Seven

Ethnography, sociology and ideology

some reflections on housework and housewives

I have to begin somehow and somewhere. Let me therefore begin with a suitable incantation.

> ...the first step in the process of cognition is contact with the objects of the external world; this belongs to the stage of perception. The second step is to synthesise the data of perception by arranging and reconstructing them; this belongs to the stage of conception, judgement and inference. It is only when the data of perception are very rich (not fragmentary) and correspond to reality (are not illusory) that they can be the basis for forming correct concepts and theories... knowledge consists only of two parts, that which comes from direct experience and that which comes from indirect experience. Moreover, what is indirect experience of one is *direct* experience of other people. Consequently, considered as a whole, knowledge of any kind is inseparable from direct experience. All knowledge originates in perception of the objective external world through man's physical sense organs.[1]

I take the term 'ethnography' to refer to just this kind of knowledge obtained by direct experience, our perceptions or if you prefer, our observations and, more especially, attempts to describe observations or perception of what people, including ourselves, do; and above all, observations of what people so observed do often and repeatedly, such that, as applied to individuals, we may speak of habit and as applied to groups, of custom and tradition. I take ethnography then to be the description of customary or traditional forms of activity or behaviour.

However –

> ...rational knowledge depends upon perceptual knowledge and perceptual knowledge remains to be developed into rational knowledge. (*ibid*)

For the purposes of this incantation, then

> The perceptual and the rational are qualitatively different, but are not divorced from each other; they are unified on the basis of practice. Our practice proves that... that which is perceived cannot at once be comprehended and that what is comprehended, can be more deeply perceived. Perception only solves the problem of essence. The solving of both these problems is not separate in the slightest degree from practice. Whoever wants to know a thing has NO way of doing so except by coming into contact with it, that is, by living (practising) in the environment.
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> (*ibid*)

That concludes my initial incantation. Let me now survey the epistemological burnt offering. I've slipped the term 'ethnography' into the discussion and if you haven't perceived that I'm cooking bean sprouts and frying rice, it may be because you are prematurely engaged in synthesising the data of perception by arranging and reconstructing them. This, however, we should recall, belongs to the stage of conception. Judgement and inference, as applied to the ethnographic description of social phenomena, may be called ethnology, anthropology, sociology or for that matter political economy or social science. Whether the *practice* of any of these requires us to solve the problem of the essence of housework or to grasp housewives in their totality, is a matter we can discover a little later on. For the time being, I urge that we stick to the world of phenomena, of appearances, of perceptual knowledge.

In the course of our everyday lives, it is highly likely that we engage in an activity which, generically, we can call cooking. This activity renders solids which we call foodstuffs edible, commonly by heating them in some kind of container, and likewise renders certain liquids potable. Some of us may indeed have engaged in just such an activity during the past day or two. Because eating and drinking are activities necessary to the survival of human beings as human beings, human subsistence if you wish, it is likely that these activities will be repeated, that they will assume habitual and customary forms which we come to take for granted. There are also certain activities associated with the preparation of food and drink for ingestion, consumption if you wish, for instance maintaining, repairing, and possibly replacing the various tools, implements, and pieces of equipment used in the preparation of

food and drink. In everyday life in Britain, we might refer to these activities as 'washing up', that is cleaning the knifes, forks, spoons, cups, saucers, glasses, plates, pots and pans, often with the aid of hot water and a suitable solvent, together with as little human effort as possible – if that is, WE have to supply the effort ourselves.

Equally commonplace observations about activities necessary to human subsistence suggest that we use a variety of insulating materials to reduce the variations in our body temperatures which might otherwise occur with daily and seasonal variations in the ambient temperature, and these insulating materials, often referred to as clothes, or clothing, are also on occasions the object of a certain amount of activity which we might refer to as cleaning, washing, repairing and so on.

Further observations, if we're sufficiently dogged, thick-skinned, not to say intrepid, ethnographers, at least of our own lives, will disclose that a certain amount of cleaning, repairing and maintenance of the body, the corporeal person underneath the clothing, also takes place. (Perhaps this is the very time and instant in which 'to grasp the essence, the totality and the internal relations of things', but for now, I will council caution and patience. We haven't finished with the phenomenal world yet. Because we really are following ourselves and other people around, observing what we and they do, for periods of days, weeks, months, even years on end we may observe the occurrence of numerous other activities.)

So far, in this list of subsistence activities, I've introduced the preparation of food and drink, and the care and maintenance of clothing. Clothing, worn on or about the body however, is not the only means of insulating human beings from daily and seasonal variations in climate. Observably, people spend considerable periods of time in some kind of shelter or habitation. Indeed, we may observe that most of the activities which I've been alluding to, if not seeking to describe in anydetail, occur in some kind of enclosed space, an enclosure which may be variously described as a dwelling, a house, a home, a factory, a shop, an office and so on. Some of these enclosures may even be called, somewhat eccentrically, you may think Universities.

Again, observably, some people frequently carry out activities seemingly directed towards cleaning, maintaining, and repairing the fabric of the kinds of enclosures called dwellings and the material objects which they contain, with which, we may wish to say, they are

furnished. We may also observe that many of the activities which I mentioned earlier, the preparation and consumption of food and drink, the washing and cleaning of culinary utensils, of clothing, of bodies, frequently, though by no means invariably, occur within these enclosures, the dwellings or houses, as well as the cleaning and maintenance of the interiors of these enclosures and their contents.

So far, in these greatly attenuated descriptions, I have used generic terms like people, activity, subsistence and enclosure as well as more specific terms like food and drink, clothing, dwellings, houses, and furnishings. Let me now add some further, if still highly attenuated, descriptive terms which begin to indicate some distinctions between the phenomena to which the terms apply and also to the apparent connections between them. Just as it is possible to describe different kinds of *activities*, so it is possible to describe different kinds of *people*. To summarise innumerable possible observations and descriptions – the people who engage in the various activities to which I've already referred appear to come in many sizes and two main shapes, and to save ourselves the trouble of inventing new terms when apparently suitable ones are already available, we can now begin to apply some everyday terms which enable us to distinguish descriptively between older and younger people and, in somewhat greater detail, between babies and young children, older children, young people, middle aged people and old people. Likewise, we can distinguish descriptively between male and female. Combining these two principles of classification, we can distinguish descriptively boys from girls, young men from young women and so on. Somewhat more conceptually, we may begin to distinguish childhood from adulthood, infancy from adolescence, adulthood from senescence; and so on.

We're at one of the borders between perception and conception, of observation and thought or reasoning when we begin to recognise classification principles, and begin to talk about age, sex and gender. Perish the thought – let's linger awhile with perception and observation of the phenomenal world.

There is observably, considerable variation in the numbers and kinds of people to be found within these enclosures which I previously called dwellings – we can speak of households and variation in household composition. Thus, in adjacent dwellings, we may find single person households, households with only adults present, households with perhaps numerous children and only one adult, households

containing elderly people and middle aged people and young people and so on. We may also observe not only that the frequency with which some of the activities which I mentioned earlier, the preparation of food, the cleaning or laundering of clothes, etc. varies a good deal from one household to another but that this variation appears not unrelated to the composition of the household. We may further observe that the performance of these activities is not randomly or evenly distributed between members of the same household but is apparently related to age and sex or gender. We are yet again trembling on the conceptual brink, this time of discovering the conception of a domestic division of labour – or who does what. Very well, lets get in and splash about for a while.

The kinds of activities which I mentioned at the outset, cooking, cleaning, and so on, are apparently directed, more or less conscious, even, we might say, purposeful activities, which require a certain amount of effort, human effort. Such activities are commonly described as *work*. To the extent that these activities occur in the kinds of enclosure which we're calling a household, we cannow arrive at the composite term housework, which for the time being stands for our conception of the performance of certain kinds of activities, which we can now also refer to as tasks, in a specified setting, the house. Moreover, the question of who does what, the distribution of tasks between the household members, the domestic division of labour can now refer, it seems, to housework.

At this point I suggest we encounter a *conceptual* difficulty. Observably – although a good deal of food and drink is prepared in the home, a good deal isn't, but is prepared and consumed in other places variously referred to as cafes, restaurants, canteens, pubs, and the like. Likewise clothes aren't necessarily cleaned and laundered in the house but in other places called laundries and dry cleaners. Moreover, we can also observe people sweeping and polishing floors, dusting furniture and so on just as much in places which are not called houses but are called factories, shops, offices, schools, hospitals and so on. It thus appears that the term housework applies not to the particular activities and whatever their intrinsic qualities happen to be – but to the context within which they are performed. Housework thus consists of those activities which are performed in the house. That after all is what the term appears to suggest.

Bit is this so? Let's consider for a moment some of the activities which observably occur in houses – a quick five minutes tour round any

household – an instant ethnography of domestic life. What do we observe?

For a start, people to spend a great deal of time not engaging in any recognisable activity, especially seemingly conscious, directed activity; far from being active, they're noticeably inactive, unconscious, asleep. Is sleeping – when it is done in the house – housework? Well – it probably don't count as such wherever it was done – so I think we can leave sleeping out in the reckoning.

What about all the other kinds of near inactivity, in which people appear awake, conscious, even alert, but not as they, and we, might say 'doing anything'. Is 'not doing anything'– when its done in the house – housework? When peopleare 'doing something', they often appear to be talking at one another and listening to one another, and even more often not talking and not listening to one another. Chat – and where would we conversational analysts be without it? Where would we be without it right now? People and perhaps more especially the smaller sizes – children – often engage in those activities called 'play'. They may even say that they're 'playing at house'. Is play housework?

The material objects which many houses contain include machines for making noises and producing visual images and moving pictures. Is listening to a radio or a record player, or watching the television housework? If not – then why is playing the record playing machine not housework while playing the washing machine is? In some houses people engage in such activities as scanning marks on pieces of newspaper and even mailing marks of pieces of paper. Is reading a newspaper or a book or writing a letter or a few notes on something to say at a seminar housework?

What about some of the other activities which observably occur in households; people just being together, or ostentatiously not being together, whispering, muttering, singing, dancing, stamping, shouting, bawling, screaming, nudging one another, goosing, holding hands, horsing, foot on foot, stroking one another, barking, biting, hitting, thumping, kicking one another, and sometimes killing one another – what, in other contexts we might call struggle meetings, not forgetting that some struggles are more joyous than others?

Are making love and murdering people housework? Provided of course that these activities occur decently in an appropriate, domestic setting? And if not, why not? Why are getting a meal, bathing the baby,

washing up, and cleaning up the ship 'housework' and chatting, loafing, quarrelling, playing, being tender, agreeable and loving or tough, disagreeable and hateful not housework?

Parenthetically, I would remark that, seemingly, we can engage in any or all of these activities perfectly well without giving a moment thought to whether they are or are not 'housework'. So the question – 'what is Housework?' is, it would seem, a conceptual or theoretical question and not a practical one. If so – let's try stating it in somewhat different terms – in the form what constitutes housework as housework, as distinct from, apart from, and possibly in opposition to some other kind of work? I would add that it is this kind of question which we may have to ask if we are to speak of the anthropology of housework, or the sociology of housework.

Perhaps, however, we haven't exhausted our ethnographic resources yet. We may for instance observe that in the domestic division of labour within households, those who seem to undertake most of those activities which are commonly, conventionally, customarily, described as housework, are adult women who are often called housewives. Could we then describe housework in terms of what housewives do in the house? If so, then by extension it would still be possible to describe as housework those tasks which are usually undertaken by housewives, even when they're observably being carried out at a particular time in a particular household.

However, it does not seem any simpler to distinguish housework form other kinds of activities undertaken in the house by introducing the term housewife. That's to say even though the people who are chatting, watching the telly, playing cards, reading books, writing monographs, putting their feet up, singing, dancing, shouting, screaming and making love or murdering people are housewives that doesn't seem to convert these activities into housework. However, it does raise further problems for investigation – which I will summarise in the form –

> What constitutes housewives as housewives – as distinct from, and maybe opposed to, some other category of person, or status, of position?
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> What is the relationship between housework and housewives?

We can make this second question more specific by asking under what circumstances the performance of 'housework' – if that term can be satisfactorilydefined – constitutes housewives as housewives and,

reciprocally, whether it may, in some special sense still to be elucidated, indeed be possible that it is, after all, the performance of certain kinds of tasks by housewives which constitute housework as housework and not as some other kind of work.

Now to speak of categories of persons such as 'housewives' and, by implication, as non–housewives, and to use such terms as 'domestic division of labour' is to imply a process of classification which refers, not only observably to activities, and to people observably undertaking activities, but to people in respect of whom the activities are undertaken, of actors whose actions are orientated to the actions and expected actions of others – to introduce some alternative terms with a distinctly Weberian, if not Wagnerian, ring. Further, to refer to actors orienting their actions to other actors, is to imply social relationships. So I would now ask – what do ethnographic descriptions suggest about the social relationships between persons, actors, who appear to perform for one another the task which we might continue to call, for the time being, housework?

I suggest that even the most casual ethnographic observation will indicate that households are often also called families, that people commonly speak of family life, and indeed, some of the people in the same house are more likely to be referred to as a family than as a household.

Further observations, suggest, however that 'families' and households are by no means co-terminus. The term 'household' appears to refer invariably to common residence and can apply to people living on their own – single person households. Everyday usage does not however include references to single person families; someone living on their own may be regarded as a member of a family – although not co–resident with them. Moreover members of a household may be explicitly excluded from membership of 'the family' and instead stand inthe relationship of boarder, lodger, or resident domestic servants to them. What then constitutes a family?

Again, following common usage, I would suggest two relationships – or if you prefer – two principles of the social organisation of the relationship between persons; marriage, which constitutes two people as a married couple and defines one person as the husband and the other as the wife – and parenthood, which constitutes two people as parent and child, irrespective, incidently of their chronological ages and, which, more specifically, defines one person as a father or mother and the other as a daughter or son.

By further recognising a special relationship between those who stand in the relationship of child to the same two parents, we can then generate abstractly a set of terms for kin relations, which we may or may not want to consider as part of family relationships.

The question now arises whether we envisage both marriage and parenthood as developing in the course of the separate interactions repeated over time between the parties to these relationships – that's to say marriage and parenthood as interpersonal relationships which are entirely the outcome of the exchanges and inter-changes between individuals, or, alternatively, whether we envisage both marriage and parenthood as comprising a set of rules and customary obligations which can be recognised and specified independently of the observable interpersonal conduct which occurs in particular households and families. I suggest that often, we envisage family relationships in both these ways, that we confuse them at our theoretical peril, and that we leave the nature of the possible relationships between interpersonal conduct in domestic settings and the more generally, socially recognised customary rules and obligations as problematic, indeed highly problematic, because we may observe ethnographically, that the grouping which most faithfully exhibits the performance of customary obligations and the maintenance of conventional relationships between married couples and between parents and children, consists of two guys, one the gayest of the gay and the other straighter than the shortest distance between two points in Euclidean geometry, and their auntie.

I would now suggest that by bringing family relationships into the analysis we may clarify and simplify some problems but complicate and possibly obscure others. The substantial volume of activities which adults, especially adult women, undertake on behalf of children, and in particular young children, but also in relation to elderly people, may be explicable, at least in part, by referring to parenthood, to customary obligations on parents to care for their children, and also to care for their elderly parents. Customary obligations in marriage, specifying the rights and duties of husbands and wives towards one another may also account, at least in part, for some of the activities in which adult men and women in the same household engage, especially in relation to one another. Even if making love isn't housework, maybe its what husbands and wives are supposed to do with one another – though not, it would seem, daughters and fathers, mothers and sons, brothers and sisters – never mind just brothers on their own, or sisters on their own.

It now appears that there is a complex contingent relationship between housework and activities connected with family life such that two may coincide but need not do so. The extent to which they do tend to coincide may be related to household composition and to stages in a family development cycle.

Why then, when the very same activities are performed outside the house and in relationships other than those of marriage or parenthood, are they not housework or not part of family life?

Ethnography to the rescue yet again – or maybe not. Conventionally housework does include an extra-mural element, fetching and carrying food, drink, and other items used in the course of housework in the house from those heaps on which bountiful Nature or a benign Providence has so kindly placed them – shopping to you and me. Likewise family life may include an extra -mural element, people may go to visit other people, other households, churches, cinemas, parks, football matches and whatever – as families, as part of collective family life. Moreover a parent may accompany a child on hazardous journeys to and from distant enclosures in which the children take part in all manner of esoteric and occult activities – judging that is, by the ethnographic descriptions which five-year old informants can provide for the benefit of those who are excluded from observing directly what happens in these mysterious places.

However, the addition of further ethnography and the conceptual combinations of housework with family life still fails to indicate why certain activities performed in one context are housework but not in other contexts.

Very well – the ethnographic gambit of last resort – back to square one, conveniently located between the kitchen stove and the kitchen sink. We shall now set up our observation post there and stay at it if necessary for days, weeks, months, years. When we've done that, the while staring as hard as we can and straining our ears to the uttermost – we shall have observed the cooking of tons and tons of bangers and mash, baked beans, chips, and porridge, and the making of thousands of gallons of tea, coffee, Ribena, and what have you. The washing and drying of innumerable cups and saucers, plates, knives, forks, spoons, pots and pans but we shall not have observed the production of a single potato, sausage, tin of baked beans, bag of oatmeal, coffee bean or tea leaf-because, at least in the kinds of households and families in which

we've been making our observations, the people in these households are not themselves directly and personally engaged in producing any of these items, but at the most on preparing them for consumption. These kinds of households are not the fiction of some disarrayed imagination but the commonplaces of everyday ethnography in countries, like Britain, or America, or France, or Germany, of the kind which sociologists sometimes call industrial – industrial societies.

Moreover, occasional expeditions to observe the activity known as shopping discloses that although the tins of baked beans are indeed piled in vast heaps, and the potatoes in mounds, they appear not to have been placed there by benign Providence to be carted off by all who care to do so, on the contrary the loaves of bread, the baked beans, the sausages, the potatoes and the tea bags can only be obtained in exchange for specially shaped pieces of paper and metal which – reliable and trustworthy informants tell us – are commonly called money or cash.

The activity of "shopping" now becomes conceptually transformed into activity of "buying" or purchasing, as commodities, just about everything which appeared in my earlier description of activities which might possibly be called housework. Not only the food, but the very plates off which it's eaten; not only the drink but the cups and glasses from which it's drunk; not only the pots and pans, but the kitchen sink by use or consumption. Moreover – commodities can't become exchange values in the course of their consumption – they simply disappear – unless, that is, they are consumed in the course of the production of commodities. Housework entails the consumption of commodities but not the further production of commodities.

How then do people, members of households or families secure the exchange-values – symbolically represented by that very special kind of commodity – money, or cash which enable them to obtain the commodities which embody the use-values which they wish to realise – or consume? We may be able to observe in a very few households people engaged in that ancient and well established handicraft known as printing your own money – but such households are extremely rare. Disregarding these exceptions, the households we're likely to be able to observe depend for their revenue and income either upon some kind of rent, or grant, or upon that kind of revenue most commonly described as a wage or salary which one or more members of the household obtains by undertaking gainful employment – paid labour. More abstractly they sell that very special commodity, labour power, to an

employer and receive in exchange a wage or salary – they engage in wage labour. Often, though by no means invariably, they will indeed produce commodities. These however do not belong to them, the producers, but to their employers to whom they have sold their labour power.

What constitutes work of the kind we're considering as housework and sets it apart from other kinds of work, other kinds of labour, including work which comprised what in isolation appear as identical activities, is that it is unpaid concrete labour which produces use-values but not exchange–values, not commodities. Make yourself a cup oftea and drink it and you simply realise for yourself the use-value of the commodity you've previously purchased, and you could call it housework. Buy the same cup of tea in a tea shop where someone is paid to make the tea and dispense it and the kitchen stove, the water, the means of heating the water and lighting and warming the premises, the clothes and the means for cleaning and repairing them, the furnishings, the transistor radio, the T.V., the cat and the canary, and the very enclosure in which this occurs, the house itself – all these now appear as commodities, and also as possessions and as property.

We are now contemplating a world of which we may well say

> the wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, presents itself as 'an immense accumulation of commodities', its unit being a single commodity. Our investigation must therefore begin with the analysis of a commodity.
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> A commodity is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another. The nature of such wants, whether for instance they spring from the stomach or from fancy, makes no difference. Neither are we here concerned to know how the object satisfies these wants, whether directly as means of subsistence, or indirectly as means of production.
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> The utility of a thing makes it a use-value. But this utility is not a thing of air. Being limited by the physical properties of the commodity, it has no existence apart from that commodity...
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> Use-values become a reality only by use or consumption. They also constitute the substance of all wealth, whatever may be the

> social form of that wealth. In the form of society we are considering, they are in addition the material depositories of exchange-value.

On this analysis then, housework and housewives, if that's what we're going to call those who are primarily engaged in housework, are not part of a process of commodity production, the housework does not take place under capitalist relations of production, the housewife qua housewife is not an employee, a wage labourer, and is certainly not engaging in the production of commodities under capitalist relations ofproduction. There is therefore no possibility of the housewife's producing surplus value which could be appropriated by a capitalist employer, however remote.

Consequently, however miserable and wretched her lot may be, the housewife qua housewife is not and cannot be exploited. That – I suggest – constitutes the fundamental difference between housework and these other kinds of work in capitalist societies.