Industrial Homework, Economic Restructuring and the Meaning of Work

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THE CLOTHING INDUSTRIES of the western industrialized countries have historically made use of subcontractors and homeworkers to permit flexibility and maintain a place in a highly competitive market. Industrial homework[1] is therefore by no means a new phenomenon in certain industries, and the historical conditions of its use have now been quite well documented. The recent "renaissance" of industrial homework in a number of countries has been seen by several analysts as a symptom of processes of economic restructuring. With rapid changes in the economic conditions for production there is increased pressure from offshore producers upon already struggling domestic industries. This has led to an increase in the use of homeworkers through the 1980s and 1990s in most of the industrialized countries.[2]

[1]It is important to note that the form of homework being referred to here presumes a certain set of productive relations. A homeworker is defined here as someone who receives work for which she is paid by the piece from a supplier, the latter being responsible for the disposal of the finished product. In the industrialized countries there is a tendency to use a category of "home-based work" (see for example Wendy Priesnitz, "Running a business out of your home," *Women and Environments* (Spring-Summer 1989), 4-8, which may include occupations such as child minders, consultants and corner store operators, as well as industrial homeworkers. This kind of catch all term obscures the *independent* nature of industrial homework, which is essential to its analysis. Although my term of choice is industrial homework, I use homework alone as a convenient shorthand since the term is used so frequently in this paper.
[2]On homework and subcontracting in the clothing industry see L.C. Johnson and R. Johnson, *The Seam Allowance: Industrial Home Sewing in Canada* (Toronto 1982); A. Phizacklea, *Unpacking the Fashion Industry: Gender, Racism and Class in Production* (London 1990). For historical accounts of homework see S. Pennington and B.Westover, *A Hidden Workforce: Homeworkers in England 1850-1985* (Basingstoke 1986); E. Boris and C. Daniels, eds., *Homework: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Paid Labor at Home*

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As companies seek to improve their ability to compete on the world market, they utilize a variety of strategies, including flexible and cheap forms of labour.[3] An increasingly popular option is to subcontract certain tasks to a separate firm or to individuals working at home. Both labour and overhead costs are passed down the subcontracting chain, while the smaller subcontracted firms and homeworkers become dependent on the larger firms for work.

In the present economic context industrial homework is in some ways the extreme result of a process of informalization affecting large numbers of jobs, workers and workplaces to different degrees, and it is increasingly a preferred option for employers. Well-established and growing in the garment industry, homework is now popular in the electronics industry and for clerical work in insurance companies in the United States. In Canada a "telework" project for federal government administrative employees has been extremely popular with workers, especially women,[4] and home-based telephone operators are being promoted as an alternative to "call centres" for companies relying heavily on telephone communications.

The recent literature on industrial homework points to its expansion in the contemporary economy, and a major aspect of the analysis has focused on the gendered nature of homework, and its close connection to women's responsibilities for the home and for childcare.[5] Much less attention has been paid to the precise ways in which industrial homework is embedded in the construction of western

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(Urbana 1989); E. Boris, *Home to Work: Motherhood and the Politics of Industrial Homework in the United States* (Cambridge 1994). S. Mitter, *Common Fate, Common Bond* (London 1986); and S. Allen, "Production and reproduction: The lives of women homeworkers," *Sociological Review*, 31, 4, (1983) discuss homework in the context of economic restructuring. See also E. Boris and E. Prugl, eds., *Homeworkers in Global Perspective: Invisible No More* (New York 1996); C. Lipsig-Mummé, "The renaissance of homeworking in developed economies," *Relations Industrielles*, 38, 3 (1983), 545-67; S. Mitter, "On organising women in casualised work: A global overview," in S. Rowbotham and S. Mitter, eds., *Dignity and Daily Bread: New Forms of Economic Organizing Among Poor Women in the Third World and the First* (London 1994).

[3]For discussions of flexibility see A. Pollert, "Dismantling flexibility," *Capital and Class*, 34 (1988); S. Wood, ed., *The Transformation of Work?* (London 1989).

[4]For the electronics industry see M-P Fernandez-Kelly and A. Garcia, "Hispanic women and homework: Women in the informal economy of Miami and Los Angeles," in Boris and Daniels, *Homework*. For clerical work see K. Christiansen, ed., *The New Era of Home-Based Work* (New York 1987). For a discussion of the Canadian government's telework project see J. Borowy and T. Johnson, "Unions confront work reorganization and the rise of precarious employment: Home-based work in the garment industry and federal public service," in C. Schenk and J. Anderson, eds., *Re-shaping Work: Union Responses to Technological Change* (Don Mills 1996); and B. Leach, "Behind closed doors: Homework and lost possibilities for change," in I. Bakker, ed., *Rethinking Restructuring: Gender and Change in Canada* (Toronto 1996).

[5]Boris, *Home to work.*

capitalist ideas about work. It is these ideas about the meaning of work in capitalist society that underpin industrial homework as a flexible strategy for economic efficiency in the context of corporate and state restructuring of the economy.

In this paper I examine how the meaning of work is constructed and manipulated in the context of industrial homework. Drawing on an ethnographic study of industrial homework in Southern Ontario,[6] the paper then discusses some of the ways in which the meaning of work is ambiguous, situationally specific and continuously redefined in the homework context. It is argued that this is possible because of the awkward location of the homework labour process, occupying as it does space and time usually associated with home and family.

Framing the Problem

Two conversations I had with industrial homeworkers subsequently became important to my analysis of how conceptual categories are confused and manipulated in the practice and understanding of homework in peoples' lives. Joan was a student in Toronto who heard me talk about my research. She told me that she and her mother had done homework for a couple of years in the early 1980s. As we chatted over coffee she said she would speak to her mother about meeting me, but in the meantime she went over her own recollections of the work. She saw it primarily as her mother's work, which she helped with informally. She told me that her mother had worked outside the home for as long as she could remember, but she had become ill, could no longer keep her old job, and so she had turned to homework, which she could do at her own pace in her own home. But the company had insisted on maintaining quotas for the work done, and when her mother found it difficult to do enough, Joan suggested to her that she do some of the work as well. She would visit her mother's apartment two or three afternoons a week, where they sat together at the dining room table, and with Joan's young children playing around them, they

[6]Field research on which this paper is based was carried out by the author between June 1987 and December 1989. During this period I visited the homes of approximately 40 industrial homeworker families and the business premises of five subcontractor enterprises, roughly equally divided between Greater Toronto and London, Ontario. Initial visits comprised a combination of semi-structured interviews lasting one to four hours followed by as much observation of work and quotidian activities as could be carried out without imposing unreasonably upon peoples' valuable work time and home space. In the case of three particularly helpful informants I was able to visit more frequently during the fieldwork period. Most of these families were engaged in garment homework, although a few worked on shoes or toys (in these cases also mainly sewing work). In addition I interviewed a number of key informants, including immigrant settlement and job placement workers, union staff persons, company owners and managers, and policy analysts. The sample of homeworkers ranged broadly in age, from early 20s to late 60s, with the presence of school-age or pre-school children in the homes of all but the oldest homeworkers. All except three of the homeworker families were first generation immigrants to Canada.

would spend two or three hours working, as they exchanged family and neighbourhood gossip, and drank cups of coffee. They worked on some kind of metal component, but Joan had no idea what they were making, only the movements needed to complete the task.

It was eight years after these events that Joan told her mother I would be interested in talking to her. She said she was taken by complete surprise when her mother flew into a rage at this suggestion. She wondered how Joan could be so disloyal as to talk to someone outside the family about work they had done only because they were both desperate for money. Joan was also astonished at her mother's very different interpretation of the events. Her mother said she had never needed help from her daughter to do the work, but she had generously allowed her to get involved because she knew that as a stay-at-home mother of small children she needed money. She told Joan she wanted to forget about the time when she had no alternative but to participate in activities she had always thought of as shady, probably even illegal, and she forbade her ever to speak of it again.

As I thought about this incident afterwards, it seemed that what was happening here was that the two women involved had placed entirely different meanings on the activity they shared. Keeping in mind that the same work experience, when carried out by two different people, could result in a conflict such as this, I reconsidered many of the conversations I had had with homeworkers and their families in terms of what I could learn about the meaning attributed to the different forms of work people do.

Another example of confusion over meaning emerged in a conversation with a man whose wife was a homeworker. Sok interpreted for his wife as I asked her about her experiences with homework. He told me she had worked in a clothing factory before they left Cambodia, but also had a sewing machine at home which she used to make a little extra money, making clothes for neighbours. They had come to Canada, to London, Ontario in 1984 as refugees. The wife's first paid work had been sewing at home, and after about a year she took a job in a local factory making automobile parts, but still sewed at home in the evenings, early mornings and weekends.

Sok had plenty of his own opinions about his wife's work which were evident from his representation of her words. He described home sewing as "ladies' work," as "easy work" to do while looking after children, and well-suited to the wife of a man whose work was very demanding. He said, with a laugh, that he would only do "men's work." He explained proudly how he had been personally responsible for sponsoring new immigrants from Cambodia, and had helped many of those to get started sewing at home with the same company as his wife. Part of the conversation we had went as follows:

He said: "When people work hard, harder than my wife does, at home sewing, they can make a lot of money. I have a friend who owns a sixplex, no mortgage, and has a house worth about $170,000 as well."

I asked him: "How can they make so much money?"
He replied: *"Every member of the family sews."*
"Men too?" I asked.
He answered: "Yes the men often work at first, but they give it up as soon as they can get a job, when they can speak English."
I asked: "Did you sew as well at first?"
"Well, yes," he said, "but only for a few months. As soon as I found a job I stopped."
"So you don't do any sewing at all any more?" I asked.
He replied: "No. Well, I sometimes help my wife with the little things, you know, like cutting threads, ironing and folding, I don't mind helping her with that. The new people [new immigrants], *when they arrive, sometimes I help them learn the sewing, but only as teacher* until they know how to do it."

Both these examples concern peoples' ideas about "work." But they also concern something else, something which in capitalist society we generally categorize as not work, or at least as a lesser form of work. Our common sense, and that of the actors, tends to locate this second kind of activity in a social and conceptual space usually associated with the "family." What is happening in both these cases is that two very powerful concepts — work and family — are being used by the actors in an attempt to organize their lives by giving distinct meanings to everyday activities. Yet the effect is precisely the opposite of that goal: when confronted with articulating their ideas about these activities, people find themselves confused, frustrated, and even sense a loss of a tangible singular identity as a person.[7] Joan's experience described above is a case in point. She perceived the work she carried out to be as helping out her mother, rather than primarily as a source of income, whereas her mother had felt just the opposite — that she was helping out her daughter financially, and in addition she was ashamed of having to resort to such low status work, which conflicted with her identity as a respectable sort of person.

While people try to put meaning into their lives as workers and as men and women, the contradictions of everyday life make this more of a challenge than we would reasonably expect. This is especially the case for certain forms of work which themselves compromise common-sense understandings. While certain taken-for-granteds provide a stock of interpretive patterns on which people draw when faced with new situations, they do not prepare people for every eventuality, and anomalies have to be incorporated into existing categories of meaning to try to avoid confusion. Forms of work like homework do not readily fit into the common-sense meanings of work or family in contemporary capitalist societies, rendering them uncertain factors in peoples' sense of identity.

The ambiguities which Sok and Joan found difficult to reconcile make an exploration of the meaning of work in the context of homework especially fruitful.

[7]For a discussion of this see D. Kondo, *Crafting Selves: Power, Gender and Discourses of Identity in a Japanese Workplace* (Chicago 1990).

The very term "homework" is contradictory. The dominant interpretation of the history of industrialization in western culture emphasizes a fundamental separation between home and work, and builds upon that separation to reinforce gendered divisions of labour.[8] Industrial homework is productive work, yet it takes place in the home, the place designated for reproductive work. The raw materials and in many cases the equipment being used often belong to the work supplier, not to the homeworker. Thus homeworkers are not strictly self-employed, yet neither are they technically employees of the companies they work for. Another contradictory feature is that while their dispersed locations in individual homes make them difficult to supervise, (a major reason why factories were popular with employers in the first place), empirical evidence shows the use of outworkers to be increasing in many countries of the world, indicating that the advantages outweigh the drawbacks to using them.

Analysing industrial homework theoretically presents a number of difficulties. The lack of fit between homework and normative ideas in western capitalist culture about the nature of work is reflected in the methodological and analytical tools available to study work in the industrial countries. These have tended to focus on common-sense western capitalist notions of what work is, in terms of social, spatial and technical criteria, which are deeply tied to a particular paradigm of industrial development and the organization of work in Fordist terms. The labels now often used to describe forms of work like homework — informal, casual, non-standard — provide clues to how we tend think about them. We define these kinds of work in terms of what they are not, and the norm — mass production industries employing men in full-time manual jobs (in other words, what jobs should be) — is the realm of traditional industrial sociology.

Mainstream labour theorists have been hitherto relatively oblivious to forms of work like homework, or at most have considered them to be "marginal" or aberrant. Thus the existing analytical tools are largely inadequate for looking at informal work. Part of the explanation for this is that such forms of work fall outside of common definitions, held by both the actors and the analyst, of what work is. This notion of what work is is crucial for theorizing homework. Above all, the concept of work has to be seen as a problematic one, not only for the analyst, but for the informants as well, for whom ideas about work and the meanings placed on it, may be a source of contradiction and contention. Raymond Williams has argued that within any given society certain concepts take on a variety of meanings. As Williams points out, while the dictionary guides us in exploring the meaning of words, it does not provide us with the meaning of a word, but rather presents a range of meanings, and as he advises "it will be the range that matters."[9] The existence

[8]M. Berg, "Women's work, mechanization and early industrialization in England," in P. Joyce, ed., *The Historical Meanings of Work*, (Cambridge 1987); M. Barrett, *Women's Oppression Today* (London 1980).
[9]R. Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London 1976), 17.

of a range of meaning presents the possibility that there may be as much argument or misunderstanding over meanings, even between people in other ways close to each other, as there is agreement. Eventual outcomes, including ideas about identity, are then partly a product of contention between groups and interests — of conflictual discourses — but a focus on discourses must take care not to lose sight of the socio-economic reality which help to shape them.

The "meaning of work" for workers in industrial societies has usually been taken for granted and it is only relatively recently that attention has been paid to the ways in which the multiple meanings of work reflect cultural dynamics and operate to reinforce capitalist hegemony. The "new" phase of capitalism, variously described as post-Fordism, or flexible production,[10] is characterized by heterogeneous labour processes and "non-standard" work situations which defy the conventional ways of recording and analysing work. Industrialized countries are less and less characterized by the homogeneous mass working populations studied in the past, for which the traditional sociological approaches were designed. Marcus and Fischer[11] argue that these older kinds of approaches are inappropriate to the study of fragmented groups in restructured societies. Ethnographic approaches permit a close exploration of the everyday struggles over meaning in peoples' lives and their role in the mutual reproduction of social relations and culture through the capacity to study both the structural context which shapes and distorts peoples' experiences of life, and the actions and resistances with which people respond. Ethnography provides the advantage of examining restructuring processes on the ground to see exactly what is happening to people and their lives while dramatic changes originating in the political and economic spheres affect them, and over which they have little or no control. While attention to symbolic systems of meaning permits us to highlight the subjective side of social relations, it is important to keep this closely tied to the political economic context.[12] A crucial theoretical question continues to be that of problematizing the relationship between the subjects' conditions and their interpretation of reality.[13] It is of course important to point out

[10]For differing views on the nature of late capitalism see M.J. Piore and C. Sabel, *The Second Industrial Divide: Possibilities of Prosperity* (New York 1984) and D. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford 1989).

[11]G. Marcus and M. Fisher, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (Chicago 1986).

[12]W. Roseberry, *Anthropologies and Histories: Essays in Culture, History and Political Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ 1989), 17-29. For ethnographic examples see J. Calagione, D. Francis and D. Nugent, eds., *Workers' Expressions: Beyond Accommodation and Resistance on the Margins of Capitalism* (Albany 1992).

[13]For consideration of these issues see M. di Leonardo, "Introduction," in M. Di Leonardo, ed., *Gender at the Crossroads of Knowledge: Feminist Anthropology in the Postmodern Era* (Berkeley 1991); S. Ortner, "Theory in anthropology since the 60s," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 26, 1 (1984), 126-66; and G. Sider, *Culture and Class in Anthropology and History: A Newfoundland Example* (Cambridge 1986).

that although multiple and divergent meanings of work may have become more apparent during the recent period of post-Fordist economic restructuring, such complex meanings have never been absent and are always problematic.

Homework and the Labour Process

My position here is that an ethnographic approach can lead to a rethinking of some of the tools and conceptual categories of industrial sociology and other disciplines concerned with the analysis of work. Other scholars have also argued for rethinking rather than dismissing what some now consider to be irrelevant concepts, notably class.[14] Approaching old issues and concepts in new ways can help to illuminate the ways in which conventional conceptions have narrowed our understandings and sustained what in some contexts are fictional distinctions.

Attempting to examine the homework labour process points to some of the problems encountered in trying to apply the tools of industrial sociology to forms of casual work, but it can also prove fruitful in furthering our understanding of its resurgence in the period of late capitalism. In contrast to Braverman's rather narrow conception of the labour process, Burawoy[15] argues for a reconceptualization which takes account of the ways legal, political and ideological forces shape and reproduce the relations of production. Building on Marx's idea of commodity fetishism, Burawoy argues that the labour process produces social relations and ideas about those relations, as much as it produces things. In other words, as Joyce puts it, the labour process is "*inherently* about the production and mediations of meaning."[16]

For Burawoy the term labour process appears to denote practically any activity which takes place inside the factory gates. This permits the possibility that non-production factors at the point of production influence what is going on there. While this improves the analytic capabilities of the "labour process" concept, it continues to be limited by excluding crucial external activities from its purview. The focus on the labour process at the point of production is generally problematic because, as we are increasingly learning, aspects of peoples' lives outside the workplace impinge on their attitudes to and experiences of work. This narrow conceptualization has much to do with a definition of "work" which limits it to a prescribed location, presenting serious difficulties for its application to homework.

Burawoy argues that it is within the labour process that under capitalism the production of surplus value is secured and obscured. As he explains it, while workers appear to be paid for their entire working day, in fact they are paid for only a part of it. The difference is appropriated by the capitalist as unpaid or surplus

[14]S.G. McNall, R.F. Levine and R. Fantasia, *Bringing Class Back In: Contemporary and Historical Perspectives* (Boulder 1991).

[15]H. Braverman, *Labour and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the 20th Century* (New York 1974); M. Burawoy, *Politics of Production* (London 1985).

[16]Joyce, *The Historical Meanings of Work*, 6, emphasis in the original.

labour and becomes profit as commodities are sold. It then follows that "[t]he dilemma of capitalist control is thus to secure surplus value while at the same time keeping it hidden."[17] Homework provides an effective means of solving this dilemma, indeed it "obscures and secures" even better than the factory work in Burawoy's cases. As Burawoy shows, ethnographic case studies are extremely useful in helping us to understand how the process of obscuring surplus value takes place. Outside of the factory, when the workplace is the home, a different way of obscuring surplus value is needed, and this operates through the ambiguous nature of homework which confuses common-sense meanings about home and work. The case of homework clearly requires that we look beyond the work process itself, into other relationships, activities and ideas strictly outside the realm of production, to discover exactly how the securing and obscuring of surplus value are accomplished. In homework not only is the securing of surplus value perhaps more successfully obscured than in other labour processes, but as well the nature of the relations in production is largely obscured. To explore this requires expanding the conventional view of the labour process. Moreover, it is helpful to look at how the meaning of work is manipulated and confused through the organization of the homework labour process on an everyday basis. In order to do this, however, I am arguing that it is necessary to consider the broader social relations in which homework is embedded in western capitalist culture, and it is to these issues that I now turn.

THE CONFUSION OF CONCEPTUAL CATEGORIES

Work and Family

These social relations are supported and reinforced by ideologies and cultural practices, which have arisen in western capitalism, where the spheres "work" and "family" have been historically separated out.[18] The meanings attributed to these key words are central to understanding why people do certain kinds of work, and they represent an important cultural factor in explaining the persistence and resurgence of homework. "Family" brings into play the notion of the home, prescriptions around gender and age roles, including a gendered division of labour, the identification of women and children with the domestic sphere, and relationships based in affection. "Work" concerns where it takes place, who does it, and what is and is not real work.

The separation of home and work is a central ideological principle on which the capitalist organization of production is based. E.P. Thompson[19] has traced how changes began around the 14th century in the way people thought about the concept of time, and how changing attitudes to time were associated with the development

[17]Burawoy, *Politics of Production*, 32

[18]L. Tilly and J. Scott, *Women, Work and Family* (New York 1978).

[19]E.P. Thompson, "Time, work discipline and industrial capitalism," *Past and Present*, 38 (1963).

of a distinction between home and work. As he argues, with the advent of industrial capitalism time began to mean money. Thus it was in the interests of the early capitalists to utilize the labour time they had purchased to best effect. Consequently, in place of the more usual cycles of work and non-work which centred on the household, based on cycles of individual energy and concentration, there developed what we think of as the traditional industrial worker's day: a period of labour stretching over a number of hours, set off from a period of non-labour. For Thompson the issue of hours of work is central to the way capitalism manipulated ideas about work and leisure. If one laboured for ten hours at the factory, then the time spent at home during the rest of the day was by default time spent in leisure.

In her study of the work of Ontario women in the 19th century, Cohen argues that a model of industrialization "based chiefly on the British experience," includes three major changes — the separation of home and the workplace, an increased differentiation in the gendered division of labour, and a sharper division between the public and private work spheres. Her work on Ontario refutes this model, which has "frequently been assumed to apply wherever industrialization occurs."[20] The point to be made here does not however concern the specifics of women's work in Ontario, but rather illustrates the pervasiveness of the ideology concerning the separation of home and work and the distinct roles of men and women, which accompanies the development of capitalism, and which distorts the perceptions of the actors in their attempts to sort out their lives. Moreover those analysts who have argued forcefully that the development of industrial capitalism led to the separation of home and work have themselves made it more difficult for different outcomes to be rendered visible.

Feminist scholars have also identified family and work as crucial to our understanding of gender relations.[21] This raises the issue of how relations of gender and class, for example, have produced meanings which reflect certain interests, while excluding oppositional categories. Joan Scott[22] contends that meaning is constructed and reconstructed through a play of oppositions which are gendered. In western capitalist culture the concepts of family with its historically constituted associations with women, and work with its associations with men, is an example of such an opposition. This opposition and its symbolic and sometimes practical manifestation, the separation of home and work, have dominated our understanding

[20]M. Cohen, *Women's Work, Markets and Economic Development in Nineteenth Century Ontario* (Toronto 1988), 9-10.

[21]R. Rapp, E. Ross and R. Bridenthal, "Examining family history," *Feminist Studies*, 5, 1 (1979); S. Stichter and J. Parpart, "Introduction," in S. Stichter and J. Parpart, eds., *Women, Employment and the Family in the International Division of Labour* (London 1990). See also Veronica Strong-Boag, "Keeping house in God's country: Canadian women at work in the home," in C. Heron and R. Storey, *On the Job: Confronting the Labour Process in Canada* (Montréal 1986).

[22]J. W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York 1988).

of the history of capitalist development. For homeworkers this underlying gender ideology provides a continuing rationale for their work. As Boris argues in her analysis of legal struggles around industrial homework in the United States, there is a consensus on both sides of the debate that women should be in the home with children; the disagreement arises over "whether industrial work should be there too."[23]

For perhaps a majority of people, in practice work and family have always been interrelated. Yet the outcome of this contradiction between ideology and reality is to create confusion in peoples' lives. This is especially the case for homeworkers, as the ethnographic examples above show, because for them the interrelatedness of the two concepts is at the surface and the ideological separation is transparently artificial. Women usually gave the need to carry out domestic responsibilities as well as to earn money as their reason for starting homework in the first place. Ideas such as "if you have a baby at home you want more time to take care of her," or "because of my baby I think it is better to stay home and I can look after him and I can make a bit of money and help my husband" were frequently encountered. Their rationale for taking on this work was quite deliberately an attempt to integrate work and family since separating the two did not appear to be workable. Yet this then presented more contradictions. One woman noted that she did the housework "because I stay home," and that when she had worked outside her husband had done more in the house. A homeworker's adult daughter, having just heard her mother say that she sewed eight to 10 hours a day, added "she doesn't want a job, because she wants to take care of us."

Although people are able to recognize that the separation of home and work is largely a fiction, and homeworkers are more aware of this than most, there remain ideological mechanisms which operate to blur the boundaries between paid and unpaid work, and which facilitate what seems to be a comfortable coexistence in the same place and during the same time period. Yet this comfortable coexistence does not exist in reality, and homeworkers rely on multiple meanings to make their lives work, and appeal to the very ideologies which organize their everyday lives. Tuyet described how by refusing to change the baby's diapers herself, she had forced her husband to do so, since that was the only way she could get work done uninterrupted in the evenings. Grace's husband was horrified that she had made enough money from her various informal jobs to learn to drive, and was now planning to buy a car. When he objected, she retorted that she needed the car to buy milk when he was working late. She also recalled that when she was sewing shoes at home she had asked her husband to call the boss to say she had to go to a relative's funeral in Italy so she could have a couple of weeks free of work. Homeworkers use the capitalist ideology of work to provide them with a rationale for resisting the patriarchal relations in the family, and they can turn this on its head to resist work relations, by using ideas which stress putting their families first. They thus manipu-

[23]Boris, *Home to Work*, 5.

late the ideological categories which reflect the capitalist organization of work and family, which is not necessarily the same thing as fully accepting them.[24]

The use of family labour to assist with homework was a recurring theme in conversation and observation with homeworkers, as it was in the cases of both Joan and Sok. One task where assistance was often sought on a regular basis was in driving to and from the supplier, a problem for homeworkers because the size of the bundles they took back and forth made public transportation difficult, and in some cases impossible if they lived far from transportation routes. A more insidious use of family labour involved the role children very frequently played in helping their mothers. In some households children had regular tasks connected to their mother's homework to perform on a daily basis, such as sorting and trimming, while in others their assistance was more erratic, but often crucial in meeting quotas within a specified time. Industrial homework then became a family activity, or perhaps more correctly, a mother-daughter activity. With the regular help of her fourteen year old daughter, Grace sewed nurses' shoes for a Toronto factory which continually increased her quotas while demanding that the shoes were returned promptly on Friday mornings. She told how after two years of this work her daughter pleaded with her to bring home no more shoes. Daughters' involvement in sewing work was also seen as a way of providing them with useful skills. Another young woman explained:

> I help my Mom if it's easy, if it's straight. She says just learn it and it's with me when I have a child, I can make more money. But sewing is not my favourite, I just do it for one or two hours, but it's so boring I just get off the chair. I did 5 or 6 hours when I lived with her. It was easy. She wanted to pay me but I didn't want it. I was working at the factory at the same time anyway.

As far as the work supplier is concerned, homework obliterates the boundary between individual workers in the family and the work they do. This can happen because through the piece rate, the piece rather than the worker is the unit of production, and the final product, the piece to which payment is attached, may conceal the labour of many family members. Work suppliers were often aware that many family members were involved in completing the homework, and recognized it as a deliberate strategy for extended immigrant families until they established a foothold in the wider labour market. One plant manager described families with as many as ten sewing machines, taking in masses of work each week, and the financial benefits of this were seen as a reason why homeworkers were frequently reluctant to take jobs inside the factory, despite better rates of pay on an individual basis, and benefits. In this way, as many homeworkers were quick to point out, it was possible

[24]C. White, "Why do workers bother?: Paradoxes of resistance in two English factories," *Critique of Anthropology*, 7, 3 (1988). See also J. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven 1990).

to increase productivity and consequently family income. Where the family owned only one sewing machine, tasks were carefully divided to maximize use of the machine. In one family the husband was the primary homeworker, dealing with the factory, and performing most of the routine sewing work. He had left his minimum wage factory job in favour of full-time homework, while his wife worked at a unionized meat processing factory job where she received benefits. He said he left the more difficult jobs, like collars and cuffs on shirts, for her to do when she was home from work, but every member of this family had some sewing related work to do, from the youngest child to the man's father.

Space and Time

The blurring of boundaries exists in both time and space. In spatial terms, the most obvious feature is that homework occupies domestic space, rather than industrial space. This then contributes to the way in which it is valorized. The work homeworkers perform could be defined in terms of criteria such as monetary or exchange value, or the time spent in the activity, yet the dominant ideology of work demands that work carried out in the home is valued less than that performed in a specified workplace, and is consequently paid less. Scott describes how Parisian tailors made less money if they worked at home than if they performed the same tasks in a workshop. In her case study the definition of skill was also tied to the location where the work process took place. Work that took place in the home (by women) was deemed unskilled, while that which took place at a workplace (by men) was deemed skilled, thereby linking skill to the location of work as much as to practical abilities.[25] For late 20th century homeworkers, the home-based nature of the work contributes to their sense of identity, so that they describe themselves primarily as housewives rather than as workers. The issue of identity is evident from the case of men like Sok, who feel able to carry out "women's work" like sewing as long as it is confined to domestic space (and time), but would not consider a sewing job outside the home where it would threaten masculine identity. There is a revealing link here to accounts of men who reluctantly take on domestic labour and while willing to operate a washing machine, draw the line at hanging clothes outside where they might be seen.[26]

Another important aspect of the spatial organization of work concerns the use made of the domestic space where homework takes place. It is not accidental that average family homes are not designed for work uses, since industrial capitalism is supposed to have dispensed with home-based work and separated work entirely from the home. Industrial homeworkers are thus forced to select from two kinds of

[25]Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*.
[26]M. Luxton, "Two hands for the clock: Changing patterns in the gendered division of labour in the home," in M. Luxton, H. Rosenberg and S. Arat-Koc, *Through the Kitchen Window: The Politics of Home and Family* (Toronto 1990), 51.

domestic space to locate their work. One option is to use part of the regularly occupied family space in the home, such as a corner of the living room, dining room or kitchen. The other is to take over some less frequently used space, for example a basement, boxroom or in a few cases, a closet. When the work was carried out in family space, it was always organized so that it could be quickly hidden from view. This was necessary not only for the benefit of visitors, but during designated family times as well (for example over the dinner hour and weekend day time).

Discussing women's experience of men's home-based work, Finch[27] argues that where "work is based in the home, the home is part of the "public" domain, both structurally and experientially, and the notion that there is a clear distinction between the two is called into question." In contrast women industrial homeworkers take great pains to keep their work discreetly out of the way of their families.[28] As one woman put it: "I work around my kids, my husband, dinner." It would appear that while they would have to deal with the blurred meaning of home because it was the place where they also worked on a daily basis, they were either unwilling or not permitted to force that contradiction on their families.

The homework labour process is devised to involve tasks which are relatively easy to start and stop. This makes it appear to be compatible with domestic tasks and in particular with looking after children. It is precisely these kinds of processes which are put out into the home, because they present the appearance of compatibility. The value to the household of the income derived from this work, and the enormous time commitment it required, can remain more generally unrecognized because of the blurred boundaries between homework and housework. When asked how much time she spent during the day on homework, one woman responded:

> I try to work 7 to 8 hours a day, but I've never figured it out exactly because I go away, come back, go away again. Sometimes I try to stay pretty regular on the machine until my husband comes home, but I'm not doing it all the time.

Another woman said she liked to work at home because she has time for cooking and "if I want to go anywhere, I just go."

Carmen, a subcontractor who had worked as a homeworker herself for many years, understood this ambiguity very well, and used it to her own ends. She reported constant arguments with the homeworkers who carried out work for her over the rate of pay. She argued that the rate she paid was good, since the workers did not have to pay for travelling costs, babysitting, work clothes, or some of the

[27] J. Finch, *Married to the Job: Wives' Incorporation in Men's Work* (London 1983), 58.

[28] There is a similar gendered parallel in examples of men's expectations of encroachments on their time when they are working at home. Men who opt to work at home describe "training" their families not to call them up to ask them to pick up a loaf of bread or start dinner. See for example, T. Wakefield, "Office eclipse: Metro's home office boom," *Business Journal* (June 1991).

other costs associated with working outside the home, but they still complained. She said when they asked for a raise in the piece rate she told them: "I'm not paying for you to do your cooking or look after the baby." Industrial homework then takes on the value accorded domestic work, which is low since "any time that cannot be accorded a money value is suspect and held in low esteem."[29] The exchange value of this form of paid work and the effort put into it is obscured behind accepted and low-valued domestic work. Moreover, implicit in Carmen's comment is the problem of identifying the time spent in each activity in the home, and a thinly veiled accusation that homeworkers inflate their estimation of the time spent doing work for her.

Yet at the same time this confusion can be useful, since it does not openly compromise the homeworker's identity as a housewife. A woman who was trying to switch from industrial homework to running her own home-based business with a friend made the point: "being housewives, we want it to stay small." Another woman, Irene, described her and her husband's strong views about her role as a housewife and a mother. She described her decision to do homework as follows:

> I couldn't go out working because I have two kids, and my husband wouldn't let me go out because he doesn't want a babysitter to bring up my kids. So I thought it was a good idea. I could make a little extra money and stay at home.

Advocates of homework have argued that it resolves the problem of trying to find childcare while working for pay, yet much evidence suggests that attempting to combine childcare and homework is in fact extremely difficult and stressful,[30] and does not resolve the contradiction. Irene's daughters told me "she never has time for us," and Tuyet explained how the birth of her baby had changed her work patterns:

> Now I work whenever I can. Because if I try to work, she just cries and cries. During the day I do maybe one or two hours. Then when my husband arrives, I give him the baby to look after. Then I work. During the day I don't work much.

The struggle taking place on a day by day, minute by minute basis, between the competing demands of production and reproduction is obscured when the labour process in production appears to be compatible with the domestic labour process.

The piece rate system also contributes to the temporal dimension of blurred boundaries in industrial homework. For one thing, as noted above, the use of several family members' labour multiplies the time (person hours) that goes into comple-

[29] B. Adam, "With and beyond the time economy of employment relations: Conceptual issues pertinent to research on time and work," *Social Science Information*, 32, 2 (1993), 168.
[30] Allen, "Production and reproduction"; Boris and Daniels, *Homework*; Leach, "Behind closed doors."

tion of the work. Moreover, the piece rate operates as an extremely effective form of control in the context of a dispersed labour force outside the direct supervision of a foreman or the rhythm of an assembly line. It controls the speed and intensity of production by providing an incentive to work faster and longer. The intensity required to meet quotas and to make a living can be realized because of the pressure of the piece rate and the absence of fixed hours of work. While homework is frequently seen as something women do at home in their "spare" time, it in fact permits the worker "to extend her working day well past what is considered reasonable and healthy."[31] Homeworkers frequently work well into the night or extremely early in the morning to make up time lost to domestic responsibilities during the day.

In principle the piece rate is accepted as a fair method of payment by homeworkers though what appears to be fair exchange obscures a more complex situation. In addition to the time spent learning the piece and sewing it, there are other activities, such as transporting work, telephoning to chase down missing items, and sorting, for which the worker is not paid. As well, homeworkers rarely considered the cost of hidden overheads such as telephone calls, hydro to run the machine and heat the house, and repairs to the machine. A frequent response was "I've never calculated it, but it's not very much." The homework labour process then includes tasks other than the actual work which is paid for, and incurs costs which are lost in regular domestic expenses, and these represent a further way in which surplus value is obscured.

Self-Employment and Independence

A further blurring of conceptual boundaries takes place through the ideas of independence and autonomy which surround homework, as well as other forms of home-based work. Indeed, a number of state policies classify homeworkers as self-employed, along with other kinds of informal types of workers. Many homeworkers claimed that they liked to do this kind of work because it left them free to organize their time as they wished. Part of the meaning they place on this kind of work then incorporates ideas about autonomy and independence. In conversation many of them expressed an ideology which supposes that one can acquire control over one's own life and labour through the ownership of an independent business. This is of course the ideology of the petty bourgeoisie,[32] but members of the working class are not immune to its persuasive hegemonic force. Sennett and Cobb[33] found that blue collar workers consistently kept in their minds the image of self-employment as a highly desirable state, although this was more in terms of

[31] Pennington and Westover, *A Hidden Workforce*, 164.
[32] For many of the Vietnamese workers I knew who worked as homeworkers, petty bourgeois ideology was a part of their fairly recent historical memory, and they took forms of work where they could sustain a degree of autonomy.
[33] R. Sennett and J. Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (New York 1972).

individual autonomy and freedom from authority, rather than an interest in business. In fact, people were more likely to value manual jobs which exhibited these characteristics, than white-collar jobs perceived as responding to the demands of others.

One factor which helps to sustain a semblance of autonomy is the flexibility with which many people move from homeworker to subcontractor. Subcontractors own their own businesses, and then enter into relationships with larger companies seeking cheaper or more specialized sources for production. All the women subcontractors (of the five subcontractors who were part of this study, three were women) had at one time worked as homeworkers themselves, so it would seem that the aspiration of mobility from dependent homeworker to apparently independent contractor was for many an immediate and attainable one. One woman had recently started her own business producing cloth diapers, in direct competition with the business which had previously supplied her with homework, and she was optimistic about the prospects for success. Another had moved at least twice from homeworker to subcontractor and back again. While this suggests that the move to subcontractor was not always a permanent one, it also indicates the flexibility of the competitive sector in absorbing workers into different positions within it. Another young woman had worked both as homeworker and inside the factory when management of the company she was working for (then as an inside worker) suggested she set up her own subcontracting business, and provided her with loans and ordered the equipment she needed. I have analyzed elsewhere[34] the benefits of this arrangement to the company, which no longer needed to bother itself with managing large numbers of homeworkers, instead relying on her to do so. Her experience also shows the instability that accompanied her move to independent status, and the reality that she was still highly dependent upon others for her continued existence as a subcontractor.

Only one homeworker I knew (and one of the few men) described himself as self-employed and took advantage of the tax provisions which that designation allowed. He talked of claiming part of the cost of running his home, his work-related telephone costs and the gas used travelling to and from the factory. He said he had received no assistance from the company in learning about the tax provisions. Another, who had bought an expensive specialized sewing machine (a serger), was frustrated when she could not persuade the company who supplied her with work to give her work for that machine. There is thus a tension between an ideology of entrepreneurial independence and the reality of being dependent on another party for a supply of work, and with no control over its ultimate disposition. The implied and inferred status of self-employment, as well as the equivocal idea of autonomy is another way that the meaning of work is manipulated.

[34]B. Leach, "Flexible work, precarious future: Some lessons from the Canadian clothing industry," *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, 30, 1 (1993).

Conclusion

The examples above indicate that models of livelihoods are culturally produced and have no single monolithic meaning,[35] yet it is still relatively easy to overlook the significant consequences of this, both for our analysis and for the working of capitalism. Ultimately, it is the political implications of these "contentious categories" which are especially significant. Our ideas about work in the present build upon invented understandings of the past, which then become useful for political purposes.[36] While people negotiate and manipulate meaning to make sense of their lives and to make them work, some fairly slippery distinctions in meaning support actual practices in the material world which are frequently exploitative. The structural ambiguity of homework at the interstices of work and the family, and the problem of connecting it to common-sense categories of meaning, was not lost on Joan and her mother, yet the latter went to great lengths to maintain those common sense meanings. We need to see these micro-level negotiations then as an arena of struggle for competing interests,[37] for example, the encroachment of capitalist production relations upon an existing patriarchal system of gender relations. This demonstrates Marx's argument that "the organization of work has political and ideological *effects* — that is as men and women transform raw materials into useful things, they also reproduce particular social relations as well as an experience of those relations."[38]

Meaning is not rooted in specific forms of work, but is subject to change depending on situational factors. Women's work in the home (paid and unpaid) and out of it takes on different and more ambiguous meanings than does the work of men, wherever it is performed. All work carried out by women in the home, whether paid or not tends to be symbolically treated as if it were domestic labour. This serves to render women inherently flexible workers, who can take on a wide range of work forms both inside the home or outside of it. I have argued elsewhere[39] that this flexibility of women's labour is not new, but has been constituted and used historically to provide a contingent labour pool. The flexibility of women's labour is an especially important issue in the present economic context where, as stable, secure, full-time jobs disappear, flexible work strategies (usually meaning part-time, irregular, casual, or contract jobs) are being promoted from a number of directions.[40] While these "new" kinds of work are recognized as representing a shift in the kind of expectations that men have of work, it is taken for granted that

[35]Joyce, *Historical Meanings of Work*, 4.
[36]Joyce, *Historical Meanings of Work*, 1.
[37]M. Burawoy, *Ethnography Unbound: Power and Resistance in the Modern Metropolis* (California 1991), 278.
[38]Burawoy, *Politics of Production*, 7, emphasis in the original.
[39]Leach, "Flexible work."
[40]J. Jensen, "The talents of women, the skills of men: Flexible specialization and women," in Wood, *The Transformation of Work?*

women's labour can be utilized in this manner. Hence there is a way in which confusion over meanings operates to sustain aspects of the capitalist system, even if on a case by case basis these appear to be relatively insignificant to its overall project. As jobs are restructured, it is especially important to understand the way the multiple meanings of work contribute to this process. This is all the more urgent since the persistence and emergence of highly exploitative forms of work which are becoming more common[41] seems to be facilitated by the confusion over meanings.

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[41]A. Phizacklea and C. Wolkowitz, *Homeworking Women: Gender, Racism and Class at Work* (London 1995).

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