture owed its existence to the "personal strength and personal skill" and the "keenness of sight and manual dexterity" of "specialized workers."²⁰ By suppressing these individual attributes, that is, by eliminating skilled workers, machine industry increases efficiency while increasingly turning its human creators into servants. Finally, even those servants disappear into a faceless factory of mechanized workers, tending machines that "produce machines."²¹ The machine displaces human agency, and, Marx suggests through metonymy, the human agent. "The mechanical appliance replaces not some particular tool but the hand itself..."²²

Because of efficiency and because of scale, machine production disrupts and destroys prior forms of production. Workers experience this destruction as a de-skilling. Or, as Marx puts it, "the skill of the worker...passes over to the machine."²³ As handicraft and skilled labor lose value, those workers turn to machines.

The lifelong specialty of handling the same tool now becomes the lifelong specialty of serving the same machine. Machinery is misused in order to transform the worker, from his very childhood, into a part of a specialized machine. In this way...his helpless dependence upon the factory as a whole, and therefore upon the capitalist, is rendered complete.²⁴

The worker confronts the machine "in the shape of capital," as the objectified form of "dead labour... which dominates and soaks up living labour power."²⁵ The machine produces by absorbing the skill and the living labor power of workers, and in that process it transforms workers themselves into parts of "a specialized machine." Finally, the machine manufactures workers.

In handicrafts and manufacture, the worker makes use of a tool; in the factory, the machine makes use of him.... [It] is the movements of the machine that he must follow. In manufacture the workers are the parts of a living mechanism. In the factory we have a lifeless mechanism which is independent of the workers, who are incorporated into it as its living appendages.²⁶

Workers are the “living appendages” of a “lifeless mechanism,” a “mechanical monster” with “demonic power.” This vast automaton destroys workers’ skills, thus rendering them “helpless” and dependent upon the capitalist’s need for machine tenders. The machines turn workers into tools of the machine. Their movements and thoughts follow the mechanism. The workers themselves become mechanized monstrosities.

Let me return to the formal parallels between Marx’s chapter on the machine and his chapter on the commodity. What the money form of the commodity conceptually reveals, the machine system makes material: the universal exchangeability of human labor power. The money form reveals this by making all commodities exchangeable through its universal equivalence. The machine system makes this universality practical by absorbing worker skill, thus making workers exchangeable tools of capital.

However, deskilling, and the necessary interchangeability of labor that follows, emasculates male workers. Machines make handicraft work, and the skill of the largely male handicraft workforce, unnecessary. Machines replace “the hand itself.”²⁷ Metonymically, the “hand itself” is a figure for masculinity. After all, machines replace *men’s* hands even as they replace men *as hands* (e.g. as workers). This displacement of male workers follows from one necessary consequence of machine industry, the “appropriating of the labour of women and children.”²⁸

Along with the tool, the skill of the worker in handling it passes over to the machine... Hence, in place of the hierarchy of specialized workers that characterizes manufacture, there appears, in the automatic factory, a tendency to equalize and reduce to an identical level every kind of work that has to be done by the minders of the

machines, in place of the artificially produced distinctions between the specialized workers, it is natural differences of age and sex that predominate.²⁹

When Marx points to the “natural differences of age and sex that predominate,” he identifies one of the dangers he sees in machine industry. By emasculating workers, machines weaken working class power. Women, as well as children, labor as unskilled machine tenders. And, Marx argues, they are far less likely to resist capital’s exploitation. The “apparently undemanding nature of work at a machine” makes the “more pliant and docile character of the women and children” preferred by employers.³⁰ These supposedly pliant and docile women and children undercut men’s wages and make organizing impossible. “Machinery, by this excessive addition of women and children to the working personnel, at last breaks the resistance which the male workers had continued to oppose the despotism of capital throughout the period of manufacture.”³¹ For Marx, the emasculating power of the machine represents one of the fundamental forces of capitalist development, weakening working class solidarity even as it extends the reach of capital and increases the tendency toward centralization and monopoly. With the advent of large-scale machine-driven industry, independent male workers disappear in favor of mechanized drones, pliant women, and docile children.

In addition to breaking male resistance to capital, Marx argues, this new industrial division of labor has deleterious effects upon women and children workers. There is the direct “physical deterioration” brought about by exposure to machine production, as well as the child and infant mortality resulting from “an unnatural estrangement between [the working] mother and child.”³² As important as these material effects, are the moral effects of machine driven industry. Marx refers the reader to Engels’s account of the “moral degradation which arises out of the exploitation by capitalism of the labour of women and children.”³³ But he also cites other contemporary accounts of these “new female workers” for moral lessons.³⁴

For instance, he quotes at length from Dr. Julien Hunter’s *Sixth Report on Public Health* (1864).

Married women...work in gangs along with boys and girls...
These gangs will sometimes travel many miles from their
own village; they are to be met morning and evening on the
roads, dressed in short petticoats, with suitable coats and

boots, and sometimes trousers, looking wonderfully strong and healthy, but tainted with a customary immorality and heedless of the fatal results which their love of this busy and independent life is bringing on their unfortunately offspring who are pining at home.³⁵

Dr. Hunter combines the trope of the irresponsible working mother with a tacit threat to monogamy, and with an even more insidious danger, inappropriate gender expression, to paint a picture of the maladies of working life for women, and for society in general. Yet even as he points to these maladies, Hunter unwittingly reveals an important fact about proletarianization for women: wage work and industrial occupations liberated some women from the domestic tyranny of fathers and husbands.³⁶ Marx does not offer comment upon the quotation, nor does he seem to notice Hunter's remark that these women "love" the "busy and independent life" made possible by their wage work. However, he adds this comment from a former physician turned factory inspector:

'Happy indeed,' exclaims Mr. Baker, the factory inspector, in his official report, 'happy indeed will it be for the manufacturing districts of England, when every married woman having a family is prohibited from working in any textile works at all.'³⁷

Later, Marx cites a narrative that more centrally foregrounds anxieties about women's gender expression and their working life. The section of the *Children's Employment Commission, Fifth Report* (1866) from which Marx quotes, focuses, first, upon the "great moral degradation" imposed upon young girls working in the mines. Then it turns to young *women* working in the fields. Again, the fears expressed emerge from the perceived independence and non-normative gender-expressions of young women workers.

The greatest evil of the system that employs young girls on this sort of work, consists in this, that, as a rule, it chains them fast from childhood for the whole of their after-life to the most abandoned rabble. They become rough, foulmouthed boys, before Nature has taught them that they

are women. Clothed in a few dirty rags, the legs naked far above the knees, hair and face besmeared with dirt, they learn to treat all feelings of decency and shame with contempt. During meal-times they lie at full length in the fields, or watch the boys bathing in a neighborhood canal. Their heavy day's work at length completed, they put on better clothes, and accompany the men to the public houses.³⁸

Like Dr. Hunter's account, this narrative foregrounds gendered anxieties about women workers and the challenge they pose to normative concepts of femininity. Work makes women independent, rough, and turns them to boys. They become adventurous, without shame, without self-contempt. They have some control over their sexuality and their leisure time. After quoting this report at length, Marx offers a single comment: "That excessive drunkenness is prevalent from childhood upwards among the whole of this class, is only natural."³⁹ Later in the chapter, however, Marx explicitly endorses these findings, referring to the "thoroughly conscientious investigations of the Children's Employment Commission."⁴⁰

Whatever the anxious motives for these reports, they capture an important historical reality. Despite the ravages of exploitation, wage work freed working class women from some domestic strictures. The independent working life opened the possibility for non-normative forms of gender expression. And wages gave them some independence from male authority and some control over their sexuality.⁴¹

As I will argue below, Marx's own approach to the construction of gender and sexuality did not share the gender essentialism found in these bourgeois commentators. But Marx employs the sources as ammunition in his argument against capitalism, and, as such, his rhetoric relies upon a certain radical paternalism he imagines in his audience. In short, radical paternalism becomes a weapon against capitalism, an almost silent subtext that accompanies Marx's systemic analysis of machine production. The rhetorical attack on capitalism represents a "defense" of women and children; and, more importantly, a defense against threats to working-class masculinity.

Capital's machines produce male workers who are themselves "part of a specialized machine." For each male worker, "his helpless dependence upon the factory as a whole, and therefore upon the capitalist, is rendered complete."⁴² In short, men become pliant and docile. Thus, Marx suggests, machine industry emasculates,

feminizes, and infantilizes workingmen. At the same time, proletarianization liberates women from their dependence upon men (now “looking wonderfully strong and healthy, but tainted with a customary immorality and heedless of the fatal results [of] their love of this busy and independent life”). If machine production is dehumanizing, part of this dehumanization involves the inversion of conventional gender relations as mechanization of both masculinity and femininity represses “natural differences of age and sex.”

Finally, Marx warns, capitalism turns the male worker into a “slave-dealer.” “Previously the worker sold his own labour-power, which he disposed of as a free agent, formally speaking. Now he sells his wife and child.”⁴³ In this quotation, and throughout the chapter, Marx repeatedly places women’s labor and child labor in the same category. And here, more explicitly than elsewhere, he makes the meaning of that categorization clear. Men are ‘free agents.’ Neither children, *nor women*, are free; neither children, *nor women*, are agents. The child’s agency belongs to its parents; woman’s agency belongs to men. Both are “pliant and docile.” Both are the workingman’s property, as well as his responsibility.

Thus, to summarize the critique of working women contained in *Capital’s* discussion of the machine: women are too docile, and too independent; too feminine, and too masculine. Further, women are, by implication, servants of Satan. As they displace men in the factories, they weaken the labor movement, and strengthen the demonic power of the capitalist machine over society. Women become appendages of that machine – the hands of the devil.⁴⁴

‘Invisible Threads’

In contrast to the moral outrage expressed by the bourgeois commentators he quotes, Marx offers a systemic social and economic analysis of the relationship between gender and capitalism when he examines ‘domestic’ or sweated labor. Capitalism turns fathers and husbands into slave dealers. On the one hand, these dealers sell their families to the factories. On the other, “invisible threads,”⁴⁵ reaching out from the factory’s machines like monstrous tendrils, embrace domestic workers and transform them into an “industrial reserve force,”⁴⁶ and their homes into “an external department of the factory.”⁴⁷ These “outworkers” are particularly liable to the most extraordinary forms of exploitation. At first, large-scale industry does not eliminate outwork done in the home. But, eventually, through factory legislation, and the centralization that such legislation necessitates, the increasing preponderance of

machine driven industry transforms even these outworkers into wage laborers, liberating them from the near slavery of sweated domestic labor.⁴⁸

Marx examines the condition of women and children outworkers by comparing their lot to workers in industrial factory labor, as well as to workers in modern small-scale and handicraft manufacture. Within each productive formation, exploitation itself takes a specific form. Domestic industry's exploitation is more "shameless" than in handicraft manufacture. And exploitation is more shameless in handicraft manufacture than under industrial capitalism. As Marx puts it:

The exploitation of cheap and immature labour-power is carried out in a more shameless manner in modern [handicraft] manufacture than in the factory proper. This is because the technical foundation of the factory system, namely the substitution of machines for muscular power, is almost entirely absent in manufacture, and at the same time women and excessively children are subjected quite unscrupulously to the influence of poisonous substance. In the so-called domestic industries this exploitation is still more shameless than in modern manufacture, because the workers' power of resistance declines with their dispersal; because a whole series of plundering parasites insinuate themselves between the actual employer and the worker he employs; because a domestic industry has always to compete either with the factory system, or with manufacturing in the same branch of production; because poverty robs the worker of the conditions most essential to his [sic] labour, of space, light and ventilation; because employment becomes more and more irregular; and, finally, because in these last places of refuge for the masses made 'redundant' by large-scale industry and agriculture, competition for work necessarily attains its maximum.⁴⁹

As the new factory system emerges, domestic production at first competes with more technically advanced methods of production. But, as it develops, the factory system itself is able to make use of domestic workers because of their

artificially cheapened labor. Though the outworkers are less efficient than machine tenders, cheapened labor compensates for human frailty. Marx enumerates a number of conditions that cheapen this labor, including “dispersal,” “plundering parasites” (or contractors), irregular employment, etc. In short, domestic production represents a mirror image of industrial factory labor, even as the two forms are bound together by invisible threads.

Compare Marx’s depiction of domestic workers to Engels’ representation of the liberating possibilities of city life and factory work. According to Engels, with the “centralization of population” in cities and factories,

The workers begin to feel as a class, as a whole; they begin to perceive that, though feeble as individuals, they form a power united; their separation from the bourgeoisie, the development of views peculiar to the workers and corresponding to their position in life, is fostered, the consciousness of oppression awakens, and the workers attain social and political importance. The great cities are the birthplace of the labour movements; in them the workers first began to reflect upon their own condition, and to struggle against it; in them the opposition between proletariat and bourgeoisie first made itself manifest; from them proceeded the Trade Unions, Chartism, Socialism.⁵⁰

Just as urban industrial capitalism brings workers together and forges solidarity, resulting in the labor movement and class-consciousness, domestic production isolates workers and individualizes poverty, thus making possible the most severe forms of economic exploitation. Capitalism extracts surplus from these isolated workers through the “cheapening of labour-power” by “sheer abuse of the labour of women and children, by sheer robbery of every normal condition needed for working and living, and by the sheer brutality of overwork and night-work.”⁵¹ But, Marx adds, this kind of sweated labor has “certain insuperable natural obstacles.” When capital reaches those limits, even domestic workers must turn to machinery, and sweated domestic labor eventually becomes a system of sweatshops.

With the introduction of the sewing machine, Marx argues, “we see the factory system proper,” even without factories. “We see middlemen receiving the raw material from the capitalist en chef, and setting to work at sewing machines, in

'chambers' and 'garrets,' groups of from ten to fifty female workers."⁵² Thus, this new factory system of sweated-labor takes root in formerly private residences. So-called "middlemen," or contractors, receive unfinished garments from manufactures. And in dark, stifling tenement rooms, small numbers of workers are crowded together, tending machines.

At the same time, these new women workers, with labor now cheapened by machine production, put their male counterparts in handicraft industry (traditional tailors) out of work.

The wage of those who work with machines rises compared with that of the domestic workers, many of whom belong among the 'poorest of the poor.' The wage of better situated handicraftsmen sinks, however, since the machine is in competition with them. The new machine-minders are exclusively girls and young women. With the help of mechanical force, they destroy the monopoly that male labour had of the heavier work...⁵³

However, these women machine tenders work in relatively small groups and continue to exhibit many of the characteristics of isolated domestic workers. Here Marx suggests a possible explanation of why women workers might appear to him to be pliant and docile. Their experience in domestic production trained them to compliance. Thus, even as they displace male handicraft workers, they are not yet in a position to achieve the kind of collective self-recognition as a class that Engels found among the industrial trade unionists. At first, they carry the household into the sweatshop.⁵⁴ Two forces intervene, and lead to an uneven transition from sweated labour and sweatshops to the near exclusive dominance of large-scale factory production. The first is purely technical. "If, on the one hand, the concentration of many machines in large factories leads to the use of steam power, on the other hand the competition of steam with human muscles hastens on the concentration of workers and machines in large factories."⁵⁵ Capitalists concentrate large numbers of machines in a central location to take advantage of a centralized power source (steam, and later, electricity), and that steam powered business, because of efficiency and scale, drives lesser manufacturers from the market. In order to compete, other capitalists need to utilize the same technological innovation, and so centralized power extends its sway over the economy.

In addition to this technical factor, factory legislation, “the first conscious and methodical reaction of society against the spontaneously developed form of its production process,” also accelerates the concentration of machinery and workers.⁵⁶ “The compulsory regulation of the working day, as regards its length, pauses, beginning and end, the introduction of the relay system for children, the exclusion from the factory of all children under a certain age, etc., necessitate on the one hand more machinery and the substitution of steam as a motive power in the place of muscles.”⁵⁷

Driven by technical necessity, as well as by political agitation and working class organization, industry tends to concentrate production, workers, and machinery, but some domestic production continues to exist as an external department of the factory. Capitalism makes use of traditional gendered assumptions about patriarchal power, and through those assumptions, allows the continued shameless exploitation of outworkers. “As long as factory legislation is confined to regulating the labour done in factories, etc., it is regarded as only an interference with capital’s rights of exploitation. But when it comes to regulate so-called ‘domestic labour,’ this is immediately viewed as a direct attack on patriarchy, or, in modern terms, parental authority.”⁵⁸ Thus,

In factories and places of manufacture which are not yet subject to the Factory Acts, the most fearful over-work prevails periodically during what is called the season, as a result of sudden orders. In the outside departments of factory, workshop and warehouse, the so-called domestic workers, whose employment is at best irregular, are entirely dependent for their raw materials and their orders on the caprice of the capitalist, who, in this industry, is not hampered by any regard for depreciation of his buildings and machinery, and risks nothing by a stoppage of work but the skin of the worker himself [sic]. Here then he sets himself systematically to work to form an industrial reserve force that shall be ready at a moment’s notice; during one part of the year he decimates this force by the most inhuman toil, during the other part he lets it starve for lack of work.⁵⁹

In his discussion of domestic production, Marx demonstrates the interaction of economic processes and capitalism with gendered, cultural concepts. Through its invisible threads, even the most developed industrial capitalism continues to make use of isolated domestic workers. *Patria potestas*, which Marx calls “parental authority,” is, in fact, *paternal* power. And Marx implicitly recognizes such a translation when calls the working class father and husband a “slave dealer.” The workingman owns the labour-power of women and children. And this gendered concept of ownership allows capital to cheapen that labour power. Gendered assumptions become pivotal in a process of early accumulation that will have long-term consequences for capitalist development. Profits accumulate from cheapened labor, giving certain firms an advantage in the marketplace and situating them for eventual concentration and mechanization. And *patria potestas* ensures labor remains cheapened. Those invisible threads are chains forged by masculine domination.⁶⁰

On the other hand, Marx argues that working class and public agitation lead to more factory legislation, and as factory legislation increases its regulatory power over capitalist firms, industrial centralization and capital concentration continue, and so-called “transitional” forms, like domestic sweated production, disappear as the result of the increasing efficiency of large-scale factory production.⁶¹ With the destruction of domestic industry, capital’s capacity for the unlimited exploitation of women and children vanishes. However, even as “the destruction of small-scale and domestic industries...[destroy] the last resorts of the ‘redundant population,’” women continue to supplant men at capital’s machines.⁶² And, as they take men’s places at those machines, the so-called “natural” division of labor turns upside down. “Thus large-scale industry, by its very nature, necessitates variation of labour, fluidity of functions, and mobility of the worker in all directions...does away with all repose, all fixity and all security as far as the worker’s life-situation is concerned.” Finally, by “suppressing his specialized function,” both as a worker, and as a man, capital makes “him superfluous.”⁶³ Just as it destroys the worker’s humanity, capital destroys the worker’s masculinity.

The machine system is the apotheosis of capitalism. As workers’ skills are transferred to the mechanical contrivance, their labor becomes interchangeable. Thus, the machine makes material what the commodity fetish revealed as an ideal construct: the generalized equivalence of human labor power. But in deskilling the largely male artisan workforce, industrial machine production has an emasculating impact upon those workers. The interchangeability of unskilled labor challenges

gendered norms in the division of work, and women, as well as children, now serve in the industrial army. Like the bourgeois commentators he quotes with apparent approval, Marx seems unsettled by wage labor's challenge to gendered conventions.

Nonetheless, Marx ends his discussion of women's work by rejecting conventional notions of gender and sexuality. Men and women are not things. To treat masculinity and femininity as fixed characteristics would be to reify them, to think them through bourgeois categories. Instead, gender roles are dialectical products of social experience. As capitalism destroys old forms of gender expression and old sexual mores, new, liberating forms become possible. In particular, women's experience with industrial labor creates new possibilities for their humanity, and for new "relations between the sexes."

However terrible and disgusting the dissolution of the old family ties within the capitalist system may appear, large-scale industry, by assigning an important part in socially organized processes of production, outside the sphere of the domestic economy, to women, young persons and children of both sexes, does nevertheless create a new economic foundation for a higher form of the family and of relations between the sexes... It is also obvious that the fact that the collective working group is composed of individuals of both sexes and all ages must under the appropriate conditions turn into a source of humane development, although in its spontaneously developed, brutal, capitalist form, the system works in the opposite direction, and becomes a pestiferous source of corruption and slavery, since here the worker exists for the process of production, and not the process of production for the worker.⁶⁴

Even as the "old family ties" are dissolved by capitalism's solvents, Marx imagines a "higher form of family," presumably purged of the forms of economic domination inherent in the old ties. However, Marx defers this "higher form of the family," until, in some imagined future, "the appropriate conditions turn [machine industry] into a source of humane development." In other words, under present conditions, women workers remain a threat to working class masculinity. And, under

conditions of capitalist production, to the extent that machinery 'feminizes' work, working men, in turn, become dependent, like women and children. The machine disrupts the gendered independence of the artisan, and turns him into a dependent, specialized machine, even as factory work and wage labor liberate women from the near slavery of so-called "domestic production."

For the contemporary reader, what is perhaps most striking about Marx's discussion of large-scale industry and the machine is the way women are both central and secondary in the narrative. They are central characters in the story of capitalist development and profit accumulation. Domestic outworks cheapen labor and allow for capitalist accumulation, and, through machine production, women displace male hands. But their experience as workers remains secondary to the male experience of work. This attitude comes out most forcefully in the bourgeois commentators Marx quotes. Through these reports, *Capital* suggests that wage labor is an inherently masculine endeavor, and to the degree that women participate, they are deviants from this normative ideal. While Marx points to new gender relations in some imagined liberated future, he ignores one of the fundamental implications of his argument. Capitalism and industrial production were remaking his contemporaries, women *and* men. According to Marx's own logic, the liberated gender relations that he defers until after the end of capitalism were *already* becoming possible because of women's new social roles and new economic functions. When he writes that under capitalist conditions, work becomes "a pestiferous source of corruption and slavery," he leaves aside an important point implied by his entire argument: women's experience of industrial exploitation, as wage slaves, was simultaneously (and, perhaps, dialectically) a source of liberation (from domestic production) and independence (from male authority and gendered conventions).

Conclusion: Radical Paternalism, Gender, and Agency

As his reflections upon the "higher form" of relations between the sexes demonstrates, Marx was not a radical paternalist, or at least not the sort Stansell finds among nineteenth century American trade unionists. By way of comparison, consider this passage from an 1864 speech by U.S. trade union leader and radical paternalist, William Sylvius.⁶⁵

The subject of female labor is one that demands our attention and most earnest consideration. There are many reasons why females should not labor outside of the domestic circle. Being forced into the field, the factory, and the workshop, (and they do not go there from choice, but because necessity compels them,) they come in direct competition with men in the great field of labor; and being compelled of necessity, from their defenceless [sic] condition, to work for low wages, they exercise a vast influence over the price of labor in almost every department.⁶⁶

Like Marx, Sylvis argues that “female labor” lowers working class wages, that their defenseless condition makes them pliant and docile. But this economic problem, he continues, is minor compared to the moral crisis caused by women workers.

If they received the same wages that men do for similar work, this [first] objection would in great measure disappear. But there is another reason, founded upon moral principle and common humanity, far above and beyond this, why they should not be thus employed. Woman was created and intended to be man's companion, not his slave...She was created to be the presiding deity of the home circle, the instructor of our children, to guide the tottering footsteps of tender infancy in the paths of rectitude and virtue, to smooth down the wrinkles of our perverse nature, to weep over our shortcomings, and make us glad in the days of adversity, to counsel, comfort, and console us in our declining years.⁶⁷

Religiously framed gender essentialism fuels Sylvis's radical paternalism. Wage-labor is incompatible with women's nature. Through this naturalization of a social category, Sylvis ideologically reifies femininity, and, by implication, masculinity. Further, Sylvis's essentialist gender ideology has the paradoxical effect of concealing women's wage work even as it justifies the sweating of family members. While

“females should not labor outside the domestic circle,” paid outwork, of course, takes place *in the home*. Sylvis argues that woman is a companion, not a slave. But his gender essentialism naturalizes the near enslavement of wives and daughters under the regime of domestic production. And the fact is that, even as Sylvis spoke those words, women were already in the industrial work force, they were forming unions, and they were resisting capitalism.⁶⁸ The main impact of excluding them from a more formal role in the National Trades’ Union seems to have been the weakening of the labor movement.⁶⁹

Sylvis’s blindness to women workers, his attempt to essentialize gender in order to “protect” women from themselves, emerged from his anxieties about the impact of capitalism on American masculinity. Republican masculinity demanded independence. But Sylvis’s constant refrain to his audiences in the labor movement was that the centralization of capital, the rise of a moneyed elite, and the assault on organized labor were creating a crisis in which “the wealth of the nation [is] concentrated in the hands of the few, and the toiling many [are] reduced to squalid poverty and utter dependence on the lords of the land.”⁷⁰

Further, capitalist accumulation represented an assault on workingmen’s independence and on workingmen’s ability to provide for their families.

A few years ago men received fair wages in these mills, and were able to live comfortably from their earnings, and to raise and educate their children well; but now, by this downward tendency of the price of labor, by this gradual reduction of wages, it requires the combined labor of the husband, wife, and every child old enough to walk to the factory, for from twelve to fifteen hours a day, to earn sufficient to keep body and soul together. There can be found thousands of human beings, men, women, and children, who are mental, moral, and physical deformities.⁷¹

Monopoly takes away the workingman’s ability to support his family; capitalism makes him dependent upon the lords of the land; and, finally, through this symbolic castration, work itself makes him a “mental, moral, and physical deformity.” Sylvis thus reacts to his anxiety about the failure of working class masculinity by rendering women’s waged work invisible. His ideology serves as a suture covering a very real wound to working class masculinity. And its effect was a political

romanticism that explicitly denied the importance of women to organized labor, and implicitly imagined some primal utopia to which masculine labor might return to reclaim its autonomy.

Marx never suggests some return to an earlier utopia. Indeed, he argues that, as capitalism develops, women become increasingly important as wage laborers, machine tenders, and members of the working class. And Marx's discussion of new gender relations that result from these changed work relations reveals a complex, non-essentialist approach to the social construction of gender and family relationships. Moreover, Sylvis's depiction conceals women's wage labor. Marx, on the other hand, takes pains to illuminate the invisible threads that bind women to both sweated labor and industrial wage work.

What to make, then, of the presence of those other voices in Marx's text? He cites narratives that portray capitalism as a moral crisis for normative gender relations, and he seems to endorse authors who essentialize gender roles and behaviors. Their views are, in short, fundamentally incompatible with the constructive, dialectical approach to gender Marx advocates. Yet, these contradictory voices exist side by side in *Capital*, contesting each other's meanings, and, perhaps, providing some signs of Marx's own ambivalence toward women workers.

Machine driven large-scale industry strips workers of skill, and increasingly employs women in industrial occupations. The implication from this Marxian argument is that women may represent the agents of the revolution he envisions. After all, if gender is not essential, but is shaped, in part, by work experience, proletarian women, as they displace men from industrial jobs, will undergo a transformation in their consciousness, they will "form a power united" against capital.⁷² But Marx never explores the gendered implications of his argument. If he had considered those implications, as well as the evidence that he presents from bourgeois commentators, he would hesitate before calling the working class husband a "slave dealer," and by implication, the working class woman a "slave." In fact, during the industrial revolution, participation in wage labor and participation in the industrial work force gave women new control over their bodies, their leisure, and their lives, and Marx documents some of this transformation. Although he makes women's labor visible, rather than pulling on the invisible threads and unveiling the implications of women's proletarianization, he leaves the knot tied. More than that, he represents women as threats to the labor movement; they break the back of masculine resistance to capital. While Marx sees women working, his ambivalence blinds him to the militancy and self-organization of women resisting capitalism.⁷³ At

the very moment he needed to emphasize women's active presence in the new working class, he quietly erased it.

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¹ While I do not provide a complete review of the literature regarding Marx's *Capital*, in the process of revising this essay I found two sources that anticipate my discussion. See Claudia Leeb, Marx and the Gendered Structure of Capitalism, *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 33, 7 (2007), pp.833-59; Heather A. Brown, *Marx on Gender and the Family: A Critical Study*. (Chicago: Haymarket Publishers, 2013), pp.78-97. (Thank you to David N. Smith for recommending Brown's important work on Marx.) Leeb calls attention to Marx's use of factory inspector reports and their gendered content; and she notes his ambivalence with regard to gender. But she tends to weight one side of that ambivalent equation. Brown's discussion of Marx's seemingly bourgeois moralism is much closer to the spirit of the present inquiry, and provides a far more detailed account of the political economy of the factory system than I have offered here. If I *have* added something to what these prior studies already discovered, it is by refusing to resolve the contradictions in Marx's work, and by searching for the implications in his silences. If those previous studies were attempts to reconstruct Marx's argument in different ways, this essay attends to the elements within Marx's work that unconsciously deconstruct his exoteric arguments. *Capital* produces contradictory meanings that remain in tension with one another. It is this tension, itself, that calls for attention, since unresolvable semiotic contradictions produce potential affects in the field of the real.

² Volosinov, V.N. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Tr. Ladislav Matejka and I.R. Titunik. (Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press, 1973 [1929]), pp.115-140.

³ Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One*. Tr. Ben Fowkes. (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), pp.620-621; see also Brown, *Marx on Gender and the Family*, p.95.

⁴ Stansell, Christine. *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860*. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), p.138.

⁵ Stansell, *City of Women*, p.138

⁶ Cameron, Ardis. *Radicals of the Worst Sort: Laboring Women in Lawrence, Massachusetts, 1860-1912*. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

⁷ Marx, *Capital*, p.544.

⁸ Marx, *Capital*, pp.492-639.

⁹ Marx, *Capital*, pp.125-177.

¹⁰ For an alternative version of this reading of Marx, see Leeb, *Marx and the Gendered Structure of Capitalism*.

¹¹ Marx, *Capital*, p.502, p.506.

¹² Professor David N. Smith (University of Kansas) has pointed out that the German term *Riesenglieder*, translated here as “gigantic members,” might be more accurately rendered as “giant limbs.” (Private correspondence between the author and David N. Smith.)

¹³ Marx, *Capital*, p.503

¹⁴ Marx does not generally use the term “drone” to depict emasculated male workers. On the other hand, his contemporary, William Sylvis, repeatedly uses the imagery of the hive, and drones, to depict contemporary machine production. In Sylvis’s writings, drones are not workers. They are parasitical capitalists: “Our people are being divided into two classes---the rich and the poor, the producers and the non-producers; the busy bees in the industrial hive, and the idle drones who fatten upon what they steal.” Sylvis, William H. *The Life, Speeches, Labors, and Essays of William H. Sylvis* (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen & Haffelfinger, 1872), p.82.

¹⁵ Marx, *Capital*, p.492.

¹⁶ Marx, *Capital*, p.502.

¹⁷ Marx, *Capital*, p.495.

¹⁸ Marx, *Capital*, p.497.

¹⁹ Marx, *Capital*, p.504.

²⁰ Marx, *Capital*, p.504.

²¹ Marx, *Capital*, p.506.

²² Marx, *Capital*, p.507.

²³ Marx, *Capital*, p.545.

²⁴ Marx, *Capital*, p.547.

²⁵ Marx, *Capital*, p.548.

²⁶ Marx, *Capital*, p.548.

²⁷ Marx, *Capital*, p.507.

²⁸ Marx, *Capital*, p.544.

²⁹ Marx, *Capital*, p.545.

³⁰ Marx, *Capital*, p.527. For Christine Stansell’s critique of Marx’s representation of wage working women as “pliant and docile,” see Stansell, *City of Women*, pp.123-124.

³¹ Marx, *Capital*, p.526.

³² Marx, *Capital*, pp.520-521.

³³ Marx, *Capital*, p.522; Engels, Friedrich. *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. Tr. Florence Kelley-Wischnewetsky. (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 1993).

³⁴ The examples I cite are exclusively from Marx’s chapter on the machine. Heather Brown offers a much more extensive catalogue of Marx’s use of sexist commentary throughout volume one of *Capital*. See Brown, *Marx on Gender*, pp.84-88.

³⁵ Marx, *Capital*, p.522.

³⁶ Stansell, *City of Women*, pp.155-192.

³⁷ Marx, *Capital*, pp.522.

³⁸ Marx, *Capital*, pp.593-534.

³⁹ Marx, *Capital*, p.594.

⁴⁰ Marx, *Capital*, p.609.

⁴¹ Stansell, *City of Women*; see also Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).

⁴² Marx, *Capital*, p.547.

⁴³ Marx, *Capital*, p.526.

⁴⁴ Leeb, especially, emphasizes this aspect of Marx's depiction of women. She argues that Marx's "moralistic interventions" were a result of "his fear of women who threaten the stability of male/female opposition." Leeb, *Marx and the Gendered Structure of Capitalism*, p.849. For critique of this position, see Brown, *Marx on Gender and the Family*, pp.92-98.

⁴⁵ Marx, *Capital*, p.591.

⁴⁶ Marx, *Capital*, p.608.

⁴⁷ Marx, *Capital*, p.591.

⁴⁸ Boydston, Jeanne. *Home & Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

⁴⁹ Marx, *Capital*, p.591.

⁵⁰ Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class*, p.133.

⁵¹ Marx, *Capital*, p.599.

⁵² Marx, *Capital*, pp.601-602.

⁵³ Marx, *Capital*, p.601.

⁵⁴ Stansell, *City of Women*, pp.105-129.

⁵⁵ Marx, *Capital*, p.604.

⁵⁶ Marx, *Capital*, pp.610.

⁵⁷ Marx, *Capital*, pp.604.

⁵⁸ Marx, *Capital*, pp.619-620.

⁵⁹ Marx, *Capital*, p.608.

⁶⁰ I do not mean to suggest that Marx endorses the principle of *patria potestas*. In fact, his text makes it clear that he opposes the near enslavement of children and women and the irrational power that men had over families. What I do mean to suggest is that Marx does he recognize, or at least does not acknowledge, the conceptual connection between *patria potestas* and the gendered epistemologies of the bourgeois commentators he quotes with approval.

⁶¹ Marx, *Capital*, p.635.

⁶² Marx, *Capital*, p.635.

⁶³ Marx, *Capital*, pp.617-618.

⁶⁴ Marx, *Capital*, pp.620-621.

⁶⁵ For a discussion of Sylvis's parallel views on race, see Graham Cassano, Labour's 'strange blindness' and the End of Jubilee, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 39, 3 (2016), pp.334-341.

⁶⁶ Sylvis, William H. *The Life, Speeches, Labors, and Essays of William H. Sylvis* (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen & Haffelfinger, 1872), p.119.

⁶⁷ Sylvis, *Speeches*, pp.119-120.

⁶⁸ Stansell, *City of Women*, pp.130-154.

⁶⁹ For more on the labor movements inability to sustain solidarity with feminists and anti-slavery activists during the 19th century, see David Roediger, *Seizing Freedom: Slave Emancipation and Liberty for All* (New York: Verso, 2014), pp.147-198.

⁷⁰ Sylvis, *Speeches*, p.129. For more on Sylvis's republican ideology, see Cassano, Labour's 'strange blindness' and the end of Jubilee.

⁷¹ Sylvis, *Speeches*, p.105.

⁷² Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class*, p.133.

⁷³ Cameron, *Radicals of the Worst Sort*, pp.47-72.