



Discussions with Wolff

“How Capitalism has Screwed Women Over”

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The following discussion prompts were written by Professor Wolff to create a discussion based around his piece “How Capitalism has Screwed Women Over” Please note, this article was written by Prof. Wolff on 10/31/2018. Keep the date in mind as it offers relevant historical context.

1. "For a large part of capitalism's history, men found themselves "free" of the status of serf that they had suffered in the feudal system that set lords against serfs. Yet they found themselves also "unfree" because they were trapped within capitalism's parallel employer vs employee system." What is the meaning of this quotation?
2. In a sense, most women did not escape from feudalism as their husbands did. While feudalism gave way to capitalism for the men at the workplace, feudalism remained the condition of women inside the homes they shared with their husbands who had become capitalist employees. How did that affect the relationships between women and men under capitalism?
3. Starting in the 1970s massive numbers of women whose whole lives had been that of serfs inside households took jobs outside the household. In what sense was this a "liberation" of women? In what sense was it just a different kind of unfreedom?
4. Poor women, especially racial minorities, had had to work for wages outside the home for a long time before the mass of women joined them. How does this different history affect US society to this day?
5. Now the majority of women in many capitalist countries do wage labor for employers alongside men. How is that likely going to affect the solidarity of women and men employees as they face capitalist employers inside workplaces and in society as a whole?
6. The hierarchy (power, domination) of lord over serf and of employer over employee was often replicated in relations between men and women. If the socialist notion of democratizing the enterprise - converting top-down capitalist enterprises into democratically run worker coops - were to be realized, how might this influence change in the relationships between men and women?



How Capitalism has Screwed Women Over

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It's been one year since the explosion of the Me Too movement that followed allegations against Harvey Weinstein. Since then, the #metoo hashtag has been used around 19 million times to expose and discuss workplace sexual harassment.

Women are raising their voices. The struggle is multifaceted, but at its heart, women want economic and political equality with men. They also are increasingly questioning capitalism, the system that has allowed and maintained their subordination.

To understand how women have been systematically denied so much of what capitalism has provided to their male peers, we need to go back to a pre-capitalist age.

Before capitalism, there was feudalism — a social structure in which most people (serfs) worked for and answered to lords, who in return granted them land and protection. There was often little or no use of money. Lords did not hire workers. Instead, the subordination was personal and church-sanctioned. People were tied to the land on which they were born, and there wasn't the separation we take for granted today between work and home.

When the transition from feudalism to capitalism began, starting in 17th-century England before spreading globally, enthusiastic supporters promised the new economic system would bring the individual freedom, equality, social solidarity and democracy people longed for. The slogan of the French Revolution that overthrew feudalism was "liberty, equality, fraternity." To this, the American Revolution added "democracy."

For men, capitalism meant escape — from belonging to a lord, being tied to the land, and from rigid hierarchies. Now, they were free to sell their labor to whomever they wanted, without any moral or religious obligation. They relished their escape from feudalism, even as they found themselves trapped within capitalism's employer-employee relationship.

But most women were excluded from even the limited benefits that men enjoyed. Capitalism didn't provide decently paid employment for both men and women. The solution was to insist that women stay at home. A

man's wage plus a woman's work in the home meant no mass of paid jobs needed to be available for women. Capitalists also managed to avoid paying for the child care that produced their future employees.

At home, women cooked meals; cleaned rooms, clothes, and dishes; repaired furniture; provided health care and child care. They worked like feudal serfs. Men's lives navigated daily between household feudalism and workplace capitalism. Exploited by capitalists at work, men could, in turn, exploit their wives at home.

It's women's subordination inside households that has produced many of the inequalities, discriminations, and abuses women are protesting to this day.

Over the last century, huge numbers of women started to work outside the home, led by poorer women. World War II saw large numbers of women entering the workforce. Then, in the 1970s, automation and globalization ended the long tradition of rising real wages in the U.S.

So, women entered the workplace to bring more money into the family. And, in doing so, they often shouldered the burdensome double shift of home and work. Women also tended to be funneled into "pink collar" jobs, such as retail, nursing or teaching, which were paid less.

All the while, across workplaces, women had to deal with men's competitive anxieties. This often manifested itself in men's attempts to extend household inequality to the workplace. As the Me Too movement makes clear, they still do, and the costs are heavy.

But as women fight for equality with men, many have realized that the ultimate problem is not the men. Rather it is the system that has positioned men and women in an unequal economic relationship with employers that infects all the other aspects of their relationships.

There is a movement of women who want more than just to work alongside men within a capitalism that continues to subordinate and exploit them both.

To do that requires that we reorganize how we run homes and businesses in ways neither capitalist nor feudal. Instead, workplaces can be organized as democratic communities. One person, one vote, decides all key workplace matters. The premise of such "worker coops" is that the democracy Americans endorse for politics belongs as well in economics. Such a change could free women and men from being trapped in the system that serves neither.