



# Reframing the Domestic labour debate in English Literature

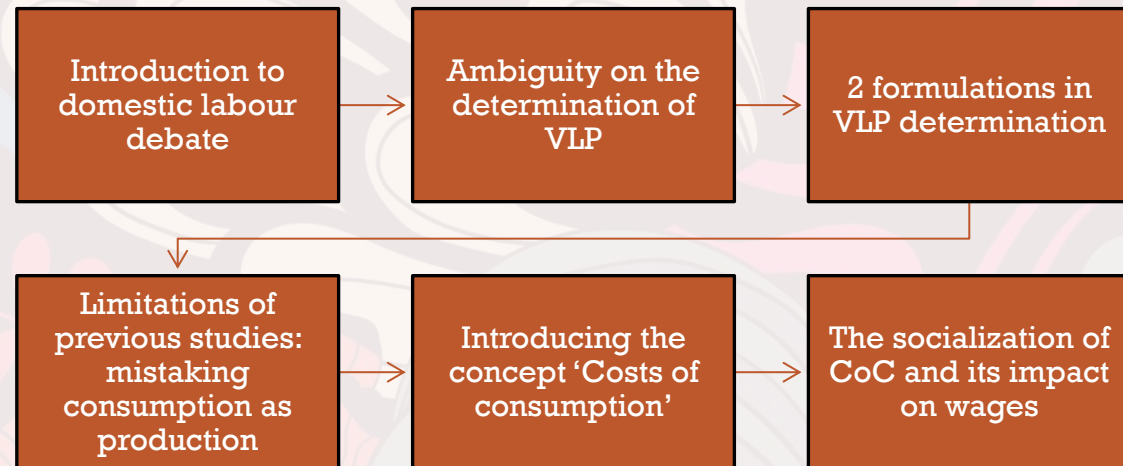
Marx's 'Costs of Consumption' and the Reproduction of Labour Power

Chen-xi GAO (Hitotsubashi University, JP)

Ming-ze BAI (The University of Hong Kong, HK SAR)



# Outline





# Introduction to the Domestic Labour Debate

## Definition

- Domestic labour: unpaid work performed within households, primarily by women
- Unhappy marriage between Marxists and feminists (Hartmann 1979)
- Social reproduction theory (Bhattacharya 2017)

## Key Issues Concerning Domestic Labour

- *Role in reproducing labour power*
- *Economic nature (productive vs. unproductive)*
- *Relationship to women's oppression*
- Relationship between domestic sphere and capitalist production

## Key Debaters

- *Platforms*
  - CSEB, NLR, Monthly Review, CSE, CJE, S&S
- *Early Representatives*
  - Delphy (1960),
  - Benston (1969)
  - Harrison (1973)
  - Dalla Costa et al. (1973)
  - Secombe (1974)
  - Gardiner (1976)
  - etc.



# The Domestic labour debate

The material basis for the subordination of women



Housework's economic contribution to capitalist system



Relation between domestic sphere and capitalist production



## Modes of production controversy

### Unitary mode of production

- Represented by Marxist fundamentalists
- The capitalist mode of production (MoP) is the only viable system
- Domestic sphere does not belong to 'production'

### Client mode of production (affiliate mode)

- Represented by Marxist revisionists
- Domestic sphere is affiliated to but is not directly dominated and exploited under capitalist production
- A transfer of surplus between the two modes is mediated by the VLP

### Petty commodity mode (independent patriarchal mode)

- Represented by most feminists
- An autonomous domestic (patriarchal) mode of production resemble petty commodity production
- Women are directly exploited by men



# Main controversies

Issues	Marxists Fundamentalists	Marxists Revisionists	Feminists
Economic nature of domestic labour	Unproductive	Productive	Productive
Relationship to capitalist production	Not relevant	Indirectly contributes	Directly contributes
Stances in the Mode of Production (MoP) debate	Single MoP (only Capitalist MoP)	Affiliate mode (Domestic client mode affiliated to Capitalist MoP)	Dual MoP (Patriarchal mode independent from Capitalist)
Proposed solutions	Unitary (class struggle and socialized production)	Unitary but recognising the value of women's works	Bilateral (Challenge both Capitalist and patriarchal dominance )



# Ambiguity in the determination of the value of labour power (VLP)

Value Formulation  
Labour time Formulation  
(Bubeck 2011: 23; 1995: 70; Vogel  
2013b: 193; Quick 2018: 386)

The Problem of 'family wages'  
Determination of VLP on a  
generational basis  
Quick 2018: 388; Bubeck 2011: 22;  
1995: 68-9

Two formulations

Historical and  
moral factors

'generational basis'

how to understand the 'historical and  
moral moments' affecting VLP





## Two formulations in the VLP determination

### The value formulation

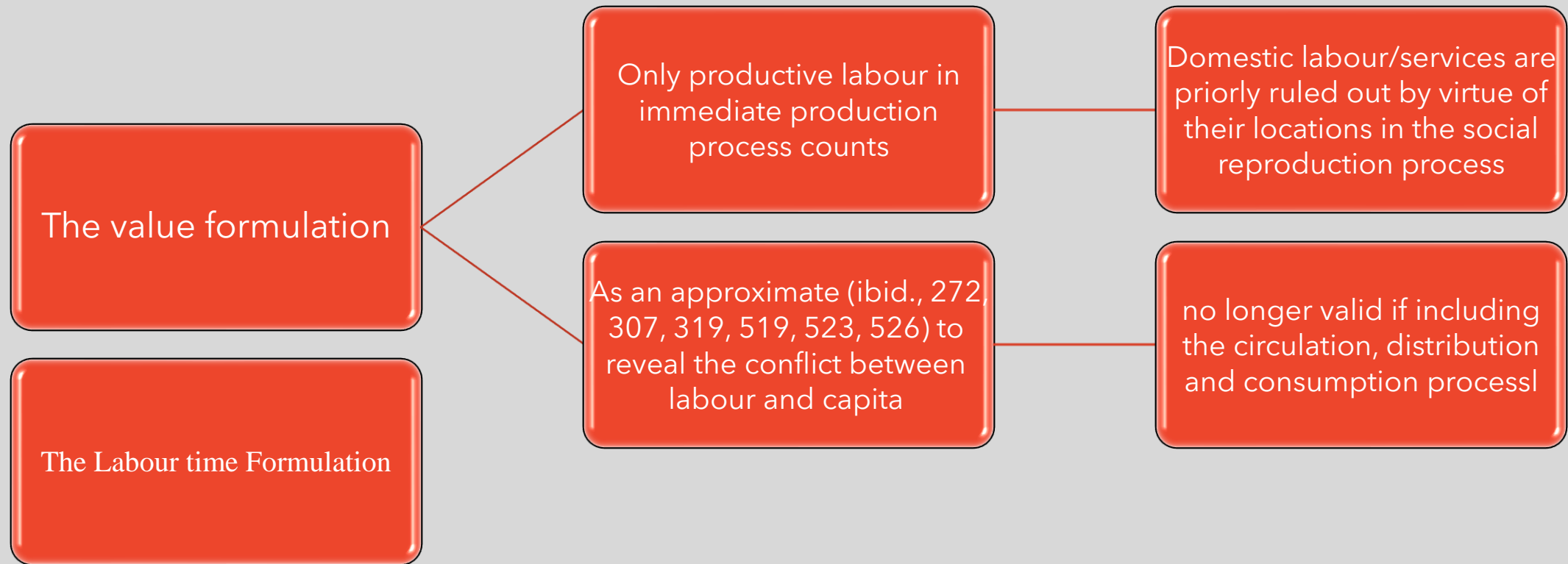
- Connotation:
  - 'the value of the means of subsistence necessary for the maintenance of the labourer' (Marx and Engels 1975-2004, 35: 181) as the determining factor for VLP
- Implications:
  - Domestic labour and market-based domestic services not included in the means of subsistence and hence not directly contribute to VLP and surplus production
- Limitation:
  - shall be abandoned in the analysis of consumption process and domestic sphere

### The labour time formulation

- 'determined, as in the case of every other commodity, by the labour time necessary for the production, and consequently the reproduction, of this special article,' (Marx and Engels 1975-2004, 35: 180-1)



# The value formulation as an approximate





# The so-called 'benefit position'





## Two formulations in the VLP determination

### The value formulation

- 'the value of the means of subsistence necessary for the maintenance of the labourer' as the determining factor for VLP

### The labour time formulation

- 'determined, as in the case of every other commodity, by the labour time necessary for the production, and consequently the reproduction, of this special article,' (Marx and Engels 1975-2004, 35: 180-1)
- Supported by revisionists (Harrison 1973; Gardiner 1976; Harrison and Gough 1975) and some feminists (Dalla Costa, et al. 1973) to buttress their idea that domestic labour is productive of VLP
- Indicate a 'gap' between VLP and wages if domestic labour counts as necessary labour for reproducing VLP



# The defects of the 'benefit position'







# Limitations of previous studies: Mistaking the theoretical field

- The real question does not lie in the inability of Marx's theory but in the problem of choosing the proper branch of theory
- Marx does not ignore domestic/personal consumption sphere beyond the theoretical scope of immediate production process
  - 'everyone, apart from his productive labour or the exploitation of productive labour, would have several functions to fulfil that would not be productive and enter into the costs of consumption' (Marx and Engels 1975–2004, 31: 194)
- costs of consumption: the costs for maintaining domestic labour or acquiring market-based consumption services





# Labour for production and labour for consumption

‘the *labour added during the year* is not represented entirely by that part of the product which can be resolved into WAGES and PROFITS. For these WAGES and PROFITS buy SERVICES, that is, labour which does not enter into the product of which WAGES and PROFITS form [a part]. These SERVICES are labour which is used up in the consumption of the product and does not enter into its immediate production.’

(Marx and Engels 1975–2004, 32: 385)

- Labour for consumption as additional labour required AFTER the immediate production process is finished



# Labour for consumption and costs of consumption

‘everyone, apart from his productive labour or the exploitation of productive labour, would have a number of functions to fulfil which would not be productive and would in part enter into the costs of consumption. (The real productive labourers have to bear these consumption costs themselves and to perform their unproductive labour themselves.) If these “SERVICES” are pleasant, ...’

(Marx and Engels 1975–2004, 31: 194)

- Some unproductive functions need to be undertaken by unproductive labour
- Functions incurred in the consumption process incur ‘costs of consumption’ that are generally borne by the unproductive labour or ‘services’ of the labourers.



# Costs of consumption and its unproductive nature

‘there are very few unproductive labours or services left on which the labourer’s wages are spent, especially as he himself provides his **costs of consumption** (cooking, keeping his house clean, generally even repairs).’

(Marx and Engels 1975-2004, 31: 104)

- Like the ‘genuine costs of circulation’, all costs of consumption arise only from the consuming of commodities do not add to their value. CoC are merely expenses incurred in the consumption of the value



# Monetary expense and labour expense on CoC

- Labour expense on costs of consumption
  - Undertaken by unpaid domestic labour
  - Does not generate costs of the employers (will not be paid by wage)
- Monetary expense on costs of consumption
  - ‘The worker himself can buy labour, i.e. can buy commodities which are provided in the form of services, and when he expends his wage in such services this expenditure does not differ in any respect from the expenditure of his wage to buy any other commodity’. (Marx and Engels 1975–2004, 34: 139)
  - the services bought by labour family do generate a money expense and ‘left on ... the labourer’s wages,’ but they are ‘very few’. (Marx and Engels 1975–2004, 31: 104)



# Service

- **Consumption labour and classic service**

Consequently, neither domestic labour that fulfils ‘a number of functions’ which ‘enter into the costs of consumption’, nor consumption services ‘on which the labourer’s wages are spent’ is productive labour. They are generally named after ‘services,’ a term used by Marx and Smith for referring ‘unproductive labour’ that is exchanged against the revenue. (Smith and Cannan 1977: 441–442; Marx and Engels 1975-2004, 30: 12; 31: 104)

- **Unproductive functions and useful labour**

It should be noted that being unproductive does not mean that the labour is useless. Productive labour fulfils productive functions, unproductive labour likewise, fulfil different functions. These unproductive functions could be necessary, but are neither carried out in the immediate production process, nor could not be seen as an additional process of production.





# Theoretical implication by introducing CoC

- consumption labour as defined above does not constitute any part of the VLP, the ‘gap’ between the wage and VLP as indicated by Harrison (1973b: 43-4) does not exist.
- an ‘add-on’ in the level of wages is possible for covering the socialised ‘costs of consumption’ incurred by the substitution of domestic labour by market-based consumption services



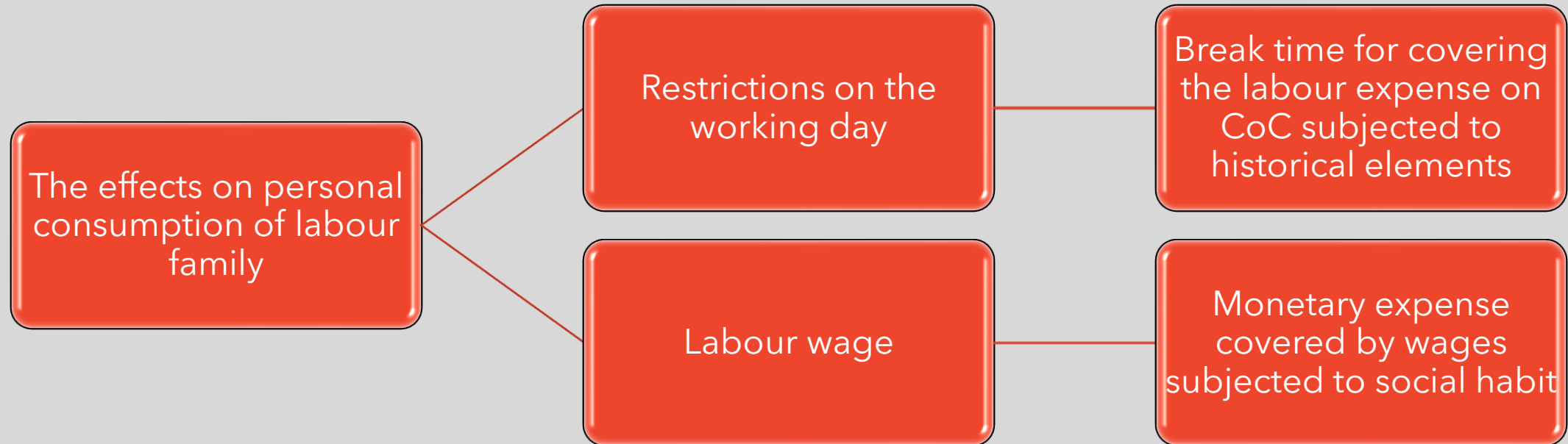


# Social conditions for the reproduction of labour power

‘the value of the labouring power is formed by two elements—the one merely physical, the other historical or social’ (Marx and Engels 1975–2004, 20: 144).

- The former is to satisfy the ‘natural needs’ of proletariats including ‘food, clothing, fuel, and housing,’ (Marx and Engels 1975–2004, 35:181)
  - ‘the *value* of those indispensable necessities forms, therefore, the ultimate limit of the *value of labour*.’ (Marx and Engels 1975–2004, 20: 144–5)
- The latter refers to their ‘needs created by society’ (Marx and Engels 1975–2004, 28:31)
  - Subjected to ‘*traditional standard of life*’ (Marx and Engels 1975–2004, 20:145)
  - relates to the historical and social elements on the determination of VLP (Marx and Engels 1975–2004, 35:181)

# The historical and social elements





# Labour expenditure on CoC in normal working day

•‘The real productive labourers have to bear these consumption costs themselves.’ (Marx and Engels 1975–2004, 31: 194)



## Working day

- Time reserved for performing productive labour
- Resulting in labour wage procured for buying means of subsistence

## Break time

- Time reserved for performing domestic labour
- Resulting in **labour expenditure** on the CoC



# CoC in normal working day

- ‘The real productive labourers have to bear these consumption costs themselves.’ (Marx and Engels 1975–2004, 31: 194)
- When the ‘*traditional standard of life*’ is still possible, when the natural and social limit on VLP and thus on working day are not broken through, the ‘costs of consumption’ will have to be **bear upon by labourers themselves**, just as it was in the serfdom
- Domestic labour constitutes a part of ‘costs of consumption’ in the form of labour expenditure that are NOT the ‘necessary’ costs for capitalists historically, and the money expenditure of CoC on these services is not intrinsically a part of VLP. Therefore, the ‘gap’ is a false issue



# Monetary expense on CoC

- ‘The real productive labourers have to bear these consumption costs themselves.’ (Marx and Engels 1975–2004, 31: 194)
- ‘worker himself can buy labour, i.e. can buy commodities which are provided in the form of services’ (Marx and Engels 1975–2004, 34: 139) .....But ‘there are very few unproductive labours or services left on which the labourer’s wages are spent’ (Marx and Engels 1975–2004, 31: 104) and it is spent ‘only when it saves this time for a productive worker.’ (Marx and Engels 1975–2004, 31: 80)
- these services ‘is absolutely necessary in order to consume things’ and is acquired by money (labour wage), ‘this would in no way alter the circumstance that one of these labours is productive and the other unproductive.’ (Marx and Engels 1975–2004, 31: 80)





# 'Service economy'

- 'it is not the normal maintenance of the labour power which is to determine the limits of the working day; it is the greatest possible daily expenditure of labour power, no matter how diseased, compulsory, and painful it may be, which is to determine the limits of the labourers' period of repose.' (Marx and Engels 1975–2004, 35: 271)
- these services 'is **absolutely necessary** in order to consume things' and is acquired by money (labour wage), 'this would in no way alter the circumstance that one of these labours is productive and the other unproductive.' (Marx and Engels 1975–2004, 31: 80)
- the main benefit for substituting domestic labour in the home with market-based consumption services is that it 'saves this time for a productive worker'.



# Discriminating sexual division of labour favours long working day





# Money expense on CoC when working day exceeds its original limit



## Original part of working day

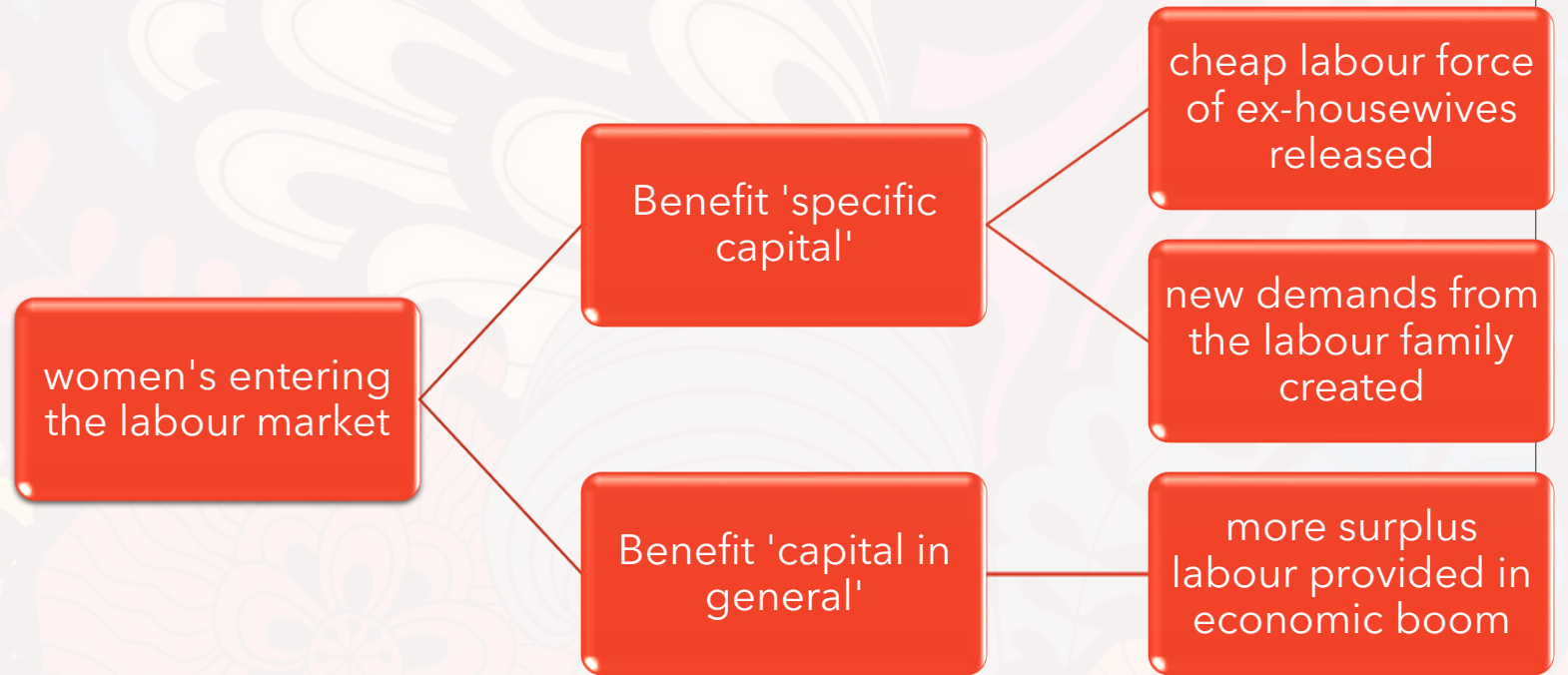
- Time reserved for performing productive labour
- Resulting in labour wage procured for buying means of subsistence

## Extended part of Working day

- Time reserved for performing additional productive labour
- Resulting in additional wage procured for the **money expense** on CoC



# New 'benefit position'





# Implications

- Most arguments in domestic labour debate stressing the ‘irreplaceable role’ of domestic labour in benefiting capitalist production shall be reconsidered under today’s service economy, when the reproduction of labour power is increasingly relied upon the socialisation of CoC.
- The New ‘benefit position’ under the socialization of CoC
  - it would leave the reproduction of labour power entirely subject to capitalist relations, leaving the role of CoC even more significant
  - It would lay bare the exploitative nature of capitalist relations in the sphere of personal consumption, resurrecting Marx’s notion of exploitation (particularly, ‘secondary exploitation’ )
  - Both domestic labour and market-based consumption services shall be distinguished ‘from work that can reasonably be described as production, especially as the production of objects’ to prevent ‘a crucially misleading representation of their <women’s> work.’ (Bubeck 1995: 66-7; 2011: 20)



# Reference - I

1. Bell, Daniel. 2019. The coming of post-industrial society. In *Social Stratification, Class, Race, and Gender in Sociological Perspective, Second Edition* (pp. 805-817). Routledge.
2. Benería, Lourdes. 2003. *Gender, Development, and Globalization*. New York: Routledge.
3. ———. “Introduction.” Pp. xvii–xl in Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*. Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket.
4. Boas, Franz. 1966. *Kwakiutl ethnology*. University of Chicago Press. Chicago.
5. Bruegel, Irene. 1978. What keeps the family going? *International Socialism* 2(1): 2-15.
6. Bubeck, Diemut Elisabet. 1995. *Care, gender, and justice*. Oxford University Press.
7. ———. 2011. The domestic labour debate. In *Care, Gender, and Justice* (pp. 45–82). Oxford University Press. (doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198279907.003.0003)
8. Coulson, Margaret, Magas Branka, and Wainwright Hilary. 1975. The housewife and her labour under capitalism: a critique. *New Left Review* 89(1): 59-71.
9. Dalla Costa, Mariarosa, and Selma James. 1973. *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*. Bristol: Falling Wall Press: 53 n. 12.
10. Delphy, Christine. 1984. *Close to Home*. London: Hutchinson.
11. Delphy, Christine, and Diana Leonard. 1992. *Familiar Exploitation*. Cambridge: Polity.





## Reference - II

12. Ferguson, Susan, and David McNally. 2013. "Introduction." Pp. xvii–xl in Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*. Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket.
13. Fine, Ben, and Alfredo Saad-Filho. 2010. *Marx's Capital*. 5th edition. London: Pluto Press.
14. Fraser, Nancy. 2016. Contradictions of Capital and Care. *New Left Review*, 100 (July August): 99–117.
15. Gardiner, Jean. 1975. Women's Domestic Labour. *New Left Review*, 89: 47-58.
16. Gardiner, Jean. 1976. Political Economy of Domestic Labour in Capitalist Society. In Barker, Robert L., and Sheila J. Allen (eds.). 1976. *Dependence and Exploitation in Work and Marriage*, London: Longman.
17. Gardiner, John, Susan Felicity Himmelweit, and Clare Mackintosh. 1975. Women's Domestic Labour. *Bulletin of the Conference of Socialist Economists*, 4(2): 1-11.
18. Godelier, Maurice. 1986. *The mental and the material: Thought, economy, and society*. (M. Thom, Trans.). Verso.
19. Goodale, Jane Carter. 1971. *Tiwi wives: A study of the women of Melville Island, North Australia*. University of Washington Press, Seattle.





## Reference - III

20. Gough, Ian. 1972. Marx's theory of productive and unproductive labour. *New Left Review* 1(76): 47-72.
21. ———. 1973. On Productive and Unproductive Labour - A Reply. *Bulletin of the Conference of Socialist Economists*, (Winter), 68-72.
22. Gough, Ian, and Harrison John. 1975. Unproductive labour and housework again. *Bulletin of the Conference of Socialist Economists* 4(1).
23. Harrison, John. 1973a. Productive and Unproductive Labour in Marx's Political Economy. *Bulletin of the Conference of Socialist Economists* (Autumn): 70-81.
24. ———. 1973b. The Political Economy of Housework. *Bulletin of the Conference of Socialist Economists* (Winter): 35-51.
25. Himmelweit, Susan, and Mohun Simon. 1977. Domestic Labour and Capital. *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 1(1): 15-31.
26. Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK der SED. 1956–1968. *Karl Marx Friedrich Engels Werke*. Berlin: Karl Dietz Verlag.
27. ———. 1975–2015. *Karl Marx Friedrich Engels Gesamtausgabe*. Karl Dietz Verlag.
28. Lebowitz, Michael A. 2003. *Beyond Capital: Marx's Political Economy of the Working Class*. Palgrave Macmillan.





## Reference - IV

29. Mandel, Ernest. 1975. *Late Capitalism*, London: New Left Book.
30. Marx, Karl. 1976. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*. Penguin Publishing Group.
31. Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. 1975–2004. *Marx/Engels Collected Works*. 50 vols. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
32. Mohun, Simon. 1994. A Re(in)statement of the Labor Theory of Value. *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 18(4): 391–412.
33. Molyneux, Maxine. 1979. Beyond the Domestic Labour Debate. *New Left Review* (116): 3-27.
34. Quick, Paddy. 2018. Labor Power: A “Peculiar” Commodity. *Science & Society* 82(3): 386-412.
35. ———. 2020. The Role of Household Production in the Determination of Wages and the Process of Capitalist Production. *Review of Radical Political Economics* 0(0): 1-8.
36. Rowntree, Mickey, and John Rowntree. 1970. More on the Political Economy of Women’s Liberation. *Monthly Review* 21(8) :26-32.
37. Secombe, Wally. 1974. The Housewife and Her Labour under Capitalism. *New Left Review* 83: 3-24.





## Reference - V

38. Smith, Adam and Edwin Cannan. 1977. *An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
39. Smith, Paul. 1978. Domestic labour and Marx's Theory of Value. In Kuhn, Annette, and AnnMarie Wolpe. 1978. *Feminism and Materialism*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
40. Starosta, Guido, and Gaston Caligaris. 2016. "The Commodity Nature of Labor-Power." *Science & Society*, 80(3): 319–345.
41. Ueno, Chizuko. 2009. *Patriarchy and Capitalism* [上野千鶴子. 家父長制と資本制]. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten.
42. Vogel, Lise. 2013a. *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Towards a Unitary Theory*. Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books.
43. ———. 2013b. "Domestic Labor Revisited." Pp. 183–198 in Vogel, 2013a. Originally published in *Science & Society*, 64(2) (Summer), 151–70.
44. Walby, Sylvia Theresa. 1990. *Theorizing Patriarchy*, Oxford: Blackwell.
45. Webster, Gloria Cranmer. 1991. Potlatch at Gilford Island. In Jonaitis, Aldona (ed.). 1991. *Chiefly Feasts: The Enduring Kwakiutl Potlatch*, Seattle: University of Washington Press: 237-260.



This work is supported by JSPS Kakenhi Grant No. 22K13370

# Thanks for your listening

For further questions, please contact us:

[gcx1917@mail.kyusan-u.ac.jp](mailto:gcx1917@mail.kyusan-u.ac.jp)

[pegasustenma15@gmail.com](mailto:pegasustenma15@gmail.com)