

From  
'Rotten  
Wives' to  
'Good  
Mothers'  
*Household Models  
and the Limits of  
Economism*  
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## 1 Introduction

In development policy and practice, economic models of 'the household' command considerable influence. This influence derives primarily from claims that household models are capable of predicting policy outcomes.

Until quite recently, the dominant model portrayed the household as a solidary unit with the preferences of all household members aggregated in a joint utility function. This portrayal is not only analytically convenient. It also implies that subsidies and transfers have the same effect regardless of whether they are directed to men or women.

Recently the unitary model has come under fire from within the neoclassical paradigm. The main thrust of this critique is that individuals should be characterised by their own preferences, rather than aggregated within the *ad hoc* fiction of the unitary model: 'individualism should be referred to even when one is modelling household behaviour; that is, the latter should be explicitly recognised as a **collective** process involving (except for singles) more than one decision unit' (Chiappori 1992: 440). Since the rules governing intrahousehold allocation can assume multiple forms, collective modellers maintain that the unitary model is simply a special and peculiar instance of a more general collective approach.

Collective modellers challenge the policy implications of the unitary model, and endorse arguments that resources should be channeled to women on grounds not only of equity, but also efficiency. Indeed, the neoclassical critique of the unitary model originates from studies that portray women as more responsible than men. In short, the altruistic male household head of the unitary model who keeps both 'rotten kids' and 'rotten wives' in line through strategic transfers (Becker 1981) has given way to the 'good mother'.

Despite more favourable representations of women, the deployment of gender in collective models remains deeply problematic. Taking gender seriously is not simply a matter of adding women, recognising their contribution, or being more generous towards them. Rather, it forces attention to the exercise of power within and beyond the household. It also disrupts claims of prediction.

My purpose in this article is twofold. First is to help demystify economic models of the household by making explicit the gendered politics through which they have been constructed and debated.<sup>1</sup> These models and the debates that surround them are gendered in two senses. Household modellers invoke particular understandings of gender, and the debates among them enact some of their key assumptions.

My second purpose is to spell out some of the implications of attention to gender power. In her brilliant introduction to **Gender and the Politics of History** (1988), Joan Scott makes the point that gender – in the sense of knowledge about the multiple and contested meanings of sexual difference – is not confined to the household, but is invoked and contested in a variety of institutional arenas as part of many kinds of struggles for power. This extended definition of politics is one of the central insights of feminism, and contains the key to moving beyond economism. In the second part of the article, I draw on my research in the Muda region of Malaysia to illustrate these arguments.

## **2 From Unitary to Collective Models of 'the Household': The Double-Gendered Battlefields of Knowledge<sup>2</sup>**

'The household' has long been a thorn in the side of neoclassical economists because it poses the problem of preference aggregation. In neoclassical theory, consistent preferences are axiomatic and essential for predictability. Posed most forcefully by Samuelson (1956) the problem is, how can we expect family demand functions to obey any consistency conditions? Samuelson viewed the notion of a household dictatorship with distaste. Instead he opted for utopian commune in which household members internalise one another's preferences such that 'the family acts as if it were maximising their joint welfare.'

Rooted in sociobiology, the 'Rotten Kid theorem' – which also encompasses rotten wives – was Gary Becker's (1981) ingenious device for legitimating preference aggregation in terms other than domestic dictatorship or conjugal communism. So long as the household is headed by an altruist 'who cares sufficiently about other household members to transfer general resources to them', then no matter how selfish the kids or wives may be, it will be in their interests to maximise the welfare of the household as a whole. Efficient outcomes are thus achieved through paternalistic manipulation, rather than through brute force or perfect consensus.

Just when Becker provided an elegant justification, the unitary model came under fire from some renegade economists who deployed game theory to develop bargaining models of the household (Manser and Brown 1980; McElroy and Horney 1981). These so-called Nash bargaining models are, as we shall see later, the precursors of the more general collective approach, and are firmly within the neoclassical paradigm. In the bargaining framework, the household is composed of self-interested individuals who engage in both conflict and cooperation. Their relative bargaining power is defined by 'threat points' or fall-back positions, which reflect the level of welfare that each could attain if they fail to cooperate. In these formal renditions, gender inequality boils down to male-female wage differentials. Other feminist economists also took up the cudgels against the unitary model, joined by a number of anthropologists and sociologists.<sup>3</sup> While accepting the idea of the household as a site of both cooperation and conflict, many of these interventions were also quite critical of economic formulations of the bargaining model and suggested a number of important modifications.

In seeking to fend off the bargaining model challenge, unitary modellers portrayed themselves and their opponents in terms that bore a rather uncanny resemblance to the household altruist trying to cope with a carping wife. Such interventions were not,

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a shortened and substantially rewritten version of Hart (1995) – a paper produced for an almost exclusively male conference of development economists.

<sup>2</sup> I have borrowed the term 'battlefields of knowledge' from Long and Long (1992).

<sup>3</sup> Non-neoclassical economists who made important

contributions to extending the bargaining framework include Folbre 1984, 1986a, 1986b; Jones 1983, 1986; Agarwal 1990; Sen 1990; Kabeer 1991. Anthropologists and sociologists who contributed to these debates include for example Whitehead 1981; Guyer 1981; Guyer and Peters 1987; Dwyer and Bruce 1988; Kandiyoti 1988; Wolf 1990.

they pointed out, in the interests of the discipline as a whole since they were 'less parsimonious' (e.g. Rosenzweig and Schultz 1984). Intra-household inequality, they insisted, reflected optimal decisions for the household as a whole, rather than asymmetrical bargaining power.

They also rejected arguments that income subsidies and transfers should be directed to women to improve their bargaining power; since intra-household inequalities are functional to the welfare of the household as a whole, 'person-specific transfer programs' are simply misguided (e.g. Rosenzweig 1986). The sub-text of these arguments is, of course, that the (male) household altruist knows best. In short, assumptions invoked for analytical convenience overlapped with androcentric constructions of the household as a natural unit (cf. Harris 1980) in ways that also informed development practice. Writing in the late 1980s, Guyer and Peters (1987: 210) noted that

Perhaps the most bizarre outcome of over-concretised thinking in development practice is that 'women' (or less often 'gender') and 'household' have been dealt with in separate domains of discourse and action. For example, in numerous donor agencies 'women's issues' are ensconced in a specially defined field of 'women in development', whereas households appear as units of analysis and social units addressed within substantive fields such as rural credit, agricultural development, small-scale enterprise, nutrition, and so forth.

Since 1990, a series of studies based on large-scale data sets have shattered the image of the household altruist. These studies show that unearned income controlled by women is associated with larger improvements in child health and nutrition than that accruing to men (Thomas 1990); with greater reductions in fertility (Schultz 1990); with increases in the share of the household budget allocated to health, education, and housing (Thomas 1993); and with a greater probability that children will attend school and receive medical attention (Duraismy and Malathy 1992 cited by Strauss and Thomas 1993) – all of which, of course, is

inconsistent with the unitary model.<sup>4</sup> Critics of the unitary model had been making these arguments for some time, but their claims were typically dismissed as 'anecdotal' and, by implication, 'feminine'; it required the legitimacy of large, hard data sets to make them stick.

The new collective models of the household take off from these portrayals of good mothers and profligate fathers who spend their money on wine, women, and song. In a somewhat Oedipal drama, collective modellers represent a group of young Turks rising up against the patriarchs of the discipline, but doing so in a way that tries to beat them at their own game. The chief limitation of the unitary model, these rebels argue, is that it 'falls short of meeting the basic rule of neoclassical micro-economic analysis, namely **individualism**, which obviously requires each individual to be characterised by his (her) own preferences, rather than being aggregated within the *ad hoc* fiction of the collective decision unit' (Bourguignon and Chiappori 1992: 356).

Collective modellers explicitly distance themselves from the 'unitary versus bargaining model' debates of the 1980s:

While any evidence against income pooling falsifies the traditional approach [i.e. the unitary model], it certainly does **not** support any alternative model [i.e. the bargaining model] in particular. There are certainly hundreds of *ad hoc* assumptions that could explain the observed results within the traditional approach, and thousands of more or less funny alternative models that could justify them outside it. (Bourguignon and Chiappori 1992: 360)

The more general point is that any set of quantitative results is almost always subject to multiple interpretations.

In challenging the 'traditionalists', collective modellers depose the unitary model from its dominant position by defining it as a special and peculiar case. Indeed, both the unitary and the Nash bargaining model are simply special

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<sup>4</sup> These studies used a measure of unearned income to avoid the charge that wages and other earnings reflect human capital.

cases of a more general class of cooperative models. Cooperative models assume full information, fully enforceable contracts, and Pareto efficient resource allocation – i.e. that intra-household allocational equilibrium is such that no member can be made better off without anyone else being made worse off. Non-cooperative models recognise imperfect information, enforcement problems, and inefficient resource allocation. As we shall see later, these distinctions cooperative and non-cooperative models are indeed far more telling than those between unitary and bargaining models.

Second, some collective modellers assert superiority over their traditionalist forebears by claiming to wield more sophisticated econometric techniques to implement their more general theory. Not only is the unitary model a special and peculiar case; in addition, the purveyors of these traditional models impose strong assumptions about the rules governing intra-household allocation. Collective modellers claim to be resolutely agnostic about household allocative rules; rather than such rules being imposed, they must be **recovered** from the data – a procedure which is, needless to say, more complex than that deployed by the old unitary modellers.<sup>5</sup>

Third, they argue that precisely because the unitary model is such a peculiar and special case, it is likely to result in a series of policy failures – including the wrong choice of policy instrument, the inappropriate implementation of a particular policy instrument, and the failure to recognise the variety and reach of potential policy handles; hence the time has come to ‘shift the burden of proof’ (Alderman *et al.* 1995, Haddad and Kanbur 1992, Haddad *et al.* 1997). The bottom line of these arguments, discussed more fully later, is that resources should be channeled directly to women.

Yet, as we shall now see, in seeking to confront the patriarchs on the narrow terrain of neoclassicism, those who deploy cooperative models to ‘recover’

sharing rules from survey data are hoist with their own petard. Those who seek to extend the terrain by devising non-cooperative models very quickly encounter the limits of economism.

### 3 The Limits of Economism

On closer inspection, collective modellers’ claims to be able to recover sharing rules from household survey data turn out to be quite exaggerated.<sup>6</sup> In practice, as some of them concede, their policy analysis is based on the shortcomings of the unitary model rather than an estimation of a specific collective model. Most of these policy claims in fact derive from the logic of the old Nash bargaining model.

There are, I suggest, two key sets of problems inherent in collective modellers’ attempts to ‘recover’ sharing rules from aggregate survey data.<sup>7</sup> First, what is most obviously problematic is that large-scale survey data collection exercises themselves embody pre-defined categories and assumptions about underlying relations. At best, therefore, the rules that are recovered are likely to be those that were assumed in the first place. At the most basic level, precisely what is meant by ‘the household’ is far from self-evident particularly in contexts defined by complex systems of labour circulation and spatially-extended sharing arrangements. More generally, to view household survey data as objective sets of facts which, if properly interrogated, will yield underlying rules, is to engage in a singularly circular exercise.

Efforts to recover sharing rules are hamstrung in another key way. Despite claims of agnosticism *vis-à-vis* sharing rules, collective modellers require Pareto efficiency in order to implement their procedures; these are, in other words, cooperative models. Such models are extremely restrictive, and represent neoclassical economics in its most orthodox form. They cling to assumptions of perfect information and costless enforcement which

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<sup>5</sup> For a lucid description of these procedures see Deaton (1994).

<sup>6</sup> In studies of French and Canadian data, Bourguignon *et al.* (1993) and Browning *et al.* (1993) reject the income pooling assumption of the unitary model, but concede that they were unable to identify the location of the sharing rule. Deaton and his colleagues, who have

worked on data from Africa and Asia, concede that the results leave much to be desired, and that ‘a great deal of work needs to be done before these methods can be fruitfully used to investigate intrahousehold allocation’ (Deaton 1995).

<sup>7</sup> These arguments are developed more fully in Hart (1995).

new institutional economists have relinquished in their attempts to crack open other black boxes – notably agrarian institutions (Stiglitz 1989; Bardhan 1989) and firms (Williamson 1985). In short, even within the confines of mainstream economic theory, cooperative models of the household are a generation behind new institutional economics models which, in turn, invoke quite crude assumptions about the nature of power relations (Hart 1986; Bardhan 1989).

Non-cooperative household models do engage with issues of informational asymmetry and enforcement costs, and represent the application of the new institutional economics to the household. Yet in doing so, they reveal very clearly the limits of economism.

Two examples of noncooperative models – Lundberg and Pollak (1993) and Carter and Katz (1993, 1997) – illustrate these limits quite clearly. Lundberg and Pollak (1993: 990) distinguish their model from the Nash bargaining model in two key ways. First, the threat point is not divorce but a noncooperative equilibrium defined in terms of traditional gender roles and gender expectations. Second, the non-cooperative equilibrium is not Pareto optimal, but may be the final one because of transactions costs. They go on to show how this model yields predictions of the distributional effects of child allowances and other family policies which differ from those of both the Nash bargaining and the unitary model. This model illustrates two particularly important points. First is the sensitivity of conclusions about distributional outcomes to assumptions about intra-household relations. Second is the awkwardness of the assumptions. The level of transfers in the noncooperative, ‘voluntary contribution’ equilibrium is ‘maintained by social enforcement of the obligations corresponding to generally recognised and accepted gender roles’ (Lundberg and Pollak 1993: 994). Yet, as the authors themselves concede, this *ad hoc* invocation of norms and enforcement mechanisms is a cop-out.

The Carter-Katz model also elaborates the idea of a domestic economy comprised of separate gender-defined spheres, but provides a more sophisticated

analysis of how transfers are mediated. Carter and Katz envisage household members as being in possession of individual property rights as well as autonomous control over income and time allocation. Transfers of resources and labour are mediated by a conjugal contract (cf. Whitehead 1981), and are enforceable only at some cost. The conjugal contract, in turn, is determined by ‘voice’ – the degree to which both partners can influence or bargain over net resource transfers – as well as their respective ‘exit’ options: ‘As fundamentally social constructions, both voice and exit reflect a complex of attitudes, mores, and opportunities exogenous to the household that can be labelled the ‘degree of patriarchy’ (Carter and Katz 1993: 7.18).

Carter and Katz’s attention to what they call ‘voice’ – in other words the capacity to **renegotiate** the rules or terms of exchange – represents a major advance over the Nash bargaining model in which the rules are given and relative bargaining power is determined by exogenous threat points (or ‘extra-household environmental parameters’). What this means in effect is that gender-biased shifts in policy or in economic opportunities not only have differential effects on different household members, but may also provoke a renegotiation of the rules governing access to and control over resources and labour, as well as redistribution of the fruits of that labour. The dynamics of household formation and partition also hinge crucially on how definitions of rights and obligations governing relations between women and men, as well as between elders and juniors, are renegotiated in relation to larger structures and processes. Although a notion such as the ‘degree of patriarchy’ calls attention to the gendered exercise of power, it is quite incapable of providing analytical purchase.

The Carter-Katz model represents an effort to formalise arguments that some of the critics of economic versions of bargaining models have been making for some time – namely that struggles over resources, labour, and redistribution are simultaneously struggles over culturally-constructed meanings and definitions.<sup>8</sup> The basic thrust of Whitehead’s (1981) original and brilliant formulation of the ‘conjugal contract’ was that domestic budgeting is a fundamentally **political**

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<sup>8</sup> This particular formulation, which has now become widely accepted, was originally articulated by Peters

(1984) and further elaborated by Berry (1988, 1989).

process encompassing the power to label and define; thus, for example, wages or money incomes earned by women do not necessarily translate into the same power as those of men because of cultural practices that define men's and women's incomes as incommensurate. Likewise, in her discussion of intra-household 'bargaining' in a Cameroonian rice-growing scheme Jones (1986) pointed out that:

it is not only the rate of compensation and type of contractual agreement that are being negotiated but also the meaning of the contractual arrangement itself. Women are bargaining not only over the level of the 'wage' they are paid [by their husbands] but also over their right to be paid a certain amount based on the level of their labour input. In effect, they are challenging the husband's right to dispose of the product of his wife's labour, a right which was recognised heretofore by the transfer of bridewealth cattle.  
(Jones 1986: 118)

Similarly, Carney and Watts (1990) show how a project designed to intensify rice production in the Gambia provoked a renegotiation of labour and property rights between men and women which undermined the original intent of the project.<sup>9</sup>

In complementary papers, Henrietta Moore and I argued that gender needs to be understood as **constitutive** of economic processes; and that the key to doing so lies in incorporating insights from cultural studies – in particular, the ways that culturally-constructed and gendered meanings both inform and are shaped by everyday practices both within and beyond the household (Hart 1992; Moore 1992). Since meanings – such as those associated with intrahousehold exchanges or claims on resources or, indeed, the boundaries of 'the household' – are multiple, contested, and change over time, outcomes cannot be predicted from 'rules' or norms. Moore makes the crucially important point that conventions are best thought of as resources that are drawn on in the process of negotiation

rather than as norms that determine the outcome of negotiation. Our strategies for linking household and extra-household processes are somewhat different.<sup>10</sup> Yet both of us argued that the question is not simply **what** are rules governing intra-household resource allocation, but rather **how** are gendered rights and obligations constructed, maintained, and made to appear 'natural' and, most importantly, what are the conditions and modalities through which particular groups of women interrogate and, on occasion, overtly challenge prevailing gender ideologies and arrangements. What, in other words, are the emancipatory possibilities?

This, of course, raises fundamental questions of subjectivity, identity, and resistance which have in recent years been the focus of considerable debate.

#### **4 Engendering Everyday Resistance: Questions of Power and Subjectivity**

In the literature on household economics, much of this debate has revolved around the question of whether or not women suffer from false consciousness. In his influential critique of economic bargaining models, Amartya Sen (1990) called into question the foundational assumption of exogenous preferences, and suggested that particularly in traditional societies women may be subject to a 'perception bias' that takes inadequate account of their own self-interest: 'insofar as intrafamily divisions involve significant inequalities in the allotment of food, medical attention, health care and the like (often unfavorable to the well-being – even survival – of women) the lack of perception of personal interest combined with a great concern for family welfare is, of course, just the kind of attitude that helps to sustain the traditional inequalities' (Sen 1990: 126). He goes on to note that these perceptions are not immutable: 'the process of politicisation – including a political recognition of the gender issue – can itself bring about sharp changes in these perceptions, as can processes of economic change,

<sup>9</sup> It is not coincidental that these and several other major contributions to the broader theoretical critique of economic household models (eg. Guyer 1981; Guyer and Peters 1987) have come from Africanist scholars confronted with household forms of mind-boggling complexity.

<sup>10</sup> Moore develops what she calls the 'system of redistribution', whereas I focus more directly on (a) identifying the key arenas of social interaction in any particular setting, and the ways in which struggles reverberate across these arenas, and (b) linking these local dynamics to larger configurations of political-economic forces.

such as women's involvement in so-called 'gainful employment' (ibid.).

Sen has been taken to task from two quite opposite directions. From an extreme poststructuralist position, Apffel-Marglin and Simon (1994) accuse him of 'feminist orientalism' and reifying liberal Western notions of the autonomous subject; for these authors, as for Spivak (1988), 'the subaltern cannot speak.' Bina Agarwal (1994) in contrast is deeply critical of Sen's assertion that women are unaware of their self-interest, and turns instead to James Scott's **Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance** (1985). Scott's central theoretical project is a critique of the Gramscian concept of hegemony – the non-violent control through which subaltern groups 'consent' to their own oppression.<sup>11</sup> He does so, somewhat ironically, by invoking the figure of the 'rational peasant' who is perfectly capable not only of penetrating the self-serving claims of the rich, but also manipulating and subverting elements of the dominant ideology. Agarwal likewise argues that women are perfectly capable of penetrating self-serving male ideologies. She criticises Scott for casting his analysis in terms of class rather than gender, but maintains that his concepts and methods can be used to demonstrate women's full awareness of their self-interest. Like Scott, she provides detailed documentation of South Asian women's 'off-stage' behaviour – including delicious stories of clandestine picnics, rude songs about male impotence, and so forth.

My own research in the Muda region of Malaysia (the locus of **Weapons of the Weak**) suggests a conceptualisation of agency quite different from Scott's portrayal of the 'rational peasant' – a free-willed, individual decision-maker with fixed and unambiguous identity and interests (Hart 1991: 116–7). Attention to gender (and other forms of

socially-constructed difference) calls for an understanding of agency that recognises multiple (and possibly contradictory) sources of identity and interests. Far from being given and fixed, identities and interests are forged through political struggle (in its extended sense) in multiple and intersecting institutional arenas. Not only are men and women differently positioned through the sexual division of labour; in addition, these struggles are informed in crucially important ways by multiple and often conflicting representations of masculinity/femininity. The picture of 'everyday resistance' that emerges from this gendered understanding differs in several key respects from that painted by Scott.

This alternative picture turns around striking differences between women and men in forms of labour organisation that Scott himself documents, and were clearly evident in the village where I lived in 1987. While men were hired as individuals, women workers organised and sold their labour collectively, defying efforts by large landowners to disband female labour gangs. Male agricultural labour relations were marked by at least outward signs of deference, whereas women adopted a far more militant stance towards large landowners. When the introduction of combine harvesters threatened massive unemployment, women tried to boycott large landowners who used the machine, whereas men resorted to clandestine acts of sabotage. These gender-differentiated patterns of engagement in the labour market and acts of defiance were reciprocally linked with intra-household relations. For women workers, labour gangs were a major source of financial as well as emotional support which carried over to shape conjugal relations; their understandings of themselves and their relations with their husbands contrasted sharply with those of women belonging to a newly emergent middle class who defined themselves in terms of domesticity and dependence on their husbands.

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<sup>11</sup> In his incisive critique of **Weapons of the Weak**, Mitchell (1990) argues that Scott dismisses Gramsci's concept of hegemony through two problematic strategies. First, Mitchell points out, Scott narrows the definition of hegemony to domination at the level of ideas – which is **not** the way Gramsci in fact uses the term. Scott then draws a problematic distinction between the realm of consciousness or culture, and some purely material or physical realm, and uses this distinction to deny that poor peasants are subject to hegemonic domination. The second strategy entails rejecting evidence of hegemony by relabelling its effects as external 'obstacles to resistance'.

Yet, Mitchell argues, each of these 'obstacles' is more usefully seen as historically constituted modes of domination. What appear as externally given structures or obstacles are the product of particular social practices: 'The new modes of power, by their permanence, their apparent origin outside local life, their intangibility, their impersonal nature, seem to take on an aspect of difference, to stand outside actuality, outside events, outside time, outside personhood' (Mitchell 1990: 569). Accordingly, Mitchell argues, the dualism that opposes meaning to material reality can be seen as the **effect** of hegemonic strategies of power.

The question is why women were more capable than men of asserting their identities as workers, and how struggles in the workplace and the domestic sphere intersected with one another. Part of the explanation, I suggest, lies in women's exclusion from a key arena – local systems of patronage that operate predominantly along male lines. The centrality of patronage, in turn, reflects larger configurations of political-economic power. Relations between peasants and the state in the main rice-growing regions of Malaysia are not a matter of state extraction. On the contrary, the state pumps massive subsidies into the major rice-growing regions in an effort to contain the threat that militant Islamic groups pose to the coalition in control of the state, and to larger processes of accumulation. Subsidies are channelled to local power brokers who then deploy part of these resources to build and maintain bases of political support. 'Poor peasants' can more accurately be seen as male clients-cum-workers enmeshed in complex, multi-faceted relations of patronage that are deeply split along factional lines. Most of the wives of these men were born outside the village; not only are they excluded from patronage relations, but they explicitly identify with one another as *orang luar* – literally 'outside people.'

These gendered patterns of inclusion/exclusion from patronage relations are only a part of the story. What is also crucial is the way men and women in different class positions have become interpellated very differently through supra-local gendered discourses. Partly in response to the social dislocations that accompanied rapid industrialisation and urbanisation in the 1970s, state power in Malaysia has increasingly been articulated in terms of religious rhetoric and symbolism, backed up by the allocation of resources to state-sponsored Islamic institutions. Gender has figured prominently in struggles between the state and resurgent Islamic forces. Ong (1990) provides an instructive analysis of how definitions of Malay womanhood and the family were actively promoted by a variety of state agencies through a multiplicity of practices. Through these discourses, constructions of women's rightful position in the home runs parallel with the principle of male responsibility, and with the construction of men as more generously endowed with *akal* (reason and self-control) than women.

These official invocations of what it means to be male and female do not determine people's understanding of themselves in any simple or direct way, but they do shape the terrain of debate and contention on which these understandings are forged through everyday practice. Working class women were typically dismissive of notions of male responsibility, in some instances openly derisive. These women were confronted with a sharp disjuncture between generalised notions of male responsibility, and the imperatives of having to prepare the next meal. Through daily practice, they developed not only horizontal relations of solidarity with one another, but also defined themselves in part through a critique of official gender representations. In striking contrast, middle class women – most notably the wives of a newly emergent class of brokers of state resources – not only invoked women's rightful position in the home in defining themselves as housewives, but also pressed claims of male responsibility.

In public discourse, the husbands of these women frequently invoked their capacity to provide for their families, and maintain domestic harmony – a capacity they contrasted with the tension and conflict between poor couples which, in turn, they attributed to the irresponsibility and inadequacies of poor men. They were also fond of drawing analogies between their role in providing for their wives and their role in promoting village harmony through their generosity towards the poor.

These emasculating discursive strategies are, I suggest, an important part of the reason why male workers were far less able than women to organise collectively, and to challenge employers directly in the context of the labour process. Not only were men incorporated into political patronage relations, while women were largely excluded. In addition, they were confronted with a principle that defined them as superior to and responsible for women, simultaneously with an incapacity to put this principle into material practice in the domestic sphere. The contradictions surrounding the construction of men as superior, more responsible beings provided economically and politically dominant men with a wider array of controls over subaltern men than over women. For poor men, it curtailed the realm of argument and made them resort to more deferent, manipulative, and indirect methods than did

women in their dealings with powerful men. By the same token, women's reciprocal capacity to organise collectively and to assert themselves in the domestic realm is most usefully seen as the product of historically-specific and geographically situated interactions in multiple, intersecting institutional arenas, and of the inseparability of meaning and practice.

These simultaneously material and cultural struggles provide concrete illustrations of more general arguments suggested earlier. These include the importance of gender as a constitutive force in shaping economic processes; the usefulness of seeing 'the household' as a political arena; and the ways in which struggles reverberate across different institutional arenas, such that negotiation within different sorts of households cannot be understood in isolation from the ways in which both men and women are engaged in other arenas and networks of relationships. Larger configurations of political-economic forces – including, as we saw, gendered discourses – define the broad terrain of struggle, although they do not in any unilateral way determine the outcomes; and these locally-generated struggles in turn reconfigure supra-local forces.

Through a gendered critique of **Weapons of the Weak**, I have also tried to show how recognition of agency does not require the invocation of an autonomous, pre-formed subject; on the contrary, debates cast in terms of false consciousness versus the self-interested, 'rational' subject are misconceived because both derive from a problematic separation between 'the material' and 'the ideological', or between base and superstructure.<sup>12</sup> In short, the 'struggles over resources/struggles over meaning' couplet that is now very widely invoked should also include struggles over identity in particular spatial contexts – along with a recognition that places as well as people are the product of these processes (Massey 1994).

## 6 Concluding Observations

'The household' is the Achilles' heel of economism, because it forces confrontation with questions of gender and hence power. Although of necessity in a

very sketchy way, I have tried to suggest how a gendered conception of the exercise of power in multiple, intersecting institutional arenas points the way towards an alternative processual understanding of socio-spatial change.

This sort of understanding also illuminates how and why discourses of 'the good mother' are so problematic, particularly when they are hitched to poverty agendas and become both the legitimation and condition for some sort of minimalist redistribution (cf. Jackson 1996). It is not coincidental that these models have become influential since the late 1980s, when the potentially disruptive effects of austerity and the decimation of state welfare and subsidies were becoming manifest in many parts of the world, especially in Africa and Latin America.

Rather than victims of development (as in older Women in Development narratives) or 'rotten wives' subject to benevolent dictators (as in the unitary household model), women are now being portrayed as individual agents with more desirable preferences than men and hence, at least in some circles, as better managers of poverty. These sorts of expert discourses, Nancy Fraser (1989: 174) notes, 'construe persons simultaneously as rational utility maximisers and as causally conditioned, predictable, and manipulable objects, thereby screening out those dimensions of human agency that involve the construction and deconstruction of social meanings.' Yet predictive claims are a chimera precisely because official efforts to channel resources to 'poor women' are almost certain to provoke new rounds of local contestation, the terms of which are likely to be shaped by the discourses themselves (cf. Moore 1992). Thus, for example, Kandiyoti (1990) points out that 'in regions where male responsibility is at least normatively present, women themselves may be likely to put up fierce resistance to measures by-passing the male household head, even though they may in practice contrive ways of increasing their own control over household income.' It is also possible that 'good mother' discourses will be disabling of women's capacity to press for a better deal – although in some instances the opposite may be the case. In general, while 'poor women' may be treated as

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<sup>12</sup> The value of a Gramscian (or neo-Gramscian) approach is that it provides a way of circumventing these dualistic

formulations; for a brilliant statement of the contemporary relevance of Gramsci, see Hall (1986).

instruments, they are unlike to act as intended. As Ann Whitehead pointed out in her comments on an earlier version of this paper, gender is a moving target precisely because gender power is constantly reasserted.

In her recent book **Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the 'Postsocialist' Condition** (1997), Nancy Fraser argues that gender is a 'bivalent' injustice, which encompass both gender-specific modes of economic marginalisation, and gender-status devaluation or misrecognition. Ameliorative strategies generate unintended effects because claims for redistribution and recognition impinge on one another. Thus, for example, ameliorative strategies of redistribution that leave intact the deep structures of gender disadvantage must make surface reallocations again and again:

The result is not only to underline gender differentiation. It is also to mark women as deficient and insatiable, as always needing more and more. In time women can even come to appear privileged, recipients of special treatment and undeserved largesse. Thus, an approach aimed at redressing injustices of

distribution can end up fueling backlash injustices of recognition.  
(Fraser 1997: 29)

By the same token, strategies that affirm women's putative cultural specificity are likely to pour oil on the flames of resentment against affirmative action. Fraser calls instead for a transformative politics addressed both to political-economic restructuring and to cultural or symbolic change.

Fraser's discussion is conducted at a fairly high level of abstraction. In this 'postsocialist' age of market triumphalism, her suggestions may also appear hopelessly utopian. Yet they do, I think, underscore the importance of clarifying the ways in which social practices are simultaneously material and cultural, and of showing how 'natural' institutions – including the household and the market – are socially and politically constructed, and therefore subject to change.

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