

Marium Sultan

Professor Ellen Oxfeld

Gender, Culture and Power

December 16, 2015

Increasing Surpluses and Decreasing Happiness

Capitalism makes promises. In placing women in the roles of consumers and producers, it promises them a higher quality of life if they participate in the system. The idea of freedom to be yourself and to do what you want that comes from endless varieties of ways to make money and endless products to purchase is enticing. However, the system was not made to bring happiness to all, in fact that is counter productive to its goals. In capitalism there are *capitalists* who own the means of production. For the capitalists to gain in power everyone must be seen as a site of extraction of capital. The generative model of capitalism states that the unceasing energy of capitalism leads to a continual drive to increase surplus. To increase surplus you can increase desire, increase productivity, decrease wages, create more activity by creating new realms of capital, expand geographically, or/and make public things private (Oxfeld Nov 9). None of these benefit the masses, but they do benefit a select few. The exploitation of labor is key, without it labor would not generate surplus. The higher level of exploitation the better. For consumption to increase people must not be satisfied with what they have, and therefore must not be happy if they cannot purchase more.

Looking at case studies from around the world, women are the most exploited group as laborers and a highly tapped into demographic of consumers. I will use the global apparel industry as an example of capital consolidation and worker exploitation and the beauty industry in Taiwan as the generation of a new realm of capital and desire. With the case study in Taiwan I will elaborate on how women gain disposable income, at the expense of other women. Changing track to alternate economic systems, I will then show how socialism failed to change the dynamics of surplus generation, how women still have a lower position in the non-capitalist village of rural Bengal, and give a positive case study of an economy that is beneficial towards women.

Marx defined capitalism as a set of social relations in which production is centered into converting everything possible into capital. Capital is then exchanged for labor and augments itself by the extraction of surplus value. Surplus is created when the total value of things produced by the worker exceed his or her wage. The wage is determined by what maintains the laborer's existence and not by the value he or she creates (Rubin 88-89). In the ideal capitalist scenario decreasing wages and increasing surpluses lead to a consolidation of money at the top.

Engels theorized there was direct correlation between women's participation in wage labor and their status, that through participating in commodity production and surplus generation they could improve both their human and economic status (Mies 178). However, as capitalism is an inherently exploitative system not everyone can win in this game and women are often the ones being exploited the most. Women serve capitalism by doing the work to reproduce and maintain labor (housework, cooking, childcare) free of cost, and then are often also expected to work in wage-labor jobs (Rubin 88-89).

Women are both producers and consumers in the global market. The global apparel industry taps into most of the leading methods of increasing surplus. In order to generate more surplus capital from workers many firms expand geographically to places with the lowest wages and force workers to increase productivity. To get consumers to consume greater amounts they must increase desire for their products. Over time the fashion cycle has sped up which lead to factories having to produce goods faster at the expense of their workers (Collins 55).

Liz Claiborne, the case study of a global capitalist apparel firm used by Jane L. Collins in her book *Threads*, was started and headed by a women (whose name is the name of the company). She wanted to design her own range of clothing for working women. Before her line, women had no option but dark, tailored suits. When she presented her idea to the managers at the company she was working for at the time they liked the idea but refused to let her put her name on it. So she left and established her own firm. She turned out to have hit just the right demographic as more and more women entered the workforce over the next few decades.

Not only were her products made for working women, however, they were also made by working women, albeit women working in very different conditions. In this example one woman has gained extreme power through the exploitation of thousands of others. Liz Claiborne was one of the first companies to source globally, taking into account where the lowest wages were. Quality was also important in the factories she sourced to, so it was highly monitored, using statistical process control (Collins 105-121).

Women make up a majority of the workforce in the global apparel industry (Collins 33). Taylorism, which allows for low wages and high quality goods on a rapid

basis, assumes the existence of a female workforce. Factory owners worldwide believe that women are more docile and therefore more easily molded. Factories that use surveillance-based measures both assume and generate (due to stress) high turnover levels. Under this system there is no need for close relationships with workers or possibilities of advancement (Collins 157).

Karl Polanyi refers to labor as a 'fictive commodity'. He writes that it is a human activity and cannot be separated from life. Workers bring themselves, their needs, and their ideas, to the workplace. The neo-liberal view ignores this and sees labor as purely a commodity (Collins 151). Wages in many factories around the world are far from able to meet the needs of a family. Being provided less than a living wage, workers have to supplement their income by other means. Factory owners justify this by saying that women's earnings by nature are 'supplemental' and not integral to the family. This is often untrue, especially in the case of single mothers (Collins 168). In Mexico, although workers in the apparel sector were mostly female (as they are worldwide) unions have historically excluded women. Women have to work a second shift. If they are married they work all day and then have to take care of cooking, cleaning and childcare at home. They have little time for union activity (Collins 145).

Taipei is a global city full of multinational stores and food chains. It is the hub of trends in national youth culture. Industrialization happened rapidly and class mobility was considered extremely high. Although inequality is rising mobility is still very possible (Adrian 33-34). Before marriage, the early years of working life are considered the time to enjoy consumption. Women and men have high levels of disposable income, all housing costs paid by parents. Both women and men can stay out all day and night,

only coming home to sleep, and purchasing all pleasures to their hearts content (if they were allowed to be content) (Adrian 83).

Traditional marriage was thought of as duty but now one is meant to pick marriage and enjoy doing so (Adrian 93). After one has chosen to get married the first major step is booking the bridal photo package. Starting in 1990 the number of photographs couples were expected to buy increased yearly. Bridal salons competed with each other in offering the biggest and best photographs. The cheapest packages started at \$1000 but many couples thought that buying the cheapest was not good enough. Average prices at elite salons were \$4000. These packages reflected status competition; each couple, one person in each couple, or the family of each couple (in different couples different parties did the insisting) wanted to show off their wealth, engaging in competitive consumption. Brides become products to the salons and the process is standardized as much as possible without seeming standardized (Adrian 50-55). This is the trick in today's world of flexible accumulation- people believe mass produced products reflect them personally. Couples were made to believe that if they did not have this visual representation of their romance it was not real enough (Adrian 71)

Taiwan brides are extensively made-up for their bridal photographs and their marriage. They undergo such a transformation that even those who know them well may have trouble recognizing them. When Adrian asked the brides why they spent so much time and money on makeovers she often received the answer "girls love beauty". Bridal makeup is not at all similar to everyday styling and is heavily influenced by conformity. Like marriage, it is a duty whose omission can face social repercussions, but at the same time the women are expected to not only do it, but want to do it. (Adrian 148-149)

In Taiwan the desired look is that that comes from Western mass media. Some claim the power of the beauty industry has not permeated every sphere of life, but this is perhaps because Taiwan has only recently entered the sphere of global capitalism. Up until a generation ago women were valued on the marriage market for being hard-working and dedicated, rather than being beautiful. Adrian writes that only directly before and after weddings do women focus so much on appearance. However, she also notes that there are beauty practices they subscribe to daily. In the 1990s although makeup was considered related to promiscuity, "invisible" beauty practices such as cleansers, moisturizers, skin bleaching products, and cosmetic surgery were common (Adrian 149-164).

Naomi Wolf writes that fashion magazines and mass media visually censor natural bodily features, refiguring the idea of how women should look. This leads to women feeling their own bodies and appearances are inadequate, and spending time and money attempting to remedy this. Having control over their bodies can become an obsession for women and lead to eating disorders and lower self-esteem. Physical divergence from the norm can be considered a 'moral failure' (Adrian 151-153).

Advertisements and the beauty industry cultivate a "pedagogy of defect" argues Susan Bordo (1997). Action is led by desire and desire is socially constructed. The expansion of capitalism requires an increase of desire for consumption to drive it. Consumer capitalism cannot allow anyone to be satisfied with what they have. The human body is a space of nearly unlimited innovation of defects and remedies for these defects (Adrian 151). Women as consumers have been manipulated and exploited to

drive them to spend more capital on products they didn't need before they were told they needed them.

After marriage, the two things that are valued most in family life in modern Taipei are the accumulation of wealth and the birthing of sons. Women are expected to produce income and contribute economically to the family (Adrian 99). As wage-labor has increased the relation between family-life and work life has decreased in contrast to the past of family farms and home industries (Adrian 106).

While women work, they leave their children with their parents, overwhelmingly their mothers, or with maids if they can afford it. Even though the young married women are occupying outside working roles, ultimately childcare falls to some woman, be it their mothers or their nannies (Adrian 100). Nannies are often Filipina maids who are treated terribly, have very low wages and no legal rights (Adrian 101). They help in the capital production system but face a low quality of life and under-compensation. The unpaid labor of grandmothers and underpaid labor of Filipina maids is necessary for the system to work where middle and upper class women in Taiwan can earn disposable income.

Husbands are still expected by their mothers and by society to occupy strict gender roles and not contribute to housework or childcare. This is further proof of the low value placed on what is considered 'women's work'. (Adrian 104)

Socialism promised women's liberation, either as part of the general revolution (as in the Soviet Union) or as its own initiative (as in China), however this liberation rarely changed the fundamental setup of women being exploited for either unpaid or underpaid labor (Mies 177). Engels saw women's entry into the wage-labor workforce as central to their 'liberation from patriarchal bondage' (Mies 178). He believed that as capitalism

made women and men equal as propertyless wage workers they both will be liberated through the same socialist revolution. After the revolution when women enter wage-labor there will be a collectivization of private domestic labor and childcare. An ideological, not economic struggle will make men and women equal (Mies 178-179).

In the Soviet Union, China, Cuba, and Tanzania efforts were made for women to enter 'social production' as opposed to private production in their households. In all these four countries women had to function in the dual economy, both doing private work in the household and social work outside it (Mies 180). In all these countries there is still the sexual division of labor, where women take on most non-wage work (Mies 194). In many of these countries the economy was divided into two segments, one was a socialized formal sector dominated by wage-labor, and the other was a private informal sector that produced goods for sustenance and exports at lower costs and worker remuneration. Those who work in the private sector are usually women, so they continued to be exploited by capitalist structures even in socialist states (Mies 197). According to scientific socialism a rapid development of productive forces was the only way out of poverty, to this end they couldn't treat all people equally with fair wages. After the era of colonization, there was a need for an exploited people in the accumulation process, and this fell to the women (Mies 202). Ultimately under this dual system women were still subjected to the same exploitation as they were under capitalism.

Sarah Lamb wrote ethnography based in a village in rural Bengal, where the economic system was a family-centered sustenance economy. Capitalism was on the periphery; it was what people who left the village to go to the city participated in. Sometimes those who left sent money back, but that system was not part of village life,

and in fact looked down upon for disrupting traditional life (Lamb 90). Unlike in the socialist case, this case study showed a strong disconnect from the systems of surplus and worker exploitation. This did not mean that women necessarily had better lives than they would under capitalism.

Women, especially young married women, are consigned to a specific status in their household. They are expected to do household tasks and obey men and their elders. There is little to no agency in the choice of work they must perform. The sexual division of labor kept them in the household, and dependent on men.

All women before menopause have to go through repeated purification rituals, are considered easily tainted and in danger of tainting others. Premenopausal women's bodies are thought to need control. This is done through physical isolation, modest clothing, 'cooling' diets. As women age they are thought of as less tainted and more closed, so they are allowed more freedom. One can compare this to the finding of flaws in women by the beauty industry, except that it remains constant and there is a relation of people to each other and tradition, rather than a relation of people to capital. There is no expectation that there will be any new flaws found in the future, and there is no need to buy any products to the end of this control (Lamb 191-197).

In all economic systems women may, and often do, have a lower status than men, have to do less valued work, and are considered in need of control. Feminist anthropologists have found a systematic undervaluing of women's work across societies (Peacock 343). However, the difference in capitalism is that the system requires constant expansion, and the dominant tie to be between people and capital, not between people and people. Sarah Lamb found that the main relationships people have are with each

other. Family ties and duty to the family are of utmost importance. Mutuality is expected. Every member of the family is expected to take care of other members (Lamb 67). The traditions of the village remain constant. There is no thought that women will have a different position in the future. They have the lowest position, and then are respected more as they age. The work does not change; there is not a need for more strenuous labor over time. Unlike in capitalism, as long as the family can sustain itself (which may be a problem at times), no expansion is necessary. This does not mean that change could not be beneficial, but in this case it is the traditions and the cultural beliefs about gender, rather than the basic economic system that create inequalities.

What Judith K. Brown found from her ethnohistoric research on Iroquois women was that they enjoyed a higher status than women in other tribes. She discovered a case where the economic system so favored women that they also gained political power due to it. They had power over basic resources and important decisions. Matrons, a position all women would aspire to, had the power to influence the makeup and decisions of the Council of Elders although they could not serve on it (Brown 238).

Women worked together in the fields and the labor was not difficult. They could work at the pace they wanted, in contrast to workers in, for example, the apparel industry who were squeezed for productivity. The land was in reality communally owned but it was registered under female names, so women nominally owned the means of production (Brown 246). There was no division of capitalists and workers. Those who worked the land also owned it. Hospitality was customary and no one went hungry (Brown 247). There was no competition among people for wealth or resources as they all worked as a community. Under capitalism the individual is the main unit, and his or her relation to

capital is his or her primary relationship. Food distribution seemed to have been controlled by the matrons (Brown 248). They supplied the essential provisions for war and were therefore able to have control over that realm in this manner (Brown 249). Matrons also controlled the wealth of the tribe through their control of stored food. They controlled the factors of production and the food produced and this gave them political power (Brown 250).

A non-capitalist system can have sharp gender inequalities, as is seen in rural Bengal, or not as among the Iroquois. A capitalist system cannot avoid having some sort of inequality; there will always be disparity between classes, even if this is not divided on gender lines. However, coming from a history of a ingrained idea of the sexual division of labor, in every capitalist society when women enter the workforce they have two jobs, one at home and one at work. Men are still not expected to do housework or childcare in any of the case studies we looked at, but women are expected to do it in addition to wage labor. Women are the ideal subjects of exploitation as they produce surplus from unpaid housework, and further surplus from underpaid wage-labor. The underpaying of wage labor is often associated with gender justifications (like saying women's wages are 'supplemental', and assuming women will not unionize) (Collins, Mies, Lamb, Brown).

In using women as consumers, insecurities are capitalized upon. Companies use the desire for romance and acceptance, and the fear of rejection and imperfection, in order to sell more goods. Fashion and beauty companies tell women and men that they need certain products in order to have a certain lifestyle. Before Liz Claiborne, all women wore the same clothes to work, when now that is unacceptable. Everyone has to crave uniqueness out of mass-produced items and stay in line with the ever-changing fashion of

the day. Women in Taiwan have cosmetic surgery on their eyelids to look more like Western women, because they are told that is what will make them more attractive and therefore ensure a better life and romance (Collins, Adrian).

Capitalism can never lead to equality due to its very set up: although some women can become rich and enjoy a high status due to their relation to capital, others will always be exploited to make this happen. Even for women with capital, happiness may still be elusive because it runs contrary to the goals of the system, you don't increase your desires and purchase more if you are already content.

Socialism in practice failed to make a change in the dynamics of gender-based exploitation, because each socialist country kept up a capitalist sector where workers were exploited even more than in some capitalist countries, and the workers used in this sector were mainly women. Women also did the unpaid housework, helping the surplus generation (Mies).

The sustenance economy of the Iroquois, with communally owned land and decision-making power in the hands of both men and women, allowed a life with rights and contentment (Brown). However, the sustenance economy in the village studied by Sarah Lamb did not lead to equality between men and women. Women were relegated to housework and did not have property or decision making rights (Lamb). Rubin writes that in any evaluation of women's power one must realize the interdependence of sexuality, economics and politics (Rubin 104). It is not only the basic economic system, but the cultural, economic and political set-up of gender divisions that ultimately determine women's status and happiness.

Works Cited

- Adrian, Bonnie. *Framing the Bride*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003. Print.
- Brown, Judith K. "Iroquois Women: An Ethnohistoric Note" *Toward an Anthropology of Women*. Ed. Rayna Reifer. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975. pp. 235-251. Print.
- Collins, Jane. L. *Threads: Gender, Labor and Power in the Global Apparel Industry*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003. Print.
- Lamb, Sarah. *White Saris and Sweet Mangos: Aging, Gender and Body in North India*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000. Print.
- Mies, Maria. *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour*. London and New York: Zed Books Ltd. pp. 175-204. Print.
- Peacock, Nadine R. "Rethinking the Sexual Division of Labor: Reproduction and Women's Work among the Efe." *Gender at the Crossroads of Knowledge: Feminist Anthropology in the Postmodern Era*. Ed. Micaela di Leonardo. Berkeley: University of California Press. 339-360. Print.
- Rubin, Gayle. "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the "Political Economy" of Sex." *Toward an Anthropology of Women*. Ed. Rayna Reifer. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975. pp. 157-210. Print.