Homes in Crisis Capitalism: Gender, Work and Revolution

By Marnie Holborow

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Does home exist anymore? ‘Home’ the concept of a private space which closes the door securely on works’ obligations – ‘the silent compulsion of economic relations’, as Marx termed it? In this richly researched book, Marnie Holborow locates the fault line for women’s impoverishment lying in the heart of what home has become.

As Holborow puts it, ‘Home has traditionally been counterposed to work, despite the extensive amount of work – both paid and unpaid – that takes place within it.’

Home and its associations with sanctuary, intimacy and nurturing, crucially, with rest, is something most people can identify. Underlying this is women’s work creating the means for such a space: women’s unwaged ‘reproductive labour’, providing the vital requirements for capital through child-rearing and the restoration of the workforce day-by-day; ‘a hidden abode’ of capitalism, the book finds. A UN global report from 38 countries in 2020 found that of 16 billion hours of unpaid work done each day, women were doing three-quarters of it. The pandemic increased that load for women.

Starting from Marx’s premise that all social relations, including gender relations, must be understood in terms of modes of production, this book examines current neoliberal policies that sweep social care and welfare burdens into hidden abodes, thus increasing exploitative pressures, particularly on working class women.

The pandemic and ensuing lockdown revealed some of the illusion involved in the ‘home sweet home’ notion. Organisations effortlessly switched workspaces from office to kitchen or bedroom – in many situations workers with only a room of their own and no desk were literally ‘working from bed’. The problematic of women’s dual role in global free-marketisation became more apparent through the pandemic years.

In pursuit of this expansion of home economics, and the ways in which women are tied down by it, the book reveals more fantasies underpinning neoliberal homilies on home. The notion of the nuclear family, stalwart of conservative rhetoric, gets statistically thrashed: ‘today’s homes and households are married couples, lone parents with children, (increasingly) cohabiting couples with children, single people with no children, same-sex couples with or without children, blended families, adoptive families, non-binary or trans people with or without children, intergenerational with grandparents living in the home or with children returned home as adults.’

What emerges is a kind of double bind. JD Vance’s recent ‘childless cat lady’ attack on Kamala Harris flags it: under neoliberalism, women’s role is (socially) reproductive. Vance agreed with an interviewer proposing that ‘the whole purpose of the postmenopausal female’ is to help rear the grandchildren, thus freeing up younger women-workers for wage-earning. Homes in Crisis Capitalism pinpoints this double-bind – women must both reproduce a properly fed, washed and educated labour force, whilst also being a part of it themselves – since the 1970’s heyday of deregulated global free-marketization child-rearing women have been compelled to wage-earn to survive.

Separating the home as an individualised private space means women must bear and care for their children, and others, with minimal social welfare support. They must also work – the explosion of foodbanks throughout the UK underlines how even dual-wage-earning families can’t cover the costs of living. Neoliberal profit-extraction enforces this prospect for women with children – part-time, often precarious, poorly-paid work, frequently in care sectors which, having been widely privatized, pay poorly.

Neoliberalism here is not only ‘labour-unfriendly’, but also ‘life-unfriendly’, through its systematic privatisation and marketization of social reproduction. Under the dominance of the free market ethos ‘the social’ must also transform into capital. Great for the lucky 10% with purchasing power; an army of women making up a ‘new service proletariat’ are competing for low wages to take on the home and childcare burdens of the highly paid: women, many of them immigrants, are ‘going up the down escalator’, exploited by their lack of state/publicly-funded childcare.

Ultimately, Holborow identifies the economics involved not only crushing women’s hopes for achieving better lives: ‘Lower wages for a larger proportion of women working partly explains labours’ declining share of national income in late capitalism.’

Deregulation of the labour market increases employment but not the volume of work: in the US and in Germany, when indefinite part-time (women’s) employment rose, so the number of full-time, properly-contracted, jobs fell.

As Holborow quotes from Marx: ‘The more productive capital grows, the more does competition extend among the workers, (and) the more do their wages shrink together.’

This book is a trove of invaluable research, well developed in a coherent narrative. From Marx and Engels through to the 2008 banking collapse, the ensuing austerity programmes, the Brexit catastrophe and on to the pandemic, Holborow shows clearly the incessant erosion of social values. Home is where the capital heart is, this book reveals.