

The impact of the recession on the time used for non-market/household labor, and the gendered division of labor

Introduction

1. The recession's impact is generally described in terms of the loss of income of working class households.
2. The image of the unemployed is one of a man standing in the street trying to find work. This is indeed one way in which we can "see" the recession, and today's panels on day laborers show how very real this is. Day laborers, as well as the less visible unemployed spend a large portion of the day in this way.
3. But if we stop to think about an unemployed woman, we might instead form an image of a woman desperately slaving over a hot stove, with a bunch of children clinging to her knees.
4. Of course women, as well as men, spend hours looking for jobs, and unemployed men spend time with children. But very little attention is paid to the re-organization of household production that takes place in a deep and prolonged recession such as this one.
5. The way in which we describe this is itself a problem. We talk (and think) in terms of how we "save money" by buying goods on sale, making do with less expensive food, eating out less etc. And indeed it is the reduction in household income that makes things like this necessary. But what is really going on here is a combination of three things:
 - i. An actual reduction in the standard of living –surviving on less. This takes such forms as increases in the number of people per household, as relative (and friends) take in those who are unable to maintain independent housing units. Or suffering from sickness but not going to the doctor etc.
 - ii. Producing at home services that used to be provided by the government, such as after-school care or home visits to the sick. (People who have to leave paid jobs or stop looking for jobs because they are too busy at home will show up not as "unemployed" but join those who have given up looking for work as "not in the labor force" – you will be able to see this, however, in the data on "employment participation rates.")
 - iii. The substitution of household-produced goods and services for goods and services that were previously purchased.
6. My goal today is to try to develop an understanding in particular of the third phenomenon, and by doing so to bring into the picture of the "war on the working class" a deeper understanding of how this war is experienced outside of the moneyed economy.

Household Production

1. The history of capitalist development is in large part a history of the continuous substitution of commodities produced by wage laborers in capitalist enterprises for the goods produced by workers at home. The proportion of wage-labor in the goods and services we consume has increased steadily over many centuries. I can give here only a few examples to this, drawing examples from the experiences of workers in the developed world. (The working class in the developing world is actually more aware of this than workers here.) I look at four categories of the necessities for the life of workers, and the raising of the next generation of workers.
 - a. Clothing. The clothes we wear are now almost entirely produced by wage labor. But the actual "consumption" of these clothes takes place over time, unless we throw our

clothes away after wearing them only once! The hours of labor spent in collecting the clothes we have worn and making them re-wearable before we finally throw them out far exceeds the labor time required for the actual production of the clothes themselves.

- b. Housing. Of course we do not, in the United States today, build our own houses. But once having purchased or rented a housing unit, its everyday maintenance takes time. I don't care much about "dusting," but it is necessary to clean the toilet, to sweep the floor (especially the kitchen floor) and to organize and take out the garbage. And in poorer-quality housing, it is necessary to set traps for cockroaches, mice and rats, and to fix, as best one can, broken fixtures and leaking ceilings. In addition, our homes are places for social interaction, and the time involved in providing for this is considerable.
- c. Child care. The compulsory education of children moved a large portion of child care into the state sector. But increasingly the care of pre-school children, including infants, has also moved into the sphere of capitalist production.
- d. Food. As with clothing, it is important to distinguish between the money-cost of food and the labor involved in its preparation, presentation, and in the following clean-up. (The latter is required even for "take-out" food.)

III Production for Whom? Production for What?

Now we are, *and should be*, resistant to describing a lot of this activity as "production." It seems wrong, for example, to describe the time we spend with children, or with other people, young or old, who need care as "work" and the activities involved as "production." But from the point of view of capital, it is indeed a form of production, the production of "labor power" – of the wage laborers who will generate profits (surplus) when they are employed. And, again from the point of view of capital, the goal is to maximize profits, and to keep to a minimum the labor time required for this "production of labor power." And this total has indeed been reduced over time, not just because the labor required for producing livestock, for example, has fallen but also because now meat is commercially processed and much of it is purchased as hamburgers in McDonald's rather than prepared and cooked at home. And, thanks to the wonders of modern technology, the time required for that finished hamburger is less than before. (McDonald's times the labor in its restaurants down to seconds!)

In capitalist societies, men and women must work full-time in order to survive and bring up the next generation. Part of this work takes the form of wage labor, the other part takes the form of household labor. (It is only the capitalists who can be "gentlemen of leisure.") Thus the proportion of wage labor has increased over time. How these two categories of work are divided between men and women has also changed over time. When the factory work-day was 16 hours, the factory worker did no household labor. Today women carry out a greater proportion of wage labor than 50 years ago, and men's share of household labor has increased. But women are still responsible for a very large proportion of household labor.

IV. The recession and the re-organization of commodity and household production

Now, when capital falters, when its internal contradictions lead to the idling not only of labor but of their own plant and equipment, capital bares its teeth. It snarls and spits at the working class, and attempts to keep its own income intact and make the working class bear the brunt of the decline in production. And now the historical process of substitution of purchased goods for household-produced goods goes into reverse. Since the workers have less wage-income to buy processed foods, quality child care etc., we must instead do the best we can to increase our household production. While unemployment reduces the amount of wage labor performed, recessions increase the amount of

household labor we must carry out. While this increased household labor provides some relief from the hardship of the recession, it cannot restore the previous standard of living.

In this section I will “interpret” the different ways in which households increase their household production – actions which are, as I said before, generally described as ways to “save money” by increasing household production. I will also address the gender division of labor involved in this.

- a. Clothing . There are limited ways to “save money” by substituting household labor for paid services and goods on clothing maintenance. The substitution of laundry for dry-cleaning is possible, particularly for white-collar workers. But skills of mending among the young are almost non-existent. Partly this is because the technology of manufacturing of many items, from socks to automobiles, has taken the form of making many repairs impractical (in terms of both time and money.) A smaller proportion of automobile maintenance is possible today, but young men, in particular, retain some skills in this area. However few young women, and even fewer men, know how to repair even a split seam or sew on a loose button. (My son asked me where he would need to go to buy a needle.)
- b. Housing. If we include in the category of housing the organization of social interaction that takes place in homes, rather than in bars and restaurants, people are spending more time with friends and relatives in their homes in order to “save money.” Thus household labor is substituted for the labor of bartenders, waiters and waitresses, and other entertainers. (The labor involved in cleaning –up after social gatherings is also a substitute for the janitorial work of commercial establishments.)
- c. Child Care and Elder Care. Taking the kids out of paid child care and the elders out of nursing homes indeed “saves money” but of course requires that the adults, or sometimes the older siblings, particularly the older girls, must take on the work. Men in two-adult households have been carrying out a greater share of child care than in the past, but women are still the primary child-care-providers. More important, perhaps, is the minimal contribution of men to the child care and other household tasks in female-headed households.
- d. Food. The “savings” that are possible here come in two forms:
 - i. The substitution of home-produced meals for take-out meals. This is a straight-forward example of one way in which household labor is substituted for the money earned from wage labor. People who are unemployed seldom eat out.
 - ii. The use of cheaper ingredients in home-produced meals. It is easy to say that nutritious meals can be produced cheaply. But this is to ignore the role of household labor. Rice and beans are cheaper and better nutritionally than hot dogs and fries. But there are two inter-related problems. The first is that rice and beans take longer to prepare: the ratio of household to wage-labor is higher. The second is that the cooking skills required for the former have atrophied as capitalist development brought women to work in a set pattern of division of labor at McDonalds and left them little time to cook at home. Men’s cooking skills are even weaker. It is also possible to include here the additional time that may be spent in shopping at different places looking for goods that are temporarily on sale, although this is not a practical use of time for most people.

Conclusion

The Great Recession necessitates an increase in the proportion of working class labor that takes the form of household labor. While a portion of the time of the unemployed is necessarily used for the (non-productive) search for employment, a larger proportion (particularly that of women) is used in the production of substitutes for the goods and services previously purchased as commodities.

Given the historical pattern of development of capitalism and the continued oppression of women, this means that the recession is placing a greater proportion of the hardship on women in their role as the performers of household production. This is obscured by an analysis of the recession which looks only at the monetized portion of the capitalist mode of production. It is also denied its significance by theorists who define the working class as consisting only of those engaged in wage labor.

Paddy Quick
St. Francis College, Brooklyn