



## Red Rag Magazine, Feminist Economics and the Domestic Labour Pains of Liberation

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# *Red Rag* Magazine, Feminist Economics and the Domestic Labour Pains of Liberation

*Abstract: This article examines the domestic labour debate of the 1970s as it was mediated in the Marxist feminist magazine, Red Rag (1972–80). Red Rag’s visual representations of housework wittily demystified the bonds of ‘love’ that bound women to the everyday routines of domestic labour while its theoretical discussions offered alternative feminist perspectives to the New Home Economics, a neo-classical economic approach to the household as well as to Marxist economics that occluded women’s labour in its emphasis on production. Within the pages of the magazine, an emerging feminist economics developed that challenged the gendered production boundaries reinforcing the division of labour, graphically depicted intra-household conflict and exposed the ideological assumptions that rendered caring labour invisible. It was not only in terms of theory, however, that Red Rag contributed to these debates but also in terms of its collective practice. The process of making the magazine became the subject of editorials reflecting on how feminists worked together. Red Rag’s analysis of its own production processes illuminated the internal tensions within the collective but also pointed to some of the ‘contradictions’ within the WLM, contradictions that were bound up with the cultural capital attached to economic theory and the authority this conferred on the Red Rag collective.*

*Keywords: feminist economics, periodicals, Wages for Housework, women’s liberation movement, Red Rag, domestic labour, care*

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We want housework recognised as hard work. We want social recognition of the time and sweat it involves to take forms more tangible than sentimental clichés about the woman’s place behind every successful man and ensuring the present and future well-being of his children. (Freeman 1973c: 16)

From 1972 to 1980, the Marxist feminist magazine, *Red Rag* included a range of competing feminist perspectives that contributed to what became known as the ‘domestic labour debates’ of the 1970s. Defining ‘housework’, making it visible and recognizing it as ‘hard work’, became one of the central themes of the movement. At the centre of the debate was the question of what counts as work and whether all forms of work can and should be counted (Waring 1999, Saunders and Dalziel 2017, Messac 2018). *Red Rag*’s visual and verbal mediation of women ‘at work’ in the home wittily demystified the bonds of ‘love’ that bound women to the everyday routines of domestic labour (Folbre and Nelson 2000, Barker and Feiner 2004). Articles on the politics of childcare, welfare and Wages for Housework (WFH) offered alternative feminist perspectives to the New Home Economics, a neo-classical economic approach to the household as well as to Marxist economics that occluded women’s labour in its emphasis on production. Within the pages of the magazine, an emerging feminist economics developed that challenged the gendered production boundaries reinforcing the division of labour, graphically depicted intra-household conflict and exposed the ideological assumptions that rendered caring labour invisible. It was not only in terms of theory, however, that *Red Rag* contributed to these debates but also in terms of its collective practice. The process of making the magazine became the subject of editorials reflecting on how feminists worked together. *Red Rag*’s analysis of its own production processes illuminated the internal tensions within the collective but also pointed to some of the ‘contradictions’ within the WLM, contradictions that were bound up with the cultural capital attached to economic theory and the authority this conferred on the Red Rag collective (Red Rag Collective 1975a: 2).

Women’s liberation magazines tell the stories of feminism differently, avoiding a narrative of ‘progress’ and ‘loss’ that simplifies feminist historical time (Jolly 2019: 37). For instance, the domestic labour debate continues to inform current discussions of caring labour. It reaches back to include early twentieth century campaigns for an ‘endowment for motherhood’ as well forward to more recent calls for a ‘universal caregiver model’ that aims to ensure that gender justice is embedded in welfare support (Fell

and Weir 1973a, Fraser 2013: 133). In her examination of two ‘first wave’ feminist journals, the *Woman’s Leader* and *Time and Tide*, Maria DiCenzo analyses the mediation of early iterations of the domestic labour debate in the interwar period. Eleanor Rathbone’s call for an endowment for motherhood was opposed by feminists who argued that it ‘would only entrench women in the domestic sphere rather than liberating them from it’, a similar objection made in the early seventies by the *Red Rag* feminists opposed to WFH (DiCenzo 2016: 385). Dismissing these tensions as ‘evidence of the fragmentation (and hence undermining) of the movement’ DiCenzo argues, ‘is to ignore complex and revealing developments crucial to understanding the changing contours of feminism’ (DiCenzo 2016: 379).<sup>1</sup> Magazines are inevitably sites of conflict, ‘part and parcel of what happens when collectives or groups become involved in contentious claim making in the attempt to effect social and political change’ (DiCenzo et al. 2011: 41). Whether it is the conflict between the Peths and the Panks, ‘old’ (equalitarian) and ‘new’ (welfare) feminism or *Red Rag* and WFH feminists, magazines are theoretical testing grounds for arguments, spaces of ‘struggle’ and sites of contestation that are part of an ‘ongoing process’ of ‘consensus mobilization’ (DiCenzo 2016: 394, Green 2016, Waters 2016). In ‘spreading the word’, feminist periodicals play a central role in ‘building and reproducing identities’ capable of sustaining collective action (Diani and Della Porta 2006: 91, Jordan 2010, Feigenbaum 2013, Forster 2016).

In the early 1970s, the main struggle within the WLM revolved around the Wages for Housework Campaign. As Sarah Stoller points out in her analysis of WFH between 1951 and 1971, the number of married women going out to work doubled from 23 to 46 per cent (Stoller 2018: 97). By 1972, more women than ever were working outside the home and they were organizing to demand equal pay and working conditions. In the wake of the women’s strike at Ford Dagenham in 1968, the National Joint Action Campaign Committee for Women’s Equal Rights sought to strengthen alliances between the WLM and the unions (Jolly 2019: 19–20). Relatively little attention, however, had been paid to the plight of women’s inequality within the home. This might partly be explained by the fact that housework and caring labour were shrouded in the mystique of ‘love and self-sacrifice’ and women’s natural ‘instinct’ to care (Stoller 2018: 100). The New Home Economics, pioneered by American economist Gary Becker, went some way to highlighting the household as an economic unit where important work took place. While gender did not initially play a significant role in his analysis, his focus on the household shed light on the activities undertaken within it. As Paula England argues, Becker’s neo-classical approach ‘show[ed] the advantages but none of the

<sup>1</sup> Cathy Clay supports the view that *Time and Tide* lost none of its feminist fervour in the interwar period, if anything, it ‘grew in prestige and influence’ (Clay 2016: 410).

disadvantages for women of the conventional sex division of labour' (Ferber and Nelson 1993: 47). But at least Becker recognized the household as an economic unit that played a vital role in the health of the wider economy. In contrast, the orthodox Marxist position analysed work within the home in terms of social reproduction, a separate activity that could not be defined as 'labour' because it did not produce anything that could be exchanged in the market. The act of simply naming 'domestic labour' was in itself a significant initiative that created the theoretical basis for an analysis of women's unpaid family work within a framework of Marxist political thought (Vogel 2000: 152). By the 1980s, the domestic labour debate seemed to have run its course but as historians of the period have illustrated, some of the ideas proposed by feminists were adapted by Conservative and New Labour governments to 'buttress family income' and support 'non-earning mothers' (Jackson 2019: 305, Davidson 2020: 102).

When the Wages for Housework Campaign emerged in the UK in 1972 it caused a minor sensation. Accounts in mainstream media have tended to focus on the charismatic though divisive figure of Selma James, reproducing a narrative of fatal 'fragmentation' (Turner 2011, Gardiner 2012). While Ellen Malos suggested in 1980 that the domestic labour debate 'generated more heat than light', the discussion of home economics provided new ways of thinking about productivity and its costs that informed not only feminist approaches to the economy but also, more broadly, approaches examining the interface between the household and the market economy (Malos 1980: 23).<sup>2</sup> Jean Gardiner, an early contributor to *Red Rag*, recognized that the original debate 'failed to address the diversity of women's experience' but that the intersectional complexities of women's economic lives came into sharper focus as domestic labour was reconceptualised in terms of 'the social relations of care' (Himmelweit 2000: 90–1, xxvii). Kathi Weeks has argued more recently that WFH needs to be considered not just in relation to its contentious rallying cry but as a 'force of demystification, an instrument of denaturalization, and a tool of cognitive mapping' (Weeks 2011: 129). The recuperation of WFH by Weeks, Sarah Stoller and Maude Bracke recognizes its discursive power in a way that echoes *Red Rag's* ground-breaking mediation of the domestic labour debates (Bracke 2013, Stoller 2018). While *Red Rag* feminists opposed the idea of providing a wage for housework, the debate itself denaturalized work, drawing attention to the hierarchies embedded within labour and the cultural work that 'work' does to produce political and social subjects.

The recent digitization of *Red Rag*, initiated by Rosalind Delmar (former *Red Rag* member) and undertaken by Natalie Thomlinson at the

2 For an account of Malos's perspective on WFH see *Sisterhood and After: The Women's Liberation Oral History Project* <<https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/ellen-malos-wages-for-housework>>

University of Reading and Alan Finlayson at the University of East Anglia, now makes the feminist domestic labour debates of the 1970s freely available, illustrating the ‘cacophony’ of voices that characterized the emerging field of feminist economics and the ways in which feminist activism intersected with feminist theory (Powell 2011: 441).<sup>3</sup> In her introduction to the digitized *Red Rag*, Delmar describes the mutually supportive relationship between the women’s liberation conferences and the magazine; ‘New topics of concern usually emerged at the end of each national conference, often in the shape of proposals for new demands, and this helped structure the next issue. It also helped to fix the publication date, as the next conference would be the place where the magazine would be sold, distributed, and discussed’ (Delmar 2020: 15).<sup>4</sup> The rhythms of periodical production were set by the conference calendar and in this way, the magazine slotted into the lives of its feminist readers and responded directly to current feminist debate. This ‘access to [a] significant sales point’ allowed it to maintain a relatively healthy circulation of approximately 4,000 (Delmar 2020: 7–8). *Red Rag*’s intimacy with its readers and its commitment to grassroots activism did not, however, protect it from charges of elitism. Recalling her days as a member of the collective in an interview for the British Library’s oral history project, *Observing the 1980s*, Roberta Henderson describes *Red Rag*’s distinct discursive ‘identity’ as the magazine ‘forging a theory’ of women’s liberation’. Increasingly, however, theory came to acquire a prestige that she felt went ‘against something very fundamental to feminism’. It is particularly revealing that she draws on an image of domestic labour to critique the hierarchical relation between theory and practice: ‘If I’m washing the kitchen floor you don’t come in and tell me how you think it ought to be done if I’m already doing it. You get down on your hands and knees with me and if we can then work out a better way of doing it, we’ll do it’ (Henderson, *Observing*). A theoretical approach that is not grounded in practice is in danger of reinforcing the social divisions that feminists sought to challenge and critique.

It was in its editorials that *Red Rag* reflexively illuminated these divisions by turning a feminist economic perspective on the production of the magazine itself, its organizational structures, its decision-making processes and the economic circumstances of its production and consumption. Perhaps inevitably, the work involved in making *Red Rag*, though unwaged, conferred cultural capital on its contributors, a certain kind of authority within the WLM that the magazine recognized and critiqued. Even though *Red Rag* was never driven by profit, in order to survive it had to sell magazines in the context of what Pierre Bourdieu describes as the ‘paradoxical universe’ of a market turned upside down, where value was determined in symbolic rather commercial terms (Bourdieu 2017:

3 Digitization was funded by the Barry Amiel and Norman Melburn Trust and the magazine is available at: [http://banmarchive.org.uk/collections/redrag/index\\_frame.htm](http://banmarchive.org.uk/collections/redrag/index_frame.htm)

4 I would like to thank Rosalind Delmar for generously sharing a draft of her introductory essay to the *Red Rag* digital archive which is available at the Barry Amiel Melburn Trust Internet Archive in 2020 and for offering invaluable insights that informed the development of this argument.

63). Mass circulation was not the desired end-product; just the opposite in fact, the magazine retained what Bourdieu refers to as its aura of ‘distinction’ by being aimed at a relatively small but loyal readership intimately connected to the WLM (Bourdieu 1979). *Red Rag*’s survival depended upon a paradox: it had to maintain its authority as the movement’s theoretical avant-garde while simultaneously reaching out to readers and including their views in broader discussions connecting feminist theory to practice. Acutely aware of its own ‘internal contradictions’, *Red Rag* repeatedly reflected on the ‘dislocation between the theory and practice of feminism as it is lived’, recognizing that the editorial process itself required acts of discrimination, exclusion and omission that were in many ways antithetical to feminist principles (Red Rag Collective 1977a: 3). The practice of producing *Red Rag* required the feminists within the collective to reflect painfully on the hierarchies of labour that persisted within the magazine’s structures, to acknowledge the relative privilege of their position as makers of the magazine and to offer a critique of ‘the contradictions inherent in the politics of the women’s movement’ (Red Rag Collective 1975a: 2).

### ***Keep the Red Rag Flying***

The feminist collective that established *Red Rag* in 1972 attempted to refuse a ‘hierarchy of responsibility or leadership’ and to ‘share work on all levels of production’ (Red Rag Collective 1974a: 2). Quickly detaching itself from its Communist Party affiliation and employing a voluntary and non-hierarchical structure, the magazine was, from its inception, preoccupied with analysing the divisions of labour within the collective and the ‘gaps [...] felt on *Red Rag* itself’ between ‘women with and without children, lesbian, heterosexual and celibate women, and women whose political practice includes membership of a revolutionary party, or not’ (Red Rag Collective 1977a: 3).

These ‘gaps’ were bound up at the grassroots level with the experience of motherhood and the politics of childcare. The Tufnell Park women’s liberation workshop, for instance, established at the end of 1968, was one of the first of the four groups to compose the London Women’s Liberation Workshop when it began in mid-1969. As Celia Hughes points out, over half the women who joined the group were young mothers; one of the group’s first initiatives was to establish playgroups to bring women together (Hughes 2015). Karen Slaney and Sheli Wortis started to organize meetings at Slaney’s house; both were seasoned activists and had been involved in various non-aligned left groups, including the Camden Movement for People’s Power. Sue O’Sullivan recalls the electric effect of attending her

first Tufnell Park meeting. An American married to a British left-wing activist and academic, O'Sullivan was living in Stoke Newington with a new baby:

Then in autumn 1968, I went to the Tufnell Park women's group, and I never looked back. It was like pieces suddenly fell into place, like light being shed on dark places, it was like sense being made out of my individual fed-upness. It was the first time I'd ever felt any desire to be part of anything that was collective, a group (Wandor 1990: 218).

When Sheila Rowbotham attended the Tufnell Park women's liberation workshop, what struck her was the influence of 'the North American women [who] brought into the British Women's Liberation movement a belief in prefiguring a desired future in the way you organized (Rowbotham 2019: 222). These new ways of organizing led to what Lucy Delap, in her discussion of the history of 'second wave' feminist bookshops, describes as 'a distinctive feminist culture of co-operative decision making, collective position taking and rotating responsibilities' (Delap 2016: 173). According to Sue O'Sullivan and Sally Alexander, the 'desire to be "in charge of our own lives, our own movement"' led to the rejection of 'hierarchies, power structures, bureaucratic methods and procedures, notions of leadership [and] anything that smack[ed] of authoritarianism' (Alexander and O'Sullivan 1975a: 19).

In theoretical terms, *Red Rag* was a creative collision between the consciousness-raising, American-style feminism of the Women's Liberation Workshops and Communist Party members used to working within formal, hierarchical structures (Andrews 2004: 62). In practical terms, some of the women were journalists working on party publications, many were mothers of pre-school children and many of them were engaged with the Women's Liberation Workshops based in London (Delmar 2020: 4–5). The everyday texture of this collective labour was inscribed in the magazine, particularly in the ways in which children's art work interrupted the flow of discursive arguments, punctuated editorials and illustrated the social reproduction of gender. The title of the magazine, with its playful allusion to both the reproductive cycle and left politics, suggested that the act of reading *Red Rag* on your way to work, in the dentist's waiting room or potentially and even more problematically, in your own home, was a political statement, a 'red rag' to the bullish patriarchal establishment. The first issue, priced at 7p (well below *Spare Rib* at 30p and even *Shrew* at 15p), consisted of six articles, all written by feminists in the Communist Party. The three-column format for articles in the magazine, together with minimal visual material, was



more akin to a political pamphlet than a magazine. The ‘Declaration of Intent’ announced *Red Rag* to be a magazine of ‘liberation and in particular women’s liberation’ (Red Rag Collective 1972a: 2), highlighting what it described as ‘a ferment of discussion especially amongst younger women, about liberation, about the need for a new society, for a change in lifestyles, in family and personal relations’ (Red Rag Collective 1972a: 2). Crucially, *Red Rag* opened its arms as wide as possible, stating it was ‘for all women who work—in factories, shops, offices, schools and in their homes’ (Red Rag Collective 1972a: 2). Distinctions between waged and unwaged labour were elided here, a crucial recognition that work in the home should be counted and valued as work.

Gladys Brooks, the Red Rag collective’s spokesperson, was hauled before a sub-group of the CP’s Executive Committee to answer questions about the unauthorized appearance of this first issue. A second issue had already been planned to deal specifically with Wages for Housework, with contributions from non-Party women such as Sheila Rowbotham and Rosalind Delmar.<sup>5</sup> Rather than publishing responses to WFH in the *Morning Star* as the CP executive suggested, the Red Rag collective argued that engaging with it in an explicitly feminist publication, independent of the CP, would be much more effective.<sup>6</sup> The CP remained unconvinced and instead of backing *Red Rag*, it established its own feminist magazine, *Link*, that ran between 1973 and 1984.

By the second issue, the countercultural style of magazines such as *Ink* and *Black Dwarf* became evident in a new visual playfulness, possibly due to the influence of Alison Fell who worked at *Ink*.<sup>7</sup> The price had increased to 10p, presumably the consequence of recognizing that without CP funding, the magazine would have to rely on sales to sustain publication. The black and white lithograph on the front page was by Ethel Gabain and depicted ‘Sandbag Workers’, women happily engaged in manual labour. While the first issue remained in an exclusive dialogue with the British left, the trade unions and the CP, the second issue turned its attention to debates within the WLM, specifically to the campaign for Wages for Housework, led in the UK by Selma James. James’ pamphlet, ‘Women, the Unions and Work, Or What is Not To Be Done’ had just been dropped, ‘like a bombshell’, stimulating a ‘great debate in the movement around how women working within and outside the home, paid and unpaid, relate to work and the trade unions’ (Red Rag Collective 1972b: 2). A summary of the pamphlet, together with seven articles engaging directly with WFH, identified a ‘new phase’ for the women’s movement. Just below the editorial was a picture, drawn by ‘Lee age 6’, entitled ‘A Man and a Woman’ where the woman is represented as a long-haired dog on a lead.<sup>8</sup> This not only pointed to unequal gender roles within

5 The composition of the Red Rag Collective changed frequently and included, among others: Sally Alexander, Sue Berger, Gladys Brooks, Sheila Brown, Beatrix Campbell, Gaby Charing, Val Charlton, Marion Dain, Daphne Davies, Rosalind Delmar, Mikki Doyle, Eva Eberhart, Margaret Edney, Alison Fell, Kerry Hamilton, Roberta Henderson, Adah Kay, Anna Livingston, Maria Loftus, Fran Mclean, Sheila McKechnie, Mandy Merck, Annie Mitchell, Annette Muir, Nell Myers, Sue O’Sullivan, Christine Peters, Ruth Petrie, Nettie Pollard, Linda Redford, Jean Radford, Sheila Rowbotham, Ann Scott, Lynne Segal, Barbara Taylor, Jackie Turner, Michelene Victor (née Wandor), Angela Weir, Elizabeth Wilson, Sheila Young.

6 Communist Party of Great Britain Archives, Women’s Department, 1950–1992, *Red Rag: A Magazine of Liberation*, Microform Academic Publishers.

7 Thank you to Rosalind Delmar for sharing this insight through email correspondence.

8 *Red Rag* frequently used drawings by children to punctuate theoretical debate. For instance, Victor, 1974; Rachel, age 5, *Red Rag* 1973, 2: 11.

the family, it also signalled the presence of children in the Red Rag collective. The child's drawing was a visual interruption that correlated to the experience of looking after children while writing and producing a magazine. Inscribed in the visual aesthetic of the second issue of *Red Rag* were the material circumstances of feminist periodical labour, the merging of domestic work with print activism. The opposition to WFH was framed by the magazine's discursive promotion of women at work on its front cover, and in the production of the magazine itself. At the same time, the notion of being 'at work' was subtly undermined by the presence of children, evident in the illustration in the contents page. Feminist periodical labour blurred the divisions between home and work, inviting children into the workspace and questioning the production boundaries that rendered caring labour invisible.

Issue 2 of *Red Rag* featured cartoons, sketches, reproductions of paintings and photographs on almost every page, representing and imagining various forms of feminist labour. Photographs depict women at work or in their lunch hour: 'Office Girls Eating Lunch Near Crown Zellerbach Building' (1972b: 8) and 'Ruby Loftus Screwing a Breech Ring' (1972b: 7); a series of single frame cartoons are used to reflect the range of affects attached to domestic labour including humour, anger, frustration and resignation. Many of them also offered a graphic critique of neo-classical economic theory. For instance, Rosalind Delmar's article, 'Oppressed Politics' is accompanied by a comic sketch depicting a man watching the television (Figure 1). The screen shows a flying-saucer, his balloon puff signifies his thoughts: 'Flyin saucers! Load o' bleedin' rubbish. They'll be telling us there's little green men next' (1972b: 10). As he utters these words, his frustrated wife is hurling her own flying saucers, (a set of dinner plates) across the living room towards his head. A child is transforming itself into a little green man by dumping a tin of green paint on itself. In the top-right hand corner hangs a framed picture, just visible in which are the words 'home sweet home'. The alienation of domestic labour is captured, laying bare the home as a site of intra-household conflict, divided along gender lines and ruled not by an altruistic head of household operating in the interests of those within it but by a slovenly man more preoccupied with the television than his own family. Clearly coded as working-class, he presides over a chaotic scene that challenges one of the principal assumptions of Becker's New Home Economics which treated the household as though it was a 'single self-seeking individual (Himmelweit 2000: xxiv). Feminists pointed out that his approach not only treated the family as a unified entity devoid of internal conflict but it also neglected to examine the unequal power relations within the family and the particular pressures in lower income households.



Figure 1. 'Flying Saucers' (Red Rag Collective 1972b: 10).

Other cartoons continue telling variations of this story: the man who agrees to do the washing-up when '[he] want[s] to do it' (1972b: 16), the man who is the expert on Women's Lib (1972b: 7), the man who refuses to stay home to care for the children because his political work is more important than her political work (1972b: 2). This pictorial shorthand repeatedly represented the household economy as divided against itself, operating not in the interests of the family as a whole but more often in the interests of the 'head' of the household even when he was visually coded as a left radical. The cartoons depicting the divided household illustrated that even as the labour market changed and more women went out to work, the division of labour had a 'tenacity of its own' (Himmelweit 2000: xvii). *Red Rag* provided the reader with immediate and recognizable situations, captured through gestures and facial expressions that convey the characters' thoughts and feelings. In doing so, these accessible visual stories offered readers a different way to connect with theoretical debates featured in the magazine.

### *Wages for Housework*

The challenges for the Red Rag Collective were particularly evident in the debate on Wages for Housework. Selma James's paper on 'Women, the Unions and Work, Or What is Not To Be Done', a pamphlet that had

sold 'like hotcakes' at the Manchester women's liberation conference in March 1972, had advocated attaching a wage for housework (Toupin 2018: 86). After speaking at the Manchester conference in July '72, James attended a meeting in Padua where feminist activists laid the foundations for the international Wages for Housework network that included feminist groups in the UK, Italy, the US and France. James had published an influential paper, 'A Woman's Place', in 1953, anticipating the arguments that were to emerge in WFH twenty years later. It was a revised version of this paper that was combined with Mariarosa Dalla Costa's 'Women and the Subversion of the Community' and became *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, published in English by Falling Wall Press in 1972 (Toupin 2018: 272). This pamphlet put the family at the centre of the critique of the political economy, and of the exploitation of women's labour. Defining household work as all care work taking place in the family, what distinguished their analysis from other Marxist-feminist positions, according to Maude Anne Bracke, 'was that the family was no longer analysed only as a space of reproduction of the workforce (and women as a reserve army of labour), but as a site of productive labour' (Bracke 2013: 628). More fundamentally, this approach argued that women should be categorized as 'working-class' based on the fact that domestic labour was productive. As George Stevenson suggests, this addressed some left-wing dismissals of women's liberation as 'middle-class' providing what James and Dalla Costa described as a 'material foundation for "sisterhood"' (Stevenson 2019: 99).

Issue 2 of Red Rag contained a summary by James of 'Women, the Unions and Work, Or What is Not To Be Done' under the pseudonym Cassandra Southwick (Delmar 2020: 9). This made it clear that from a WFH perspective, the 'reformist' unions were part of the problem rather than the solution to women's inequality. WFH, argued James, would transform women into a social class capable of 'leaping beyond the oppressive institutions which trapped men' (Southwick 1972b: 3) Accompanying her summary is a vertical cartoon, positioned on the right-hand side of the page. The figure of the be-suited, balding and slightly rotund boss is at the top of a ladder; underneath him is the middle manager, sweating profusely as he tries to claw his way up, the flat-capped worker hangs on, rather precariously, just below. Kneeling at the foot of the ladder—propping up the hierarchical structures of labour—is a woman. The image humorously captured the sentiments of feminists on both sides of the WFH debate. The key question for left feminists was how to dismantle the hierarchical structures of labour rather than how to climb the ladder. Following James's summary are a series of robust responses to WFH including Sheila Rowbotham's 'The Carrot, the Stick and the Movement'. For

Rowbotham and many other *Red Rag* feminists including Caroli Mullen and Sue Cowley (later O’Sullivan), the point was not to abandon the unions but to seek to reform them from within (Mullen 1972b: 14–18). More specifically, the fetishization of the wage through WFH, according to Rowbotham, ‘does not socialise housework. It merely confirms the isolation of the houseworker, in her, or less likely his, nuclear home’ (Rowbotham 1972b: 5). For this reason, she argued, the WLM needed to organize women at work and in union branches to strengthen the movement at the grassroots level.

In ‘Eclectic but Not Dialectic’, Sue Cowley asserted that the problems of sexism within the unions were ‘as much a reflection of the whole ideology of capitalist society as of the particularity of the unions’ (Cowley 1972b: 6). Moreover, she extended her analysis to trouble the concept of work itself, drawing on feminist economics to interrogate the meaning and value of labour: ‘[...] Are exploitation and work synonymous? [...] is Selma really saying that work equals capitalism? [...] Or is she posing new definitions of work?’ (Cowley 1972b: 7). Clearly one of the central concerns for many of the contributors to the second issue of *Red Rag* and in subsequent issues, was that the call for wages for housework would ‘elevate housework and looking after children to the current alienated definition of work’, thereby reversing any progress that had been made to challenge the ‘ideology of women’s role as wife and mother’ (Victor 1972: 12). Issue 5 returned with gusto to the WFH debate, combining this with a focus on childcare. In ‘When is a Wage Not a Wage’, Caroline Freeman asked ‘What is a Wage?’ and in doing so, began to dismantle the production boundaries that define work outside the home and only recognize the value of that work in terms of the wage (Freeman 1973c: 17). Freeman went on to argue that it was the definition of housework itself that needed clarification: ‘I think we must distinguish between child care and the rest of housework, without forgetting that the latter is greatly increased where there are children’ (Freeman 1973c: 18). Freeman’s rhetorical question got to the heart of the issue: ‘Must the wage then recognize, by quantitative differences, the vast difference children make?’ (Freeman 1973c: 17). The labour that takes place within the home cannot be measured, has no limits and, more fundamentally, is affectively bound up with gender: ‘Wages for housework could not undo the identification between housework and being available 24 h a day by virtue of being a woman’ (Freeman 1973c: 17). Freeman is characterizing caring labour here in terms of what Bauhardt, Harcourt and other feminist economists have referred to as its ‘time intensity’, the ‘continual requirements of the dependents and the inability of the carer to postpone care needs’ (Bauhardt and Harcourt 2018: 3). Measuring this kind of labour

becomes particularly difficult when it is not always ‘a specific physical activity in itself; it is carried out through a range of physical activities or sometimes none at all’ (Himmelweit 2000: xxviii). Those who opposed Wages for Housework resisted the idea that caring labour could only be valued if measured within existing accounting systems. In doing so, they anticipated broader critiques of GDP as the central focus of economic policy (Messac 2018).

Yet not all the articles in *Red Rag* were uniformly hostile. Monica Sjöö’s ‘Women, the Claimants Unions and the Cohabitation Ruling’ began with the question, ‘what does Selma James mean by “a wage to the house-worker”?’ (Sjöö 1972b: 20). Recognizing some common ground, Sjöö provided an overview of the Claimants Union’s campaign against the government’s Co-habitation ruling which cut payments to single mothers who were seen to be living with men. Likewise, James’s pamphlet identified the Claimants Union as having ‘at its core unsupported mothers’ and had already begun to organize a struggle around the demands articulated in her pamphlet (James 1973: 66). In later issues of *Red Rag*, the work of the Claimants Union continued to feature regularly, as did the Family Allowance Campaign, an action that aimed to stop the Conservative government tying benefits to taxes and cutting the Family Allowance. Issue 4, for example, published ‘We Want Some Money of Our Own’ by Suzie Fleming, an early activist for the Power of Women Collective who established Falling Wall Press in Bristol to disseminate the perspectives of the WFH campaign (and who reprinted Eleanor Rathbone’s *The Disinherited Family*, a germinal text that argued for an endowment for motherhood) (Toupin 2018: 88). While feminists were split in terms of the theory, in practice they were unified by their opposition to what they saw as the government’s economic assault on women. Fleming points out that, ‘the Family Allowance represent[ed] for millions of women the only money of their own’ (Fleming 1973b: 17). ‘All of us working in the campaign’ she observes, ‘have had a sense of the support of countless women in a way that has simply not been true of any of the other campaigns the women’s movement had conducted’ (Fleming 1973b: 17). Clearly an economic approach that recognized how welfare cuts affected women disproportionately united feminist activists at a grassroots level.<sup>9</sup> While *Red Rag* feminists rejected a call for a wage for housework, the inclusion of perspectives from WFH activists such as Fleming continued to provide the WFH campaign with media coverage even as it contested its aims and arguments. It also pointed to the vital connection between feminist activism and its mediation, the ways in which feminist periodical labour maintained an activist community through debate and dissemination.

9 The Women’s Budget Group continues to show the disproportionate economic effects on women of Austerity and the more recent global pandemic. See <https://wbg.org.uk> Women’s Budget group.

### *Periodical Labour Pains*

*Red Rag* examined the pleasures and the pains of feminist periodical labour in its editorials. Here visual and verbal reflections on the collective's working practices blurred the boundaries between the public and the private, work and home, labour and love, to challenge the production boundaries that rendered caring labour invisible. Issue 4 invited the imagined reader into the magazine's 'offices' to see the Red Rag collective in the process of assembling the magazine. 'At Work' by Alison Fell is a single-frame cartoon that occupies the top half of the first page of the magazine (Delmar 2020: 7) (Figure 2). This free-hand drawing mimics the on the spot sketches of graphic journalists in the nineteenth century, a sense of haste, speed and immediacy is conveyed in the absence of detail and precision. Vertical lines demarcating the walls of the room wobble, solid objects such as the typewriter, cups and plates retain a flat, two-dimensional quality in the foreground, individual figures are characterized in a pictorial short-hand through hair, clothing and body stance. The figure at the centre of the composition occupies a slightly more prominent position, providing a focal point for the viewer to enter the workspace. After this initial visual invitation, however, there are few resting places for the reader's eye as she is drawn into the visual commotion of the *Red Rag* women at work. This is a busy, buzzy, harmonious and non-hierarchical site of feminist periodical labour, where production boundaries dissolve, different roles and responsibilities are equally shared and decisions are made collectively. The illustration conveys the collective's flat organizational structures through its depthless composition and its restless perspective, refusing to focus on any one individual figure. The close proximity of the women in relation to each other suggests the intimacy of this workspace; their smiling faces attest to the pleasure of working together. More significantly the clothes drying and the children playing, together with the vertical lines at the back and at one side representing the walls of the room, suggest the family home has become the site of periodical production. While the pleasures of this form of labour are evident in the intimate proximity of bodies, at the same time, the vertical lines behind and around the women are a visual reminder of the bars of a domestic prison.

*Red Rag's* visual wit was probably largely due to the skill and expertise of Alison Fell and Val Charlton, both art school graduates (Delmar 2020: 7). Charlton recalls the pleasure she took in making the magazine 'look right'. Having trained in fine art, she would get annoyed 'if something looked messy and unthought-out' (Wandor 1990: 168). Beatrix Campbell recalls the 'complete crisis' at *Red Rag* when Charlton's partner left her: 'she

was suddenly on her own with two kids, one of whom was not yet at school. How was she going to get a job? How was she going to get a job that would enable her to keep two kids?’ (Campbell 2010-2013, *S&A*). In fact, Charlton had already started a career as an animator in the film industry in 1972, the year *Red Rag* launched. She had spent the decade of the 1970s engaged in multiple forms of labour, waged and unwaged. Being a single parent, however, created near intolerable pressures. How would Charlton be able to continue to care for her children when compelled to ‘work [...] all the hours God gave’ (Campbell 2010-2013, *S&A*). ‘At Work’ responds to this crisis by imagining spaces where labour fit around care rather than the other way around. Charlton’s personal circumstances reflected the circumstances of many women who were either single parents and/or working a double shift. Visualizing and verbalizing the textures of women’s working lives, *Red Rag* was a site of feminist labour but also a site where the concept of labour itself began to dissolve as a distinct category, merging into and intersecting with a range of activities that require time and attention.

Issue 7’s hand-written editorial provided a verbal correlative to this image of collective labour. Work on the magazine has been interrupted by a variety of activities that resulted in falling behind schedule (Figure 3):

Underneath this list of activities was the note, ‘Dear Red Rag, that’s no excuse for being a month late’ and a response: ‘P.S. Yes it is—she’s pregnant’ (Red Rag Collective 1974b:2). A line drawing of a woman dropping



Figure 2. Alison Fell, ‘At Work’ (Red Rag Collective 1973b: 2).



In the last few months Red Rag has lived through an election, been to Scotland, China, has worked for a living, consumed enumerable conferences, been to the launderette 280 times, taken exams, not written a thesis, been to Romania, Berlin, lived daily with 9 kids and a number of men and women, been to Nearden, America, gone to too many meetings, demonstrated, may have had some orgasms, picketed, had lots of relationships (just good friends) has not made any money, and is still struggling.

Dear Red Rag  
That's no excuse for being a month late!

Anxious Ms

Figure 3. 'Editorial' (Red Rag Collective 1974b: 2).

the contents of the magazine suggest this biological 'news' interrupted the cycles of periodical publication. Below, handwritten graffiti defaced the typewritten list of issue contributors, correcting 'This issue was produced by' to 'This issue was produced in spite of', followed by the names of the collective. The juxtaposition of handwritten and typed copy graphically conveys how reproductive cycles and the routines of everyday life disrupt the production of the magazine. The roughly hewn aesthetic foregrounds the quality of the hand that writes these editorial statements and, by extension, the labouring body involved in production/reproduction. More fundamentally, the meaning of production is contested in the statement. Measuring the collective's productivity simply in terms of its ability to meet its publication deadlines occludes the many and equally important forms of work that the women have been engaged in; that work is defined in capacious terms and includes childcare, housework, activism, research and travel as well as relationships and even orgasms. The labour of the feminist collective is engaged in various forms of work that create material objects (such as magazines) as well as immaterial benefits (such as orgasms and childcare). The concept of 're/productivity' is anticipated here as the spheres of production and social reproduction are bound

together, blurring the distinction between the household and the market economy and expanding the definition of labour to include activities that sustain lives and livelihoods (Bauhardt and Harcourt 2018: 19).

Between the playful illustrations of collective feminist labour in issues 5 and 7, issue 6 explored the hierarchies embedded within the collective's working practices. The editorial shared with its readers its own labour pains:

We may have all agreed that we're going to share responsibility, but that has taken a long time to work out. Who would do layout? Who could already do layout? How could we all learn, when we had printing dates, which we might be staying up all night to meet? Who would deal with the printers, who are not always the most pleasant or responsible people themselves? And what about visuals – pictures, drawings, cartoons? How could we view it politically, when these were areas some of us did not know or have any skill in and those who were landed with these jobs began to resent it? (Red Rag Collective 1974a: 2)

The editorial outlined the particular problems associated with individuals having to take on the responsibilities of distribution and finance. The approach, described as a 'mixture of individual initiative and assumed collective responsibility', aimed to move the collective towards a position of 'mutual accountability' (Red Rag Collective 1974a: 2). The collective agreed to restrict its membership while the magazine was under production, opening it up again as new issues were being prepared for publication. This policy, however, was to fuel criticisms of the magazine as elitist. When Sue O'Sullivan announced her resignation in *Red Rag* 11, she expressed her unease with the magazine's reputation: 'There was too much the air of prestige and position in belonging to *Red Rag*' (O'Sullivan 1976b: 30). In spite of the collective's objective to adopt non-hierarchical structures, it was perceived by some readers as an exclusive and privileged clique (Benton 1976b: 31). As a corrective to this, the same reader suggested the magazine abandon its navel-gazing and organize open meetings to include more women in discussion.

As editorials reveal, a shared feminist ethos did not prevent inequalities in the distribution of labour. *Red Rag* was all too aware that its 'distance' from the movement and from feminist practice could be 'characterised as being elitist or exclusive' (Red Rag Collective 1977a: 3). This was a problem not only for *Red Rag* but for many other feminist publications working within structures that sought to be open, inclusive and representative. Eve Setch's analysis of the London Women's Liberation Workshop Newsletter explores the accusations of censorship and exclusivity aimed at the feminists who produced it (Setch 2002: 183). These charges of elitism

were in many ways indicative of the challenges of feminist publishing and of the hierarchical nature of the editorial process itself. The ‘editorial imprimatur’ in feminist publishing houses, as Simone Murray points out, exercised ‘the gatekeeper’s right to allow a text entry into the public domain or to withhold it from the general currency of ideas’ (Murray 2004: 493). The very fact that work at *Red Rag* was unwaged also meant that participating in the collective required a certain degree of financial stability as well as the time to engage in this kind of intellectual/creative labour. In addition, making the magazine conferred a distinction on the *Red Rag* feminists that sat uncomfortably with their own politics. Even within the restricted economy of the counter-public sphere, hierarchical structures reasserted themselves, inevitably privileging some voices over others. Recognizing that ‘we are limited to the boundaries of our own history’, *Red Rag*’s reflective practices provided a way for feminists to critique the contradictions of the movement by analysing the economics of women’s liberation and the material circumstances that made activism possible (Red Rag Collective 1977a: 2).

The two letters by O’Sullivan that appeared in *Red Rag* in the Autumn of 1976 explaining why she resigned from the collective, pointed to the difficulties of maintaining the ‘kind of organisational structures’ necessary for a ‘political collective’ to operate effectively (O’Sullivan 1976b: 28). The first letter, written in the immediate aftermath of her resignation, resonates with feelings of sadness, anger, disappointment and frustration. She begins by describing her own context: ‘The telly’s on, the kids around and I’m tired so it won’t be as nicely put as it could be’ (O’Sullivan 1976b: 28). She pointed to the increasing tensions between CP feminists and the fact that ‘some sisters got fed up with a few of us talking on about the politics of organisation and structure’ (O’Sullivan 1976b: 28). The second letter, written seven months after her resignation, referred to the ‘series of extraordinary meetings in December 1975’ that led to a decision to suppress an article by Rob Henderson that was critical of the CP (O’Sullivan 1976b: 29). This was the pivotal moment. While the split between CP women and non-CP women had existed from the magazine’s inception, for O’Sullivan, the ‘early creative tension’ between these two groups, the ‘energy’ of sisterhood and the ‘excitement of struggle ha[d] dissipated’ at least partly because of the collective’s unwillingness to allow feminists to ‘rock the boat’ and to ‘make criticisms of left groups’ (O’Sullivan 1976b: 30). Yet fundamentally, O’Sullivan’s resignation reveals not only the political divisions within *Red Rag* but also the intimate and personal relationships embedded within feminist periodical labour. ‘I care and always will do for women’ who work on *Red Rag*, she writes and signs her letter with ‘love’ (O’Sullivan 1976b: 28).

O'Sullivan's description of the suppression of criticism of the CP also points to the contradictions embedded within Marxist feminism particularly in relation to the domestic labour debate. The debate itself, as Diemut Bubeck suggests, made it difficult to avoid 'identifying men as the exploiters of women' and from an orthodox Marxist perspective, was in danger of undermining the solidarity of the working-class struggle against capitalism (Bubeck 1995: 46). The focus on patriarchal oppression created tensions not only along class lines but also in terms of race. Jean Gardiner has pointed to the limitations of the concept of patriarchy for an understanding of black women's labour and has suggested that 'the household may be the primary support system available for the powerless and most oppressed groups' (Himmelweit 2000: 91).

Particularly in the wake of Covid-19, intersectional debates about the social relations of care have become more urgent. The pandemic has highlighted the nation's reliance on the labour of unpaid and low-paid carers, cleaners and nurses, most of whom are women and many of whom are black, Asian or ethnic minority women. The pandemic has also shifted paid labour into the home where it competes for time and attention with the demands of childcare, cooking, cleaning and household administration, throwing into relief the persistence of the unequal and gendered division of labour. As a result, *Red Rag's* visual and verbal mediation of the domestic labour debate of the 1970s is a timely reminder that the household can be a site of conflict as well as co-operation and that caring labour continues to be undervalued, if valued at all.

It also reminds those of us exiled from the workplace of the interpersonal relations formed in and through work. It is *Red Rag's* representation of feminist periodical labour, the intimate snapshots of the collective 'at work' that reminds us of the powerful affects attached to work itself. As Sue O'Sullivan's heartfelt goodbye to the Red Rag collective suggests, 'care' is not limited to the home and family life but can become embedded within working relationships and practices. *Red Rag's* visual politics is particularly resonant and affective because it reflects the intimacy between workers; an intimacy that can be intense and sustaining and may even fulfil many of the functions that family relations are supposed to provide.

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