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Capitalism and the Transforming Family Unit: A Marxist Analysis.

Lisa Healy

Psychology and Sociology

This paper is concerned with the manner in which Marx envisages the nuclear family unit as being designed to support the continuity of the capitalist system and the positions of privilege it perpetuates. The suitability of the nuclear family structure for capitalism can in turn be utilised as a basis for understanding the manner in which the alternative family formation of lone parents, are constructed as an 'other' in society. It will be argued that discourses and state policies disadvantage lone parents, constructing them as an economic liability to the capitalist economy, which in turn operates to preserve capitalist interests by obscuring the structural barriers which impede workforce entry for this group.

Introduction

Macro-sociological theorising of the family has venerated its role as a fundamental institution and as a locus for understanding the structural basis of society (Jackson 1999, p.160). The special place afforded to the nuclear family in the Irish Constitution affirms its position at the nucleus of Irish society and as a foundation for the Irish national identity (O'Connor 1998, p.89). However, significant transformations in the structure of the Irish family have characterised modernity, with a distinct trend towards lone parent and other alternative family arrangements emerging in recent decades (Central Statistics Office 2009a; Combat Poverty Agency 2006). For instance, lone parents now account for 18 percent of families in the state; an increase of 80 percent over the past two

decades (Central Statistics Office 2009a). Consequently, the 'family' is now a highly contentious concept to define (Nock 1992, p.39).

This paper begins by initially examining the family in its nuclear formation, which consists of heterosexual parents sharing a monogamous relationship and their dependent children, whom occupy a residence independent of extended kinship (Abercrombie, Hill and Turner 2000, p.243). Marxist theory focuses upon the instrumental role that the nuclear family plays in ensuring the continuity of capitalism (Harris 1969, p.93; Nock 1992, p.40), which is saliently evidenced by inherent power disparities in the nuclear family's structure (Marx and Engels 1976, p.52) and also, in terms of its ideological supports of capitalism (Marx and Engels 1976, p.80). In the course of this paper, the core tenets of Marxist theorising of the nuclear family will be explored and will in turn, be used as a basis for understanding the position of disadvantage borne by lone parents under the capitalist state (Marx and Engels 1976, p.46).

Marxism

Marxist theory envisages capitalist society as a site of inequality and conflict (Best 2003, p.49). Accordingly, Marxism proposes that society fails to represent a system of interdependent institutions and alternatively envisages the economic system assuming paramount importance in society, with all other institutions (the family included) subservient to its operation and maintenance (Marx and Engels 1974, p.49).

In theorising the family, the works of Marx (1818-1883) and his colleague Engels (1820-1895) are inextricably linked (Nock 1992, p.10). Their theoretical focus pivots from the identification of the conditions upon which the nuclear family was created to assist the operation and reproduction of capitalism over time and the inherent inequalities it perpetuates (Marx and Engels 1976, p.46). I

will argue that the nuclear family facilitates the continuity of the capitalist project, primarily through power disparities in its structure (Marx and Engels 1976, p.52), the reproduction of workers (labour power) (Engels 1986, p.96) and its ideological support of capitalism (Marx and Engels 1976, p.80).

Inequality, exploitation and the division of labour

Marx asserts that the intrinsic inequalities of capitalist industrial society originate in class relations (Marx and Engels 1974, p.82). He identifies the manifestation of a dual class based stratification system, whereby the class in which one resides, is determined by one's relationship to the means of production. The ruling bourgeoisie (capitalist class) own the means of commodity production and in turn, employ the proletariat wage labourers whom are necessitated to sell their productive capacity (labour power), as a means to survive (Marx and Engels 1967, p.80). The proletariat are provided with a wage which does not equate with the exchange value of the commodity they produce in the marketplace (Marx 1974, p.317). Consequently, they are in essence subject to exploitation by the capitalist, who is in pursuit of profit maximisation (Marx and Engels 1967, p.87).

As an element of this theoretical premise, Marx and Engels propose that gendered role disparities reflect oppressive and exploitative relations which permeate family life (Marx and Engels 1976, p.46; Shaw 2007, p.380). Here, a class based analysis is superimposed to delineate the operation of familial power differentials, upon two core levels: control of women's sexuality and the gendered division of labour (Engels 1986, pp.104-105).

Marx and Engels regard this nuclear family arrangement as a derivative of class based economic conditions: the emergence of private property (Engels 1986, p.23). Consequently, it is perceived that the predominate aim of controlling

women's sexuality by way of monogamous marriage, entails the propagation of offspring of undisputed paternal lineage (Engels 1986, p.92). As property is transmitted inter-generationally along male lines, the reproduction of legitimate heirs enables families to sustain their concentration of wealth, by reproducing the societal class stratification structure in each succeeding generation (Engels 1986, p.102).

The woman's entrance into this legal monogamous marriage bond is viewed as analogous to the contract to which the proletariat enlists when surrendering their labour power to the capitalist (Engels 1986, p.103). Thus the power asymmetries manifesting in marriage place the man in a position of supremacy and the woman in a position of exploitation, synonymous to the relationship between the capitalist and proletariat respectively (Marx and Engels 1974, p.52). Not alone does this exercise of control over women's sexuality enable the propagation of legitimate heirs (Engels 1986, p.106) but furthermore, ensures the reproduction of the next generation of workers, at a lower cost to capitalist forces (Ritzer and Goodman 2003, p.471). In essence, it is proposed that the first 'class' opposition corresponds with the antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage, expressed in the man's exclusive supremacy over the woman's sexuality (Engels 1986, p.105).

The second form of familial power differentials operates in the gendered division of labour, which is again facilitative to the operation of capitalism. In forming a class based distinction between the operation of the division of labour in bourgeois and proletariat families (Engels 1986, p.105), Marx and Engels, account for class biases inherent in the Parsonian-functionalist theoretical

framework² (Parsons 1949, p.20). It is suggested that bourgeois families represent the single breadwinner arrangement; whereby, the husband-father secures paid employment in the workforce, with the wife-mother rendered responsible for family subsistence through the exercise of domestic tasks and childrearing (Engels 1986, p.104). In proletariat families by contrast, it is customary for both men and women to enter paid employment, due to economic necessity (Marx and Engels 1967, p.88; Engels 1986, p.105). Yet, in the latter case women remain unprivileged in the workforce, in terms of lower pay and predominant exclusion from higher echelon positions, often the justification is that their wages are supplementary to that of the husband (Irving 2008, p.175). Furthermore, the woman's unpaid responsibility for domesticity is predominantly sustained, which is facilitative to capitalist interests, as it renders the state free from the responsibility of such provision and also relieves the capitalist from granting higher wages to workers for the purchase of household services (Tovey and Share 2003, p.244; Engels 1986, pp.104-105).

The entwinement of capitalist interests and state policy is saliently reflected in Article 41.2.2 of the Irish Constitution, which expresses women's natural vocation as residing in the home (Lentin 1998, p.11) and renders invisible alternatives to the nuclear family form (Lentin 1998, p.5). State policy can thus be construed as operating to further safeguard the male breadwinner model and the hegemony of the nuclear family which underpins the capitalist project (Luddy 2005, p.185). In essence, women's domestic labour is a vital contribution to the production of marketplace commodities, as it permits the

² Functionalist theorist Talcott Parsons focuses upon a male breadwinner nuclear family model primarily associated with the bourgeois class, thus failing to account for proletariat families whereby both men and women enter paid employment.

capitalist to extract surplus value³ in the marketplace and can hence, be construed as unpaid labour “performed for the capitalist” (Tong 1989, pp.66-69). Thus, whilst wage workers are exploited in a direct manner, women are exploited indirectly, as they remain unpaid for the value of their domestic labour which assists the yield of a surplus value in the first place. I would argue that the gendered division of labour exhibits the second manner in which women across classes are subject to capitalist oppression, through the exploitation of domestic labour and relative economic dependency upon men (Engels 1986, p.104; Ritzer and Goodman 2003, p.471).

However, it is imperative to note that Marx did not envisage the labour force as impervious to universal participation by women. Rather, he recognised all women as an available reserve army of labour, to be utilised as temporary additional workers, at times of economic prosperity or wartime (Marshall 1994, p.53). From a capitalist perspective, the available reserve army possesses a further monetary value, as it prevents potential worker’s wage inflation at times of economic expansion, whereby, increased costs of labour power would inevitably hinder the maximum accumulation of capital (Ritzer and Goodman 2003, pp.471-472).

In instances where the ‘reserve army’ is no longer required, the naturalism ideology which defines women as domestic childrearing beings, can be re-invoked in order to justify and encourage their reinstatement to the domestic realm (Shaw 2007, pp.386-387). This perception would initially appear to contradict the current situation in Ireland, where (as a result of the economic recession) more men than women are becoming unemployed (Central Statistics

³ Surplus value refers to the value remaining once the worker’s daily costs of subsistence (labour power) have been subtracted from the value of the commodity he produces. This value represents the capitalist’s ‘source of profit’ (Scott and Marshall 2005, p.351).

Office 2009b). However, this scenario can simultaneously be regarded as beneficial to the present conditions of capitalism and the preservation of profit maximisation. I would argue that the higher levels of women (who predominantly work in lower paid occupations) maintaining their employment in the labour force, is actually beneficial to the capitalist system as it provides a lower cost to capitalism than the employment of men currently can (Marx 1974, p.320).

Ideology and socialisation

Marx views the family as a key institution of socialisation and primarily concerns himself with the nature of the beliefs which are cultivated (Josephs 2006, p.13). He contends that the beliefs disseminated within the family are representative of the interests of the ruling class bourgeoisie; sinisterly framed as representing the common interest of all society and its members (Marx and Engels 1976, p.180). For instance, the transmission of meritocratic ideologies attributes ones success or failure to attain upward social mobility, to dispositional factors, as opposed to the inequitable material structure of society (Crompton 1999, pp.109-110). Such ideologies are not in the proletariat's interests, as they proliferate a shared social understanding, which consolidates power as a preserve of the dominant capitalist class and obscures the inequalities which permeate social life (Marx and Engels 1974, p.66). The preservation of the status quo consequently, inhibits the development of the class consciousness which Marx deems necessary to usurp the capitalist order and affix a classless, socialist utopia in its place (Marx and Engels 1967, p.35).

This pattern is also applicable at another level within the family through the ideological perpetuation of gender disparities in power, which enables men to maintain their position of domination in the nuclear family household (Marx and Engels 1974, p.54). For instance, the ideological coercion of women to

believe that the role of wife / mother represents their natural destiny ensures that the nuclear family is preserved as the “ideal” family form, despite its inequitable structure (Duncan, Edwards, Reynolds and Alldred 2004, pp.258-259; Muncie and Wetherell 1995, p.61). This produces a magnitude of benefits for capitalism, as it encourages women to be unhesitant in submitting to the unpaid domesticity, which serves both commodity and social production for the capitalist project (Marx and Engels 1974, p.70).

To complete the familial ideological loop, Marx and Engels regard societal exclusion of children from entrance into the labour force (Marx and Engels 1967, p.100) as a measure to foster the child’s internalisation of parentally conveyed capitalist ideologies (akin to those aforementioned), for an extensive period of time (Share, Tovey and Corcoran 2007, p.246). Hence, the next generation are reared and moulded to be obedient and productive workers; the very values which are of maximum benefit to future employers and the continuity of capitalism over time (Share et al. 2007, p.247). This conception may be critiqued for reducing familial interaction and the act of childrearing to a mere sinister service of capitalism to which individuals subsume (Barrett 1991, p.99); as opposed to an enriching eclectic process, which functionalist Parsons, rendered so fundamental and held in such high esteem (Parsons 1968, p.40). However, Marx does not disregard the proposition that the socialisation process harbours positive dimensions; rather, he merely elucidates its underlying implications which assist the maintenance of inequalities inherent in the capitalist system over time (Marx and Engels 1974, p.66).

The myth of welfare dependency and the construction of lone parents as the ‘undeserving poor’

Lone parent families comprise “one parent together with one or more usually resident never married children” (Central Statistics Office 2002 cited in Conroy

and O’Leary 2005, p.25), the vast majority of which are headed by women (Central Statistics Office 2009a). On the basis of the aforementioned instrumental role which the nuclear family has for capitalism, a Marxist analysis can be further applied to understand the manner in which unconventional families, deemed to be less facilitative to the capitalist project, are accordingly, disdained as a “burden” to the wider “conformist” society (Adair 2001, p.455; Knijn, Martin and Millar 2007, p.638). This is saliently applicable to the case of lone parents, who are subject to extensive homogenising stereotyping, which obscures the diversity of entry routes into lone parenthood (OPEN 2006, p.3). The pervasive stigmatisation, encompasses a construction of lone parents as an economic liability, due to low workforce participation rates, patterns of welfare dependency and a less significant contribution to the capitalist economy, in comparison with the “decent”, members of ‘conformist’ society (Adair 2005, p.823; Culleton et al. 2005, p.3; Linne and Jones 2000, p.63).

A Marxist analysis discloses the inherent political and capitalist agendas of discourses, which operate as a mechanism of social control and to preserve capitalist interests (Millar 1996, p.110; Lens 2002, p.140). In essence, the manner in which state policy is organised can be conceived as enveloping two qualitatively different discourses, which both operate to stigmatise lone parents, their reliance upon welfare, and their predominant location at the lower echelons of the income hierarchy (Culleton et al. 2005, p.3; Edwards and Duncan 1996, p.115).

The first discourse uniformly denigrates lone parents as “undeserving” welfare recipients, despite their diversity of entry routes, which is subsequently, reinforced by the state through insufficient welfare payment provisions (Bergmann 2004, p.111; Lens 2002, p.144; OPEN 2006, p.3). The dissemination of “New Right” ideologies of self-sufficiency can be strategically

used to divert public attitudes away from supporting state provision of services, and placing the onus upon the individual to attain their own income (Culleton et al. 2005, p.3; MacGregor, 1999, p.110). This coupled with meritocratic ideologies, cultivates a shared social construction of lone parent welfare recipients, as solely responsible for their position, rather than as a consequence of the structural barriers which impede entry into the labour market (Doras Bui and Northside Partnership 2004, p.13; Hardey and Crow 1991, p.4).

From a Marxist perspective, the dissemination of discourses advocating labour as the key to rupturing the cycle of dependency (Adair 2005, pp.823-824; Linne and Jones 2000, pp.62-63), reflects the unequivocal aim of the capitalist state; to provoke lone parents' participation in the competitive workforce. This outcome is furthermore achieved, ideologically through denunciations against lone parents, and economically, due to financially unfavourable welfare payments (Albelda, Himmelweit and Humphries 2004, p.1; Lens 2002, p.143; Linne and Jones 2000, pp.67-68). This process deters lone parents from reliance upon the state for financial support, and ensures that potential public resistance towards the state for its inadequate welfare provision is attenuated (Millar 1996, p.110). In this manner, the state in conjunction with the capitalist, values lone parents solely in terms of their labour power; rendering unemployed, childrearing lone parents as an uneconomical societal "other" (Culleton et al. 2005, p.37).

The second discourse is patriarchal in nature. It ensures that those who manage to enter the labour market remain trapped by punitive policy strategies; sustaining their typification as non-conformist to the male breadwinner ontology of the capitalist family (Edwards and Duncan 1996, p.115). For instance, to qualify for the Family Income Supplement (FIS) and Supplementary Welfare Allowance (SWA), a lone parent must work for at least 19 hours and not exceed 30 hours per week (Citizens Information Board 2009;

Culleton et al. 2004, pp.78-80). This concentrates lone parents in low-paid part-time or contract work, whilst impeding potential mobility to higher echelon income positions due to the potential loss of welfare payments or secondary benefits such as a medical card (Duncan et al. 2004, p.255; Hardey and Glover 1991, p.90). This assurance of a continuous pool of low paid workers produces a crucial advantage for the capitalist economy. An advantage which is synonymous to that attained by the maintenance of the female “reserve army” in employment during the current economic recession; and the extraction of enhanced profit due to lower costs of labour (Lens 2002, p.140; Marx 1974, p.320).

The impact of increased labour force participation rates by lone parents extends further, to the state. The economic benefits which ensue are two-fold, as it ensures the generation of tax income is enhanced and welfare expenditure diminished (Millar 1996, p.110). The present government initiatives aiming to incorporate those in receipt of the minimum wage into the income-related tax system, evidences another attempt by the Irish state to maximise an available pool of tax revenue at the lowest income echelons (Office of the Revenue Commissioners 2009). I would argue that state policy can thus be viewed as initiating multifaceted attacks upon lone parents, by aiming to reprimand them as an alternative family arrangement, dissuade them from seeking welfare entitlements and oppressing those who do (Culleton et al. 2005, p.37; Lens 2002, p.143).

Family change, societal change

Reappraisal of a core tenet of Marxist theory provides a basis for eradicating social disadvantage associated with the family unit. In his *Communist Manifesto* (1848) Marx purports that the oppression of the proletariat would become so severe, that it would lead to the eventual formation of a class consciousness,

necessitated for the usurpation of the exploitative capitalist system (Marx and Engels 1967, p.95). Similar societal struggles are evidenced between lone parents and wider society, as lone parents presently represent a rising alternative to the nuclear family hegemony in Irish capitalist society (Knijn et al. 2007, p.638). Moreover, societal struggles are exhibited in miniature form within the nuclear family unit itself, through the man's supremacy, which the woman is often without the power to overcome (Marx and Engels 1974, p.52).

As Marx viewed the abolition of capitalism as inseparable from the abolition of the nuclear family (Marx and Engels 1967, p.100), he conceded that in order to usurp the capitalist order, all forces contributing to it, the monogamous family and private property included, must also be made obsolete (Marx and Engels 1967, p.96). The abolition of the monogamous nuclear family as an economic unit of society is identified as the means to emancipate women from domestic labour confinement (Engels 1986, p.199); fostering participation of all women in paid labour, in the process enabling the exercise of human potential (Marx and Engels 1976, p.54). Ultimately for Marx, the elimination of the nuclear family as the "ideal" unit eradicates women's subordinate relationship to men (Marx and Engels 1967, p.101) and at a further level, may serve to propel lone parents from prior demonisation, to a position which is independent from capitalist-political authority (Adair 2005, p.829; Hardy and Crow 1991, p.7). Most pertinently, Marx's socialist state aspires to ensure the equitable distribution of power and resources, in order to benefit all families and their members across gender and class disparities, which permeate Irish society (Bergmann 2004, p.3; Marx and Engels 1967, p.35).

Conclusion

Marxism has provided a rich conceptual legacy to sociology (Nock 1992, p.40). An analysis of the family in capitalist society is provided, which is both

powerful and pervasive, as it illuminates the nuclear family's instrumental role in the preservation of capitalism and the inherent inequalities it perpetuates (Marx and Engels 1976, p.46). Marxist premises concerning the inequitable arrangement of society are readily applicable to understanding the marginalisation of lone parents. I have argued that demonising discourses and punitive state policies are embedded with capitalist and political agendas of profit maximisation and social control (Tovey and Share 2003, p.244; Adair 2005, p.823), as the very presence of lone parents' endangers the nuclear family hegemony of Irish capitalist society (Hardy and Crow 1991, p.7). In essence, this paper has demonstrated the utility of Marxist theory for understanding the family under capitalism, as it attends to class and gendered power disparities permeating the family (Marx and Engels 1974, p.52; Marx and Engels 1976, p.46), considers the operation of the nuclear family as an ideological support for capitalism (Marx and Engels 1976, p.180) and provides a solution for change (Marx and Engels 1967, p.100).

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