Domesticity

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Published on: May 31, 2023

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21428/1d6be30e.442077f2

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Domesticity has been significant in cultural histories of the home and domestic life. But what does the notion of domesticity bring to conversations about work?

In anthropology, recent efforts have proposed and searched for ways to re-center and mobilize feminist theory (Mahmud 2021), and drawn connections between relations of race, gender, and kinship to understand inequalities generated under capitalism (Bear et al. 2015). This reignites attention to domesticity as an idea anchored in a gendered separation between the domestic and the public sphere, and as an imaginary that underpins gendered social relations in spaces of work.

Domesticity encompasses a set of ideas popularly associated with the 19th century Victorian bourgeoisie, and later the figure of the white, middleclass, American housewife. Anchored in the idea of a gendered separation between the domestic and the public sphere, it is a concept that still holds potential for illuminating aspects of gendered dynamics of work in certain contexts.

Honing in on the notion of domesticity signifies a return to earlier conversations and approaches in anthropology and related disciplines preoccupied with both representing, and analyzing the significance of, women and women’s work. Historians of women’s history associate domesticity with a particular set of ideas emerging throughout 19th century Western history in which Victorian ideals of piety and modesty coalesced with ideals of womanhood that associated women with family, domestic life, and the home. This was most prominently advanced by the protestant, white upper and middle classes in Europe and the United States who emphasized ideals of femininity based on a value system of piety, purity, and submissiveness to men (Welter 1966).

Authors writing in the tradition of feminist political economy have offered a more material engagement with the notion of domesticity and its system of values, which in this tradition is part and parcel of processes of capitalist accumulation and the denigration of women and women’s work. Authors such as Angela Davis (1983), Silvia Federici (2004), and Maria Mies (1986) analyze the figure of the housewife as a historically specific result of the transition to capitalism and to the separation between a public sphere of commodity production and a domestic sphere for the reproduction of labor. The very idea of domesticity and domestic work, in these discussions, are intrinsically connected to capitalism’s need for labor power that pushes women in and out of different forms of wage labor according to dynamics in capitalism. Importantly, this process hinges on race and class dynamics. As Davis (1983) thus notes, working class women and women of color always bore “the double burden” of wage work and housework (Davis 1983, 226). While the ideals of womanhood associated with the notion of domesticity emerged in the social reality of the white upper and middle classes, its value system was eventually adopted by the working classes as well (Davis 1983, 226).

In anthropology, earlier discussions around domesticity and women’s work, also centered analyses of multifarious forms of unwaged feminized work in the domestic realm. Furthermore, discussions here pointed
to how observing gendered dynamics in the relationship between production and reproduction unsettles formal ideas about what constitutes “the economy” as a bounded domain.

Common for discussions that either explicitly or implicitly deal with domesticity is the idea that the system of values that underpins it, is mediated through spaces of work and through an organizing separation between the domestic and the public. But what relations and contradictions do the notion of domesticity bring to the fore in spaces of work today?

The commercial shrimp fishery of coastal Louisiana is a context, which is conventionally understood through tropes associated with masculine spaces of work and sociality. Yet, the fishery also contains a rich history of work and labor performed by women in and around the industry, and is a context, which simultaneously illustrates and complicates a clear-cut separation between domestic and public spaces of work. The largely small-scale shrimp fishery is here typically organized as household enterprises in a way that blurs the boundaries for what constitutes the domestic and the public sphere. With shrimping taking place over periods of days and nights in a row, commercial fishing boats operate as extensions of the home, and women have historically de facto performed the work of deckhands on boats captained by male spouses. At the same time, work on a commercial fishing boat is not limited to the formal labor process of extracting and sorting seafood. It also includes cooking and cleaning, and with this, forms of work, which in the context of the home, conventionally would be characterized as housework, and which here historically has been performed by female members of the household.

The organization of work in the shrimp fishery constitutes more of a functional than a spatial gendered division of labor, and values, which can largely be ascribed to conventional ideals of domesticity, coalesce in this context for men and women alike through an emic idiom of “the good woman.” Tropes of what constitute a “good woman” are here intimately tied to the ability to maintain a household through work in and outside of the home. For some women, however, ideals of womanhood tied to conventional notions of domesticity, are also mobilized as anchors for relative forms of autonomy.

For example, Carol, a woman in her 60s, who is married to a fisherman and throughout her life has vexed in and out of housework, wage labor, and working as a deckhand on the family’s skimmer boat while raising a family of three children, refused at some point to continue to work as her husband’s deckhand. Her refusal was due to the fact that her husband, in her words, both talked to her and worked her “like a man” while on the boat. Carol anchored her refusal in an insistence on being treated and spoken to in accordance with gendered ideals of femininity, which in this understanding should have allowed her to deal only with the less physically strenuous aspects of the labor process onboard a commercial fishing vessel, such as picking shrimp, cooking, and cleaning.

The structural circumstances of Carol’s refusal are situated in a context of economic crisis in an industry facing competition with imported seafood that at large now leads women to take on wage work outside the home. Yet
her refusal also indexes a non-linear relationship with a gendered value system of work. Domesticity writ-large is here thus both part of a system that generates dependence and suppression, but is also what Carol—through an act of subversion—anchored her insistence on what she considered a more dignified working life. Domesticity, then, emerges not as a transhistorical phenomenon or a fixed set of values but as a muddy reference point for visibilizing concrete social relations, and for understanding people’s quotidian navigations in gendered worlds of work.

References


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