Jill Mathews discusses some of the hard questions between marxism and feminism. She argues that marxism is patriarchal at its core. Marx, she says, analysed the masculine economy and called it universal. She challenges modern concepts of women and work and illustrates that it is not only housework which is ignored by the labour movement but most of the work of women that earns income and produces commodities and services for sale. Her solution is a politics which puts women first.

I want to talk about a politics that takes women's experience as central: a politics that sees women first; that works to create a space in which women are autonomous shapers and creators of our own meaning.

This politics takes as its starting point the power relations in which women are engaged.

Fundamentally, women are systematically controlled, manipulated and exploited as women within a series of relations from which men as men benefit.

This systematic oppression of women is expressed and experienced in every dimension of personal and social existence: economically and ideologically, politically, culturally, physically, sexually, psychically. Such systematic masculine sexism, or patriarchy, has created, over its history, a dual reality.

The world that women inhabit, the reality that we experience, the truths that we know are different from men's.

If we take for the moment the central materialist proposition that consciousness is determined by material circumstances, the recognition that women's and men's material circumstances are fundamentally different is of crucial importance in devising political strategies for social change.

How different is different? and how significant is it? I don't know. Feminism, or perhaps the set of feminisms, are in flux at the moment.

The process of deconstructing the universe back to its masculine specificity has reached a stage where the enormity of the task is being reassessed. We are becoming aware, in a different way from before, of how totally the world has been created in the social image of man; how totally reality has been perceived through masculine eyes; how deeply entrenched in masculine symbolism is our very language, both in words and structure.

We are becoming angry all over again.

We are not content to be simply The Other, marginally attached to this Men's world.

So, what about marxism — as a tool, as an ally, in the struggle?

There is serious and growing doubt among various groups of feminists about whether marxism has anything to offer a politics that takes women as central.

The reason for this is not just its manifest sexism at the level of individual relations, or social practice, or organisation, or political programme. That level of sexism certainly exists, and is slowly being challenged and changed within at least some of the marxist parties.

In no way am I intending to impugn the good intentions of many marxists, both women and men, in these struggles against sexism. But the real problem is rather more deeply embedded. Marxism, as a theory, is patriarchal.

This is not simply to call marxism sex-blind, or gender-free, and it cannot be corrected simply by adding women's oppression on to the whole list of other oppressions dealt with by marxists.

The solution is not simply a matter of equality of numbers, of affirmative action, of getting more women into positions of power within the party, the union, the committee — although these are crucial reforms.

Marxism is patriarchal at its core, in its philosophical assumption and its key concepts. Along with the capitalism it opposes, and the whole
history of western social and political thought, Marxism puts man at the centre of its theory, and calls that man universal human.

This is the direction of a growing feminist critique of marxism. Obviously a complex business, and fairly new, but strong. I don't want to set myself up here as an Aunt Sally for philosophical debate about the epistemology and ontology of marxist theory. There are others who can argue that case much more cogently. I would recommend an article on marxism and feminism by Mia Campioni and Liz Gross in the latest issue of Intervention. They present one of the best analyses of the phallocentrism of marxism's philosophical assumptions about Knowledge, Truth, Reason and Power, and the need for a genuine autonomy for women's theories and practices.

Instead of talking about politics at that level, I want instead to talk about about a few of the phallocentric assumptions involved in marxist analysis of everyday economics and politics.

Let's start with the patriarch himself. In the preface to Capital, Marx declared that 'here individuals are dealt with only in so far as they are the personification of economic categories, embodiments of particular class relations and class interests.' Already, we are presented with a unity, a universality that pretends to have no sex.

He then goes on to analyse the inner dynamics of pure capitalism. This involves concentrating on those areas of production that were at the time most advanced in terms of capitalist organisation, and to leave aside, for the sake of clarity of analysis, those areas of economic life that were not, or not yet, organised on such lines. Further, his focus on the point of production from the viewpoint of capital excluded all other socially necessary work that did not add directly enough to capital's extraction of surplus value. Thus, the whole area of consumption and its integral relation to production is ignored. The work that is poorly organised by capitalism at the local and domestic levels is ignored. The uneven spread of the capitalist marketplace throughout industrialised economies is ignored.

Even more explicitly, for the purposes of analysis, Marx assumed that the 'average laborer' was the male head of household. He acknowledged the difference between the 'labour power of men and women, of adults and children' only to exclude from analysis all but the prime age male.

A consequence of this method of analysis was that the economic categories Marx used were those which tended best to explain the class relations, exploitation and interests of adult male workers in the commanding heights of the industrial capitalist economy of mid-nineteenth century Britain. Apart from everything else, this form of analysis ignored the fact that capitalism was an intrinsically gendered system. The economic order then, as now, was a dual one.

The myth that women have only entered the workforce in large numbers in the post-war period is not borne out by the fact that women had always engaged in domestic capitalist labour such as private sale of skills, home produce and lodgings, operation of small businesses, and outwork.

The sexual division of labour was an essential organising principle of capitalism, not a mere excrescence or afterthought. Marx analysed the masculine economy and called it universal capitalism. Marxists ever since have maintained this distortion. The very words they use have acquired meanings that apply only to the masculine economic world, but are used as if they were gender-free universals.

Notions of labor, of skill, productivity, workplace, unit, time, career, part-time, working conditions, unemployment, wages: all have a different meaning depending upon whether they assume the cock-eyed view that the masculine economy comprises the whole economy, or whether they accommodate the fully-gendered, dual nature of that whole.

Examples of such distortions are abundant, but a few will indicate the centrality of masculine experience.

The notion of work does not commonly accommodate domestic housework, childcare, or shopping; that of the social relations of production does not encompass sexual harassment; that of career does not take account of the rearing of children; that of the family wage ignores the existence of women supporting dependents.

We know very little at all about the history or experience of females' economic life because the categories used in the masculine economy are wrong for the feminine.

Such masculine economic language symbolically organises a patriarchal reality...their hero of marxism is the worker.

This worker was ideally a male artisan. He learnt a specific trade as an apprentice, acquiring over time a
definite and definable skill, which he
sold throughout his lifetime to capital.
He entered a career at an early age,
and remained within it steadfastly until
death or retirement.
All the critical terms of this model are
male. Apprenticeships, by and large,
were denied to girls. Skill, we have
come to understand, is a description of
what men do, whereas women doing
the same work tend to be described as
unskilled.

Women are denied a lifetime car-
 eer because of the ideological
assumption that marriage must
remove them, at least for a time, from
the waged workforce.
This meaning of worker not only
determines the meaning of work. It
also establishes the criteria by which
both working class membership and
trade union membership are assessed.
Economically, politically and
ideologically, the male artisan has
been used as the measure of work and
of the working class, leaving out, by
definition, unskilled men, especially
those whose work lives are constantly
interrupted by unemployment and who
pick up work when and where they can.
These men, and the casual poor, make
up a large section of that
anathematised group, the lumpen-
proletariat. The artisan definition also
excludes ethnic and race outsiders.
Most importantly, it excludes women,
especially married or familied women.
The heroic worker of socialist
Australian history is anti-woman, anti-
homosexual, and racist because these
attitudes were symbolic of the material
circumstances of his work. The culture
of these heroic workers was ockerism,
centring around solidarity, drinking,
mateship and exclusion. Their political
culture demanded the domestication
and subordination of women, and
expressed itself in patriarchalism of
leadership, hierarchy and authority.
They were certainly valiant fighters
against capitalism, but only as it
affected their specific, sectional,
masculine interests.
This definition of the working class
and its model worker has become
increasingly anachronistic. Because of
changes in the organisation of
capitalism, the hegemony of the male
manual worker within the working
class has declined, being replaced by a
more diverse group of service and
technical workers.
The politics of marxist and other left
groups, the trade unions, and the
Labor Party, have begun to
acknowledge these changes and to
accommodate and adapt to the
demands and interests of the newly
visible workers.
Because many of these workers in
technical and service industries are
women, there is an appearance of
feminisation of the political process.
This feminisation is, however, only a
limited acceptance of women into the
masculine world, on masculine terms.
The phallocentric, masculinist
assumptions remain in place.
What has really changed for women
and our experience of subordination?
What has changed in our experience of
work?
By and large, women’s work has only
been acknowledged if we are visible in
the masculine economy, and even
then, the only part of our work that
counts is that directly organised in
masculine capitalist forms.
Trade unions, which exist to protect
and further the interests of working
people have only chosen to defend
masculine work. Socialist and marxist
parties that have proclaimed working
people to be the agents of change and
overthrow of capitalism have only
concerned themselves with that
masculine class of workers in the
commanding heights of capitalism,
throwing occasionally, a token glance
at working class families, as
appendages.
Now, you all know the story about
how women, over the last thirty
years, have begun adhering to
Engels’ injunction to free ourselves by
engaging in waged work. The story
about how, until the 1950s, women
comprised about 20% of the Australian
workforce, and how only about 6% of married women were at work. Then, in the post-war boom, women began popping out of the woodwork. By 1980, the percentage of women in the workforce had almost doubled, to about 37%, while 60% of married women were out there. As a consequence, several times removed, we have more women in trade unions, more women voting for the ALP, and new demands by working women for equal pay, no discrimination, and childcare.

This story is a load of patriarchal bullshit. It denies our historical work experience and our oppression. It denies our work. I'm not talking here about housework, vital though that is. I'm talking about the denial of the work of women that earned income, that produced commodities and services for sale in the capitalist marketplace.

Throughout the 19th century and well into the 20th, married women were extensively involved in an informal, or domestic, capitalist economy, the dimensions of which are impossible to know because the tools of masculine economic analysis were not directed towards it, regardless of whether those tools were wielded by census or tax officers, or labour inspectors, or trade unionists or marxists. The measurement of this work was based in and around the home. Married women, or rather familial women moved at times out of their own homes and into others, or into more masculine workplaces for short periods of time, where they undertook the same or similar work to that which they did in the home.

Alternatively, married women brought into their homes paid work. In all instances, the crucial determinant was compatibility with their family domestic work in terms of time, space, movement and skills. Or, rather, the determinant was that of an integral fit between financial, emotional, ideological and material necessities and possibilities. All of this work was outside the restrictions, protections, surveillance and organisation of masculine capitalist work.

There were at least five types of this domestic capitalist labour:

- **Private sales of skills.** Married women sold their domestically skilled labour power to other household units. (Laundry, ironing, cooking, cleaning, childminding, casual prostitution).
- **Private sale of home produce/commodities.** Married women produced goods for their own families' use, and sold the surplus, or produced extra deliberately for sale.
- **Provision of lodgings, board, bed and breakfast.** Married women sold the services and familial comforts of the home to strangers.
- **Operation of a small business from within or near the home (Corner shops, dressmaking, music teaching).**
- **Outwork.** This form of domestic capitalist work was the closest to the forms of the masculine economy. It gained the attention of trade unions and socialists, but they were more concerned with sweating's consequences for factory workers than with the economic survival of women working at home.

All this domestic capitalist work has been as much as ignored by Marxists as by masculine ruling class apologists when looking at the development and growth of capitalism in Australia. (As an aside, I might point out that even at the strictly waged level of the economy throughout the 18th century, women have been ignored if they worked around the home. The female counterpart of the heroic male artisan was the domestic servant...Where does she fit in marxist economic theory?)

That was the past. What about now? Female domestic capitalist work still continues. Married women have kept on doing the same work as before, but now it has become visible. The capitalist marketplace and its forms of organisation have diversified.

This new visibility to masculine analysts, not a new reality, is the source of the apparently revolutionary move of married women into the workforce involving:

- **Sale of skills.** Private sale amongst neighbors has become mediated through service companies and government agencies. Married women now do the same work part-time in laundromats, cleaning companies, home help services, family day-care and massage parlours.
- **Sale of commodities.** Local sale of home products has become organised by capitalistic companies into distribution networks for commercial commodities... (Holiday Magic cosmetics, Tupperware) and home products have been transformed into luxury, handmade craft commodities.
- **Board and lodging** probably has declined absolutely, but still exists as a form of cheap accommodation, and is a growing aspect of the tourist trade.
- **Small business.** The registration of home companies is at a peak. Many of them now service specialised needs of companies, households and individuals.
- **Outwork.** There is no reliable quantitative information, but some analysts believe that the number of outworkers is increasing as more employers try to cut costs in time of depression. As well as in the traditional area of the clothing trade, outwork is progressively an important process in packaging and light assembly work, and especially in clerical work.

All of this new-old work is still organised around the same determinant as in the past — the compatibility of the two spheres of work, and the needs of existence, daily, and over the life-cycle. Although women have entered the masculine economy, our experience of it, our consciousness of it remains different from men's.

As women's work in the masculine economy is predominantly on a part-time basis. From 1965 to 1980, the number of female part-time workers increased from 289,000 to 814,000, more than a third of all women workers, and over three quarters of these are married.

Patriarchal theory, including Marxism, is trying to come to terms with this new visibility of women's work. Patriarchal left politics is trying to come to terms with new capitalist processes. Processes, at least, that are new for men, who are increasingly being drawn into previously female work patterns: part-time work, outwork, domestic capitalist work, periodic unemployment, de- and re-skilling, parental breaks in career.

Such attempts to come to terms with a changing economy are still, however, being conducted from within a vision that takes men as the measure. Patriarchal theory is attempting to appropriate women's knowledge and experience and turn it to male advantage, then to claim that we are all benefitting. We are being wooed: we must not become subordinate wives.

We, as women, can and must try to influence patriarchal marxist theory. We must retain our own meanings and experiences, our own difference, our autonomy. We are stronger than they, or we think. Our struggle is to determine our own issues; to transform ourselves and the world from the basis of our own experience and reality — not just relative to the boy.

We must fight a politics that appropriates our lives and turns us into that universal which is masculine. Only a politics that puts women first is of any use to us.

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