

“The Woman Question”

Collier writes:

“To understand, gender, we must understand social inequality. And, **if gender conceptions are idioms for interpreting and manipulating social inequality**, then we should expect notions of femininity and masculinity to change when one organization of inequality gives way to another.” (101)

Collier is writing about 20th C rural Spain, but similar dynamics took place in England, US, in 19th C — transition from agrarian society (what Ehrenreich and English call the “Old Order”) to modern, industrial society

Ehrenreich and English ALSO write that shift in subsistence base was accompanied by shift in the idiom in which people understood inequality — haves and have-nots — AND thus also understand gender, sexuality, marriage, etc.

E&E frame discussion of the shift in gender ideologies with a shift from agrarianism to market capitalism in 19th C England and America as “The Woman Question”

how would you phrase “The Woman Question”?

what are women to do/what are women good for, when **wage labor** reorganized  
how people thought about work

**wage labor** is different from all previous labor relations (products of labor could be sold; laborers could be sold (slaves, indentured servants); but not labor itself)

**wage labor** = idea that E can buy W’s labor for X amount of time, and by extension all products of that labor for *duration* of that time.

Requires the idea that a worker is “free” to SELL his own labor; that is, need sense that a person OWNS his own **labor power** (productive capacity) (as if property) and thus can sell this belonging for \$ wages.

as opposed to the vision of a person as a “dependent”; who is not free to dispose of his/her labor because dependent on the support of another person (indentured servant, apprentice, tenant farmer, slave — AND in 19th C, woman; legally “belonged” to father and then husband [classic patriarchy])

what did wage labor system do that was so significant for how we think about social relations?

1) notion that get paid what labor is “worth” — different kinds of labor are “worth” more than others — we’re deserving of what we have because we’ve earned it — achieved status — if we aren’t successful, it’s our fault; don’t have what it takes (ideology)

2) **wage labor introduced division between paid and unpaid work** — qualitative difference between work done in **household** and work done in **market** (unlike agrarian) this is significant — **work that doesn't earn wages suddenly "worth" less**

today, tendency to see & accept symbolic and structural separation b/w different kinds of labor — in market society:

1) productive labor

in market economy, labor that generates wages, income = purchasing power to meet basic needs – commercial transactions in market society

and *other* kinds of labor that people do, but are not seen as “productive” in same way

2) reproductive labor — making and raising babies; physical and emotional labor of feeding and nurturing; socializing good citizens and future workers and members of ethnic/religious communities

sustaining people on a daily basis: cooking, cleaning, feeding, sexing (conjugal right of sexual servicing), taking care of sick and elderly

3) work of status enhancement (middle classes) — promote social worth and prestige of families and husbands. Raising well-adjusted children and be smart consumers. Stay at home mom has become symbol of middle-upper class status.

4) “kinwork” and “community work” — maintaining kin networks through sharing work and resources; also writing letters, arranging family events and parties, emotional support. Narrator in *Middlesex*: “Didn’t my mother quiz me on uncles and aunts and cousins, too? She never quizzed my brother, because he was in charge of snow shovels and tractors, whereas I was supposed to provide the feminine glue that keeps families together, writing thank-you notes and remembering everybody’s birthdays and name days.” (72)

Often extends into community: church and community activism (from PTA to party politics).

Easy to think of separation b/w 1 and 2-4 as “natural” or “logical”:

Domestic	capitalist market
Private	public
Unpaid	paid
Love	money
Family	co-workers/bosses/employees
Reproduction	production
Women	men

(note that activities that move from domestic to public sphere acquire an exchange-value and can shift from women's to men's work: cooking —> chefs)

HOWEVER, these separations, dualisms are NOT “natural”, old or inevitable.

the apparent separation of public/private spheres when it comes to qualitative difference in kinds of labor is very recent.

this is the framework in which “The Woman Question” emerged in the 19th C

immigrant stories like Desdemona's in *Middlesex* also enacted the woman question – symbolized by her having to dump her silkworms, the basis of her livelihood, at Ellis Island

now, let's return to Collier's thesis — which E&E are in agreement with...

“To understand conceptions of gender, we cannot look at what men and women are or do, but rather must ask what people want and fear, what privileges they seek to claim, rationalize, and defend. To understand, gender, we must understand social inequality. And, if gender conceptions are idioms for interpreting and manipulating social inequality, then we should expect notions of femininity and masculinity to change when one organization of inequality gives way to another.”

in GROUPS: evaluate hypothesis: that ideas about g/s are related to ideas about labor

using Collier, *Middlesex*, E&E and handout as guide: correlations b/w mode of subsistence (agrarianism v. industrial capitalism) and the rest – making generalizations — and discuss

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