

## RECENSIONS

Barrett and McIntosh have provided us with a clear and thorough analysis of why this is the case. The task now is to go beyond their excellent summary and critique to develop new insights into the politics of sexuality, male domination and the oppression of women.

Meg Luxton  
Atkinson College  
York University

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## CONTRADICTIONS IN MATERIAL FEMINISM

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Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981.

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This ground-breaking book begins with descriptions of utopian socialist communities in the 1820s and 1830s, and ends with a map showing all the locations of Kentucky Fried Chicken outlets in the Los Angeles area. An unlikely plot line? Not really, when one considers that the topic of this history is the rise and fall of collective solutions to the housework problem. Remedies for the isolation and overwork suffered by housewives have come to be largely monopolized by fast food empires and other profit-making industries; these

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services only 'free' the housewife to a limited extent, and in any case they pit the women who work in them (generally immigrant or poor women) against the better-off women who use them. Thus, the promise of the 'kitchenless house' of the utopian feminists has turned into a bitter joke. It is this process that Dolores Hayden has set out to outline.

To carry out this ambitious project, Hayden describes some of the developments in architecture, home economics, sociology of housework, and economic history, which combined to shape the experience of American women — and indirectly of men and children — in respect to housework and family life. The "grand domestic revolution" which she describes began by affecting middle-class white American women; however, to the extent that the final result of this process, the suburban American family, has become a world-wide ideal through American TV and through Hollywood movies, Hayden's analysis is relevant to women the world over in various degrees.

Much of the book is taken up by descriptions of the innovative feminist ideas developed in the 19th century to lighten housework, make it more scientific, and break down the isolation of the single-family home. Wisely, however, Hayden does not merely give us nostalgic pictures of utopian feminist ideas, but goes on to outline the way in which a backlash developed (in the 1914-1930 period) and successfully eliminated all pockets of feminist and socialist resistance to the housewife-consumer model of women's work in the home. The subsequent counter-revolution is not described in as much detail as the earlier grand domestic revolution; however, as will be argued below, the analytical link between these two dialectical opposites is the weakest element of the book.

The first chapters trace the co-operative projects of utopians such as Frances Wright and Robert Dale Owen, as well as the religious utopian communities such as the Shakers, the Perfectionists, and so on. These early utopian experiments have been studied before, but Hayden adds to our knowledge about them by paying close attention to the actual ways in which they re-organized housework. What she finds, not surprisingly, is that the practice often fell short of the ideal. Here, as throughout the book, Hayden makes good use of surviving drawings, engravings, and floor-plans, to see if the spatial arrangement of the communities actually facilitated collective and egalitarian forms of housework.

Hayden also points out the great impact of the French socialist Charles Fourier on American utopian socialism. Fourier, an eccentric advocate of communitarian living and sexual liberation, had many followers in the United States; the importance of this influence, often neglected by Yankee-centric historians, is borne out by Hayden's study. The early experiments in co-operative living and moral reform became more or less extinct in the 1850s. American capitalism boomed, and the West offered potential rebels land for individual homesteads; the Romantic and religious visions of America as the land of collective, natural living gave way to the individualistic and consumeristic ideology with which we are familiar today. Cleanliness and privacy were elevated to the rank of holy virtues, thus creating more work for housewives; at the same time, American men began to unionize and win wage packets that were high

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enough to support dependent wives. The non-productive "lady" became the hegemonic form of womanhood among the middle classes, and the ideal among the working classes.

Hayden is not at her best in describing this period of retrenchment, which was roughly from 1845 until 1880. She gets rather carried away describing technological innovations without emphasizing that a crucial social transformation was quietly taking place beneath the surface of technical progress: capitalist industry was taking up and *co-opting the technical innovations* of the utopians, while subtly *suppressing the social innovations* which the utopians had seen as the *raison d'être* of their communities. Radical collectives were watered down into ordinary apartment hotels with shared services, or even into fancy resorts where the bourgeois women were 'freed' from housework because maids did it all. Hayden does describe these pilot projects as they were and mentions some of the problems, but she fails to provide an analysis as well as a description. The class bias of the bourgeois projects to rationalize housework is seen — as radical feminists usually see class — as an unfortunate barrier between women, and not as one of the two key contradictions in American society as a whole. The development of trade unions, the increasing gap between Yankees and immigrants, and the growth of the middle classes, are all crucial class-related contradictions that marked this period of American history. Any history of women's work, in the home or outside the home, must integrate these factors in order to have any analytical power.

After reading about the naive attitudes towards social change exemplified in so many turn-of-the-century feminists, even brilliant women like Charlotte Perkins Gilman, one can't help but conclude that the class interest of the majority of "material feminists" were the main reason for the failure of so many housework reform projects to meet the needs of working-class, immigrant, and black women. Hayden deplores the way in which some material feminists were either co-opted or silenced by the promoters of consumerism, but she does not see that it was precisely the lack of a wider political strategy that led the material feminists to do this.

This brings us to Hayden's key theoretical category: "material feminism". She distinguishes this both from socialist feminism and from the feminism of those who fought for political rights or social reform (suffragettes, temperance activists, etc.) Material feminists, she states, "expounded one powerful idea: that women must create feminist homes with socialized housework and child care"; "while other feminists campaigned for political or social change . . . the material feminists concentrated on economic and spatial issues as the basis of material life." (P. 1).

The feminists discussed by Hayden did indeed draw attention to certain problems, such as the isolation and overwork of housewives, which political activists usually ignored. However, Hayden glosses over the material feminists' crucial error, namely that material changes in household organization could not be generalized to society as a whole without some major social upheavals. The material feminists did not foresee (and they're certainly not alone in this) that capitalism might be able to co-opt and integrate many of their ideas and

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inventions, as ways of *rationalizing* housework without challenging the gender and class relations that created the housewife and her problems in the first place. The difference between domestic co-optation and domestic revolution is illustrated in the chasm that separates the Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet from the community food co-op.

The point is that the pilot-projects that Hayden lovingly describes remained 'utopian' not just because of individual failures of nerve, but because American capitalism could only survive and grow by creating fifty million single-family dwellings, each with its own set of appliances. And for those who scoff at conspiracy theories, the last couple of chapters of Hayden's book are full of evidence that the crushing of the radicalism of 1880-1914, and the subsequent promotion of consumerism as the *summum bonum* were indeed consciously planned by industry and government. Judging by the evidence provided by Hayden, the counter-revolution in domestic relations was nothing if not a conspiracy.

In the 1890s, when socialism and feminism were spreading throughout the U.S., many radicals thought that the private kitchen was about to disappear, and that women would all soon have well-paid jobs. This optimism, however, was short-lived. The Socialist Party of America, weakened by internal dissension, was effectively eliminated in the Red Scare of 1914-20 (see the movie "Reds" for some details of this); while suffragists, having already alienated themselves from both workers and blacks through a series of strategic blunders, were finally depoliticized by winning their one and only goal, the vote. Thus, when the war ended in 1918, the government's aim of sending women back into the home to create jobs for veterans dovetailed neatly with industry's aim of expanding the consumer sector. These economic goals were linked to a very explicit political motivation: in a book entitled *Good Homes Make Contented Workers*, published by an industrial planning firm in 1919, it was stated that "the man owns his home but in a sense his home owns him, checking his rash impulses . . . Then they won't leave and they won't strike. It ties them down so they have a stake in our prosperity." (Quoted on p. 284).

During the red scare, the community housing projects that had mushroomed in American — and Canadian — cities were attacked as hotbeds of anti-Americanism, communism, and lice. Henry Ford's famous spider-web chart of 'pinko' organizations, which was widely reproduced, included the YWCA and the WCTU. Co-operativism, feminism, and all other forms of non-macho behaviour were tarred with the brush of Bolshevism.

A few years later, as the Depression was settling in, the idea of promoting single-family, owner-occupied dwellings for the working class was taken up by none other than Herbert Hoover. The idea was to keep down strikes, eliminate collectivism, and promote sales of consumer goods. The homeowner, assumed to be male, was seen as by nature conservative; and so the ideology of the suburb was born, Hoover's own "Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership" (1931) explicitly linked the building of suburbs for the white working class to these political goals. And, as Hayden points out, the male workers who scrimped and saved to buy a home had an edge over their wives which their fathers had not

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had; this problem was compounded by the effect of the Depression on women's employment opportunities.

These right-wing strategies were successful partly because the co-operative movement had by then become disrespectable, being associated with the break-up of the family, the yellow peril, and other horrors. Many noted feminists made the tragic error of attempting to gain respectability for their own little projects (in the 1920s and 1930s), at the expense of all other progressive movements. They concentrated on such things as home economics classes and new kitchen gadgets. The irony of it all was that when their own organizations, such as the YWCA and the WCTU, themselves came under attack, there was no one left to defend them. A further irony, not mentioned by Hayden, was that as the Communist Party flourished in the thirties and revived the radical tradition, feminism had lost its radical roots, and was thus not integrated into the new wave of left-wing activity. Socialism became rather impoverished and class reductionist for the first time in American history; though the communist leadership certainly bears some of the blame for this, the evidence presented by Hayden shows that feminists themselves contributed to this tragic split.

To conclude: the success of the domestic *counter*-revolution demonstrates that the Achilles' heel of the whole material feminist project had been the glossing over of political and class contradictions. While the early utopians were clear that their buildings and gadgets were only means to an end — the end being the total renewal and transfiguration of the body politic — the later material feminists became rather fetishistic about their commodities. They forgot that it was not the automatic washing machine that would by itself deliver women from slavery; they forgot, or never knew, that without a broader political context such material changes can easily be incorporated into more sophisticated forms of oppression. The housewife of the 1980s does not have to wash by hand; but her family expects clean clothes every day, not just every week, and her television expects inhuman whiteness to shine from every collar. It seems to me that the real domestic revolution has yet to take place.

Hayden has given us an important and readable book which deserves a wide readership. Nevertheless, her book is marred by many of the problems that characterize much of American feminist research: a naive understanding of the class structure in the U.S., and a failure to underline sufficiently that many of the gains made by well-to-do ladies from Boston and New York were made on the backs of their Irish maids, their black cooks, and their Russian Jewish seamstresses. In this sense, the contradictions plaguing the material feminists are still very much with us.

Mariana Valverde  
Department of Women's Studies  
University of Toronto