

Juliet Mitchell 1966

Women: The Longest Revolution

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Women in Socialist Theory

The problem of the subordination of women and the need for their liberation was recognized by all the great socialist thinkers in the nineteenth century. It is part of the classical heritage of the revolutionary movement. Yet, for most of the mid-twentieth century, the problem became a subsidiary, if not an invisible element in the preoccupations of socialists. Perhaps no other major issue was so forgotten. In England, the cultural heritage of Puritanism, always strong on the left, contributed to a widespread diffusion of essentially conservative beliefs among many who would otherwise count themselves as 'progressive'. A *locus classicus* of these attitudes was Peter Townsend's remarkable statement:

Traditionally Socialists have ignored the family or they have openly tried to weaken it – alleging nepotism and the restrictions placed upon individual fulfilment by family ties. Extreme attempts to create societies on a basis other than the family have failed dismally. It is significant that a Socialist usually addresses a colleague as 'brother' and a Communist uses the term 'comrade'. The chief means of fulfilment in life is to be a member of, and reproduce, a family. There is nothing to be gained by concealing this truth.

So that when the Women's Liberation Movement first arose, it broke upon socialist consciousnesses entirely innocent (ignorant) of its necessity. How did this ignorant counter-revolution come about? How had the problem of woman's condition become an area of silence within contemporary socialism? August Bebel, whose book *Woman in the Past, Present and Future* was one of the standard texts of the German Social-Democratic Party in the early years of this century, wrote:

Every Socialist recognizes the dependence of the workman on the capitalist, and cannot understand that others, and especially the capitalists themselves, should fail to recognize it also; but the same Socialist often does not recognize the dependence of women on men because the question touches his own dear self more or less nearly. [August Bebel, *Woman and Socialism*, 1883]

But this genre of explanation – psychologistic and moralistic – though true, is clearly inadequate. Much deeper and more structural causes have been at work. To consider these would require a major historical study which I have not attempted.

But it can be said with certainty that part of the explanation for the decline in socialist debate on the subject (a decline which may, in part, have provoked the rise of Women's Liberation) lies not only in the real historical processes, but in the original weakness in the traditional discussion of the subject in the socialist classics. For while the great studies of the last century all stressed the importance of the problem, they did not solve it theoretically. The limitations of their approach have never subsequently been transcended.

Fourier was the most ardent and voluminous advocate of women's liberation and of sexual freedom among the early socialists. He wrote:

The change in a historical epoch can always be determined by the progress of women towards freedom, because in the relation of woman to man, of the weak to the strong, the victory of human nature over brutality is most evident. The degree of emancipation of women is the natural measure of general emancipation. [Charles Fourier, 1841]

Marx quoted this formulation with approval in *The Holy Family*. But, characteristic of his early writings, Marx gave it a more universal and philosophical meaning. The emancipation of women would not only be as Fourier, with his greater preoccupation with sexual liberation saw it, an index of humanization in the civic sense of the victory of humaneness over brutality, but in the more fundamental sense of the progress of the human over the animal, the cultural over the natural:

The relation of man to woman is the most natural relation of human being to human being. It indicates, therefore, how far man's natural behaviour has become human, and how far his human essence has become a natural essence for him, how far his human nature has become nature for him. [Marx, *Private Property and Communism*, 1844]

This theme is typical of the early Marx.

Fourier's ideas remained at the level of utopian moral injunction. Marx used and transformed them, integrating them into a philosophical critique of human history. But he retained the abstraction of Fourier's conception of the position of women as an index of general social advance. This in effect makes it merely a symbol – it accords the problem a universal importance at the cost of depriving it of its specific substance. Symbols are allusions to or derivations from something else. In Marx's early writings 'woman' becomes an anthropological entity, an ontological category, of a highly abstract kind. Contrarily, in his later work, where he is concerned with describing the family, Marx differentiates it as a phenomenon according to time and place:

It is, of course, just as absurd to hold the Teutonic-Christian form of the family to be absolute and final as it would be to apply that character to the ancient Roman, the ancient Greek, or the Eastern forms which, moreover, taken together form a series in historic development. [Marx, *Capital I*]

What is striking in his later comments on the family is that the problem of women becomes submerged in the analysis of the family – women, as such, are not even mentioned! Marx thus moves from generalized philosophical formulations about women in the early writings to specific historical comments on the family in the later texts. There is a serious disjunction between the two. The common framework of both was his analysis of the economy, and of the evolution of property.

Engels

It was left to Engels to systematize these theses in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, after Marx's death. Engels declared that the inequality of the sexes was probably the first antagonism within the human species. The first class antagonism 'coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in the monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression with that of the female sex by the male'. Basing much of his theory on Morgan's fascinating, but inaccurate, anthropological investigations, Engels had many valuable insights. Inheritance, which is the key to his economist account, was first matrilineal, but with the increase of wealth became patrilineal. This was woman's greatest single setback. The wife's fidelity becomes essential and monogamy is irrevocably established. The wife in the communistic, patriarchal family is a public servant, with monogamy she becomes a private one. Engels effectively reduces the problem of woman to her capacity to work. He therefore gave her physiological weakness as a primary cause of her oppression. He locates the moment of her exploitation at the point of transition from communal to private property. If inability to work is the cause of her inferior status, ability to work will bring her liberation:

... the emancipation of women and their equality with men are impossible and must remain so as long as women are excluded from socially productive work and restricted to housework, which is private. The emancipation of women becomes possible only when women are enabled to take part in production on a large, social, scale, and when domestic duties require their attention only to a minor degree. [Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*]

Or:

The first premise for the emancipation of women is the reintroduction of the entire female sex into *public* industry ... this ... demands that the quality possessed by the individual family of being the economic unit of society be abolished. [*ibid.*, II]

Engels thus finds a solution schematically appropriate to his analysis of the origin of feminine oppression. The position of women, then, in the work of Marx and Engels remains dissociated from, or subsidiary to, a discussion of the family, which is in its turn subordinated as merely a precondition of private property. Their solutions retain this overly economist stress, or enter the realm of dislocated speculation.

Bebel, Engels' disciple, attempted to provide a programmatic account of woman's oppression as such, not simply as a by-product of the evolution of the family and of private property: 'From the beginning of time oppression was the common lot of woman and the labourer ... *Woman was the first human being that tasted bondage, woman was a slave before the slave existed.*' He acknowledged, with Marx and Engels, the importance of physical inferiority in accounting for woman's subordination, but while stressing inheritance, added that another biological element – her maternal function – was one of the fundamental conditions that made her economically dependent on the man. This is crucial, but Bebel, too, was unable to do more than state that sexual equality was impossible without socialism. His vision of the future was a vague reverie, quite disconnected from his description of the past. The absence of a strategic concern forced him into voluntarist optimism divorced from reality. Lenin himself, although he made a number of specific suggestions, inherited a tradition of thought which simply pointed to the *a priori* equation of socialism with feminine liberation without showing concretely how it would transform woman's condition: 'Unless women are brought to take an independent part not only in political life generally, but also in daily and universal public service, it is no use talking about full

and stable democracy, let alone socialism.’ [Lenin, *April Theses*, 1917] To this point, the liberation of women remains a normative ideal, an adjunct to socialist theory, not structurally integrated into it.

The Second Sex

The contrary is true of De Beauvoir’s massive work *The Second Sex* – to this day the greatest single contribution on the subject. Here the focus is the status of women through the ages. But interestingly socialism as such emerges as a curiously contingent solution at the end of the work, in a muffled epilogue. De Beauvoir’s main theoretical innovation was to fuse the ‘economic’ and ‘reproductive’ explanations of women’s subordination by a psychological interpretation of both. Man asserts himself as subject and free being by opposing other consciousnesses. He is distinct from animals precisely in that he creates and invents (not in that he reproduces himself), but he tries to escape the burden of his freedom by giving himself a spurious ‘immortality’ in his children. He dominates woman both to imprison another consciousness which reflects his own and to provide him with children that are securely his (his fear of illegitimacy). The notions obviously have a considerable force. But they are very atemporal: it is not easy to see why socialism should modify the basic ‘ontological’ desire for a thing like freedom which De Beauvoir sees as the motor behind the fixation with inheritance in the property system, or the enslavement of women which derived from it. In fact she has since criticized this aspect of her book for idealism:

I should take a more materialist position today in the first volume. I should base the notion of woman as *other* and the Manichean argument it entails not on an idealistic and *a priori* struggle of consciences, but on the facts of supply and demand. This modification would not necessitate any changes in the subsequent development of my argument.

Concurrent, however, with the idealist psychological explanation, De Beauvoir uses an orthodox economist approach. This leads to a definite evolutionism in her treatment in Volume I, which becomes a retrospective narrative of the different forms of the feminine condition in different societies through time – mainly in terms of the property system and its effects on women. To this she adds various supra-historical themes – myths of the eternal feminine, types of women through the ages, literary treatments of women – which do not modify the fundamental structure of her argument. The prospect for women’s liberation at the end is quite divorced from any historical development.

Thus, the classical socialist literature on the problem of woman’s condition is predominantly economist in emphasis, stressing her simple subordination to the institutions of private property. Her biological status underpins both her weakness as a producer in work relations and her importance as a possession in reproductive relations. De Beauvoir’s interpretation gives both factors a psychological cast, yet the framework of discussion is an evolutionist one which nevertheless fails noticeably to project a convincing image of the future, beyond asserting that socialism will involve the liberation of women as one of its constituent ‘moments’.

Kate Millet’s recent book *Sexual Politics* is also written within a socialist perspective. Millet states that the most important section of her book is the initial one where she develops a theory of *patriarchy*: the sexual politics whereby men establish their power and maintain control. The rest of the book discusses the history of sexual relations from 1830-1960, the psychological contributions to a concept of the feminine, the perspectives of contemporary ‘social sciences’, two paradigm instances of state

manipulation of the family (Nazi Germany and the USSR) and, proportionally the largest section of all, notions of women and sex revealed in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature. Presented like that it sounds random, but a unifying link sometimes explicitly emerges which makes it clear that these are not merely various illustrations of a 'theory of patriarchy', but essential contributions to its development.

Millet establishes that within patriarchy the omnipresent system of male domination and female subjugation is achieved through socializing, perpetuated through ideological means, and maintained by institutional methods. Millet gives us the symptoms of patriarchy and some of the means by which it achieves its success; she demonstrates that might is not right, but then, nor is it, I would contend, in itself, politics. The ways in which patriarchy works are different from how it works in the sense of the articulation of those ways. Again, the way male domination permeates our lives obscures from us the *different* methods by which it operates. In isolating some of these Millet has done an invaluable job, but we still – all of us – need to work to re-cohere these insights into a 'theory'. From the apparently undifferentiated mass (or mess) of our experience we have to separate the mechanisms that make it function as such, but then we have to decipher the complex interconnections of the complex mechanisms (or contradictions) that make up the complex whole. For me, one of the weaknesses of Millet's study is that, although it *isolates* different mechanisms, it doesn't confront their relationships; so we are left with a sense of the random and chaotic and *equal* contribution of each and all to the maintenance of patriarchy; one could add to the list or shuffle it around. It is unstructured. This does not seem to me to be accidental but inherent in the notion of patriarchy as a political system in itself. For one thing there can be no such thing as a *general system*. Patriarchy may seem universal, but in the first place this universality is part of the ideology by which it maintains itself, and in the second where it does indeed have common factors through different political systems these common factors find them selves in different combinations in all specific instances. Any political system is always a specific aggregate. This should make us suspicious of accepting the ideological formulations (in this case 'universality') that the system offers us as the basis of our scientific investigation of it. Another problem; a political system is dependent upon (a part of) a specific mode of production: patriarchy, though a perpetual feature of it, is not in itself a mode of production, though an essential aspect of every economy, it does not dominantly determine it. In seeing patriarchy as equivalent to a class system, Millet is moving away from a socialist analysis and coming closer to a feminist one. As the book was written after the advent of the Women's Liberation Movement, this conflation is, in itself, interesting.

For it is against the inadequacy of classical socialist theory that both radical feminists and socialist women in the movement have alike reacted. It is against the background of the far cruder practices of contemporary socialist groups that the Women's Liberation Movement has been founded.

Socialist Practice and Women's Liberation

In America, the experience of the preceding and even contemporary male left (black and white) was horrific. This was also true – as pointed out earlier – of the Paris Group, slightly less true of England and Holland and, though of dubious benefit, considerably less true of Scandanavian countries. Where socialist groups have apparently 'respected' the position of women, the 'respect' has had all the implications of paternalism and mystification with which its meaning in capitalist society is redolent. Again, as in contemporary society, where 'respect' is absent, thuggishness takes its place: the wife and the prostitute.

Ellen Willis describes the initial break-away confrontation between white women and white men of the New Left in Washington back in 1969. Women's Liberation was already in existence – but in an uneasy (or unholy?) alliance with other revolutionary groups. This confrontation provoked the establishment of radical feminism, a branch of the movement having no truck with the 'compromise' and sexist politics of other radical organizations. The occasion for the confrontation was the anti-inaugural demonstrations against President Nixon. There was a woman's contingent concentrating on burning their voter's registration cards to illustrate the inefficacy of the vote to change any aspects of women's oppression in America.

Ellen Willis's impressions:

Mobe's ad. in the *Guardian* calls for an end to the war and freedom for Black and Spanish people: no mention of Women's Liberation. Women in another group want to ask men to destroy their voter cards. Apparently they have interpreted the action as a simple protest against electoral politics, rather than a specifically feminist rejection of appeasement-by-ballot.

I get the funny feeling that we're being absorbed. Will we get the chance to deliver our message, or are we just there to show our support for the important (i.e. male-oriented) branches of the Left? Our group decides to confront this issue with a speech attacking male chauvinism in the movement.

Dave Dellinger introduces the rally with a stirring denunciation of the war and racism.

'What about women, you schmuck,' I shout.

'And, uh, a special message from Women's Liberation,' he adds. Our moment comes. M., from the Washington group, stands up to speak. This isn't the protest against movement men, which is the second on the agenda, just fairly innocuous radical rhetoric – except that it's a good looking woman talking about women. The men go crazy. 'Take it off!' 'Take her off the stage and fuck her!' They yell and boo and guffaw at unwitting *double-entendres* like 'We must take to the streets.' When S. (Shulamith Firestone), who is representing the New York group, comes to the mike and announces that women will no longer participate in so-called revolution that does not include the abolition of male privilege, it sounds like a spontaneous outburst of rage (rather than like a deliberate statement of the politics of Women's Liberation). By the time we get to the voter card business, I am shaking. If radical men can be so easily provoked into acting like rednecks (a Women's Liberation group at the University of North Carolina was urinated on by male hecklers at a demonstration) what can we expect from others? What have we gotten ourselves into? Meanwhile Dellinger has been pleading with us to get off the stage, 'for your own good'. Why isn't he telling them to shut up?

And from Paris, at Vincennes, the enclave of the May revolutionaries:

As we walked around we handed out leaflets, particularly to women. A crowd of about a hundred people followed us around; most of them were hostile. We had been prepared for significant opposition from men, even afraid of it; but even so were not prepared for such depth and breadth of outrage. Here were 'movement' men shouting insults at us: 'Lesbians', 'Strip', 'What you need is a good fuck.'

Not one single left-wing movement: working-class, Black or student can offer anything to contradict this experience. Radical feminism -the belief in the *primary* and paramount oppression of women was born as a phoenix from the ashes of this type of socialism. If socialism is to regain its status as *the* revolutionary politics (in addition to the scientific analysis it offers of capitalist society) it has to make good its practical sins of

commission against women and its huge sin of omission – the absence of an adequate place for them in its theory. Many Women's Liberation groups have remained committed to Marxist socialism, planning to supplement a theory whose expertise in the analysis of capitalism has already developed to include the conditions for revolution in imperialized, feudal countries and, therefore, hopefully can offer insight into all forms of oppression, including that of women, an oppression which so far endures all changes in the mode of production. Radical feminist and socialist Women's Liberation groups, despite their crucially different analyses, share a revolutionary politics and this involves many of the same basic concepts.

Feminism

Feminism unites women at the level of their total oppression – it is all-inclusive (cf. Black Power and 'totalism'). Its politics match this: it is a total attack. The theory backs this: the first division of labour was the first formation of oppressor and oppressed – the first division of labour was between man and woman. The first domination must be given priority – it must be the first to go. This is poetic justice: what are its political implications?

Shulamith Firestone's invigorating book, *The Dialectic of Sex* is the fullest development of the theory to date. Radical feminism finds that the inadequacies within Marxist analyses of a comprehension of women's oppression, are due *not* to its chronic underdevelopment in this sphere (as Marxist women believe) but to the limitations of the theory itself. The failure is not failure of attention, but limitation of scope.

... we must enlarge historical materialism to include the strictly Marxian, in the same way that the physics of relativity did not invalidate Newtonian physics so much as it drew a circle around it, limiting its application – but only through comparison – to a smaller sphere. For an economic diagnosis traced to ownership of the means of production, even of the means of reproduction, does not explain everything. There is a level of reality that does not stem directly from economics.... We can attempt to develop a materialist view of history based on sex itself.

Amoeba-like, radical feminism, would ingest Marxism. The historical basis is not the economic determinism of the classes but the natural division of the sexes which precedes this. As a materialist Firestone gives full weight to the objective physiological sexual differences. Her argument proceeds thus: there is no doubt that the male and female of the species are distinct; the distinction that counts is the ability to bear children. This is not just because it has been socially exploited to oppress women, but because *in* itself it is a brutal, painful experience. Hence the revolution is not just against a specific historical form of society (e.g. capitalism), but against Nature (and its untranscended manifestations in all human culture):

Feminists have to question, not just all of *Western* culture, but the organization of culture itself, and further, even the very organization of nature.... For feminist revolution we shall need an analysis of the dynamics of sex war as comprehensive as the Marx-Engels analysis of class antagonism was for the economic revolution. More comprehensive. For we are dealing with a larger problem, with an oppression that goes back beyond recorded history to the animal kingdom itself.

As the elimination of economic classes requires the revolt of the economic 'underclass' (the proletariat), so the overthrow of the sexual classes similarly demands the revolt of its underclass (women). In both cases the revolution is not to conquer privilege but to eliminate distinction. This is the expansion of a materialist analysis, and an extension of

the implications of revolution:

We have attempted to take the class analysis one step further to its roots in the biological division of the sexes. We have not thrown out the insights of the socialists; on the contrary, radical feminism enlarges their analysis, granting it an even deeper basis in objective conditions and thereby explaining many of its insolubles.

The material basis for sexual division being the reproductive system, the revolutionary means to its annihilation will be man's scientific ability to transcend it. Science conquers Nature. The ecological revolution will finally put an end to the biological base. Feminism and the new ecological technology arise together, both caused by the contradictions of the primitive and oppressed animal life that mankind lives, within the context of the possibility of vast technological improvement. Both have arisen to protest against man's refusal of what he could do to bring heaven closer to earth. Both, if they are frustrated, will only mean that mankind, in irretrievable conservatism, prefers hell: chronic over-population, famine, wretched hard work, pain, pregnancy, disease.... Embracing the feminist and ecological revolution would mean that cybernation and other technological advances would end all joyless labour: the labour of the factory and of the child-bed.

A feminist revolution could be the decisive factor in establishing a new ecological balance: attention drawn to the population explosion, a shifting of emphasis from reproduction to contraception and demands for the full development of artificial reproduction would provide an alternative to the oppressions of the biological family; cybernation, by changing man's relationship to work and wages, by transforming activity from 'work' to 'play' (activity done for its own sake), would allow for a total redefinition of the economy, including the family unit in its economic capacity. The double curse, that man should till the soil by the sweat of his brow, and that woman should bear in pain and travail, would be lifted through technology to make humane living, for the first time, a possibility.

Radical feminism, the revolution for the release of the oppressed majority of the world, would liberate test-tube babies, baby-farms, big-brother control, from their confinement within the horrors of 'brave new world' and 1984, and guarantee that their humane application would finally free mankind from the trap of painful biology. Thus culture would at last overcome nature and the 'ultimate revolution' would be achieved.

The analysis leads to some 'very pertinent insights, for instance, the shared oppression of women and children, the permeation of all cultures by a fundamental pattern of family relationships and the psychology of oppression. Firestone's castigation of many mystifications that surround woman, pregnancy, 'being in love', etc. are salutary. Yet what of the basic premise? The *Dialectic of Sex*? The extension of historical materialism? Certainly enlarging Marxist class analysis to incorporate the division of the sexes is materialist, but that doesn't make it either historical or dialectical. In fact, it precisely returns us to the type of dualistic concept that preceded the discovery of dialectical materialism. That the technological-ecological revolution of the future will transcend and harmonize the biological and cultural dualities – male/female – in no sense makes that a dialectical moment. Dialectical materialism posits a complex (not dualistic) structure in which all elements are in contradiction to each other; at some point these contradictions can coalesce, explode and be overcome but the new fusion will enter into contradiction with something else. Human society is, and always will be, full of contradictions. Never can the complex structure become a simple whole in the way Firestone suggests:

What we shall have in the next cultural revolution is the reintegration of the Male (Technological Mode) with the Female (Aesthetic Mode), to create an androgynous culture surpassing the highs of either cultural stream, or even of the sum of their integrations. More than a marriage, rather an abolition of the cultural categories themselves, a mutual cancellation – a matter-antimatter explosion, ending with a poof! culture itself. We shall not miss it. We shall no longer need it: by then humanity will have mastered nature totally, will have realized in actuality its dreams.

The theory is no more *historical* than it is dialectical. To say that sex dualism was the first oppression and that it underlies all oppression may be true, but it is a general, non-specific truth, it is simplistic materialism, no more. After all we can say there has always been a master class and a servant class, but it does matter *how* these function (whether they are feudal landlords and peasants, capitalists and the working class or so on); there have always been classes, as there have always been sexes, how do these operate within any given, specific society? Without such knowledge (historical materialism) we have not the means of overcoming them. Nothing but this knowledge, and revolutionary action based upon it, determines the fate of technology – towards freedom or towards 1984.

Marxism has not been sufficiently developed to incorporate new scientific discoveries (e.g. those of Freud, which Firestone rightly finds so important). Finding a theory that explains the oppression of women will most likely involve us in rejecting some of the statements made by Marx and Marxists – rejecting them *because* we are utilizing the methods of Marxist dialectical materialism. As Lenin commented we must not ‘sacrifice the method of Engels to the letter of Engels’.

Engels says explicitly that with each epoch-making discovery even in the sphere of natural science (‘not to speak of the history of mankind’), materialism has to change its form. (Engels: *Ludwig Feuerbach*). Hence, a revision of the ‘form’ of Engels’ materialism, a revision of his natural-philosophical propositions is not only not ‘revisionism’, in the accepted meaning of the term, but, on the contrary, is demanded by Marxism. [Lenin, *The Recent Revolution in the Natural Sciences and Philosophical Idealism*, 1908]

The Marxist method must indeed be made to take in the new scientific discoveries and the new social forces such as feminism, but it must be used historically and dialectically. Firestone has thrown out both these in a return to a dualistic base and its monistic solution – this is ‘materialism below, idealist above’.

Where are we Going?

Perhaps in the future, the biggest single theoretical battle will have to be that between liberationists with a socialist analysis, and feminists with a ‘radical feminist’ analysis. But that future has come too soon. The conflict is premature because neither group has yet developed a ‘theory’. The ‘practice’ which is that theory’s condition of production has only just begun. This is not an argument for ‘holding our horses’ and such-like timidities; the ‘immaturity’ of a movement should never be an excuse for not forging ahead – it is precisely ‘immature’ just so long as we refuse to push on. But it is an argument for the simultaneous necessity of radical feminist consciousness and of the development of a socialist analysis of the oppression of women.

The main reason why the battle has been engaged prematurely, belongs to the prehistory of the Women’s Liberation Movement. Responsibility largely lies with the nature of the socialist groups in the Western World during the sixties. The much greater flexibility

they displayed in analysing new revolutionary groups – Blacks, students and youth – often fell between the two stools of over-rapid and crude assimilation of them to dogmatic socialist positions, or developed outside the reaches of socialist theory altogether. The same duality marks, in this respect, the Women's Movement. The rejection of socialism by radical feminists is only the other side of the same coin as the over-hasty rush into revolutionary socialism by those left-wing sisters who have always hovered around the edges without a 'place' within it – either theoretically or practically. The demand that 'what we've got to understand is the relationship of Women's Liberation to socialism' is twin sister to 'socialism has nothing to offer us'. It is not 'our relationship' to socialism that should ever be the question it is the use of scientific socialism as a method of analysing the specific nature of our oppression and hence our revolutionary role. Such a method, I believe, needs the understanding of radical feminism quite as much as of the previously developed socialist theories.

Feminist consciousness is the material with which our politics must work, if it is to develop. The Women's Liberation Movement is at the stage of organizing our 'instinct' of our oppression as women, into a consciousness of its meaning. This will become a rational consciousness as we come to understand the objective conditions which determine this oppression. At the moment, the essential 'instinct' coexists with the possibilities for transforming it into rational consciousness. The 'instinct' expresses itself as all our protests against every manifestation of our oppression – it is here that the jokey, spontaneous bra-burning, the smoke-bombing of Miss World competitions, descriptions of the misery of housework and of the degradation of women's jobs have their place, as machine-breaking and descriptions of the 'real life' of the workers in the nineteenth century had a place in the formation of working-class consciousness. It is as though we suddenly, out of the blue-mists of mystification, see what is being done to us. Socialists in the movement who want to combat the feminist instinct forget that they will be charging empty-handed against their own would-be weapons. *We do* have to experience the implications of our own oppression.

However, where socialists would by-pass the exploration of oppression to pounce upon a theory that fits in with earlier socialist analyses (such a theory is inevitably idealist), radical feminists construct too rigid a theory from feminist instinct. The notion of undifferentiated male domination from the earliest to the latest times simply gives a theoretical form to the way oppression is usually experienced. It is also somewhat equivalent to a worker seeing the employer himself as the only enemy, simply because he seems directly responsible for the individual exploitation. This is an aspect of the oppression, or exploitation and should not be ignored, but nor should it be made to stand for the total situation. On the other hand, those who counter the radical feminist analysis of men as the oppressor, shirk a very important aspect of the oppression if they simply say, 'no, it's not men, it's the system'. The two clearly interrelate, and feminist instinct is correct in experiencing the supremacist role that men play as part of the overall oppression.

I think, then, that we have to develop our feminist consciousness to the full, and at the same time transform it by beginning a scientific socialist analysis of our oppression. The two processes must go on simultaneously – feminist consciousness will not 'naturally' develop into socialism, nor should it: the two are coextensive and must be worked on together. If we simply develop feminist consciousness (as radical feminists suggest) we will get, not political consciousness, but the equivalent of national chauvinism among Third World nations or economism among working-class organizations; simply a self-directed gaze, that sees only the internal workings of one segment; only this segment's

self-interest. Political consciousness responds to all forms of oppression.

On the other hand, if our socialist ‘theories’ ignore our feminist consciousness they *cannot* understand the specific nature of our oppression as women. Having not worked on this terrain, any ‘theory’ here immediately falls for idealist bourgeois ideology, as this is the dominant ideology under capitalism, and there is, in this case, a refusal of the experience and analysis of oppression that would countermand it.

Radical feminists and those socialists in the movement who deny the importance of feminist consciousness *present* their positions as polar opposites, but, if isolated, both end up, at the same point, succumbing to the chief tenets of bourgeois thought: empiricism and idealism. Radical feminism makes a ‘theory’ of the concrete *experience* of oppression, and those we might call ‘abstract socialists’ evade the specific oppression of women and *idealize* the *role* of the oppressed.

This debate, as I have presented it, probably seems rather remote from most people’s experience of disagreements within the movement; perhaps tabulating some of the arguments on either side will give it the necessary concreteness.

Radical Feminism

Men are the oppressors.

All societies have been male supremacist.

It starts with a psychological power struggle – which men win.

Socialism has nothing to offer us.

Socialist countries oppress women.

What we want, is all women to unite against men and male-dominated society.

We want to liberate women from male oppression.

Abstract Socialists

Men are not the oppressors: it’s the system.

Capitalism oppresses women.

It starts with private property.

We’ve got to discover ‘our relationship’ to socialism.

The scene isn’t too good in socialist countries for women – but that’s because women’s liberation wasn’t part of the revolutionary struggle.

It’s most necessary to convince men of the importance of our struggle. They are oppressed by their roles too.

All people are alienated under capitalism, we want to liberate everybody to become ‘whole people’.

Both positions are possibly right together, both are certainly wrong apart. Hence, the battle is premature. ‘Radical feminism’, in capturing the *experience* of oppression, starts to grapple with the ideological and psychological oppression of women. ‘Abstract socialism’ points to the economic oppression and does, in a hackneyed form, indicate the importance of the relationships between different groups, and the complexities of a specific society.

If we could start to use the methods of scientific socialism on the material of our oppression, whose most advanced expression is feminism, then, truly a ‘theory’ might start to evolve from our practice.

It is true that to date the socialist countries still tend to discriminate against women – it is hardly surprising given the length and nature of their prehistory. But what is more important is that the oppression of women is *intrinsic* to the capitalist system – as it is *not* to the socialist. We have to see why and how our oppression is structurally necessary today in order to fight for its overthrow. As it is structurally necessary, this struggle will involve, and be a part of, the struggle of all people who are comparably and necessarily oppressed. This is not the generality of ‘all people are alienated under capitalism’ (or all men and women), but applies to specific groups. The relationship between these is a crucial means of understanding ourselves – we cannot comprehend our own oppression in isolation.

Feminism, then, is the terrain on which a socialist analysis works. It is, by definition, available to all women, whatever their class or previous political position: it is about *being women*. In itself it can produce no revolutionary ideology, any more than the consciousness of workers *on its own*, can produce this:

Since there can be no talk of an independent ideology formulated by the working masses themselves in the process of their movement, the *only* choice is – either bourgeois or socialist ideology. There is no middle course (for mankind has not created a ‘third’ ideology, and, moreover, in a society torn by class antagonisms there can never be a non-class or an above-class ideology). Hence to belittle the socialist ideology *in any way, to turn aside from it in the slightest degree* means to strengthen bourgeois ideology. [Lenin, *What Is To be Done?*]

The trouble is, that ‘socialists’ try to prevent feminists from having their ‘feminist consciousness’ by asking them to subscribe to a working-class ‘ideology’ – which can exist no more than feminist ideology. All oppressed groups – workers, women, colonized – can have their oppressed consciousness, but the ideology they propagate must be either that that is dominant in the society that oppresses them (bourgeois ideology), or that that they have consciously espoused for the society that will overthrow this (socialist ideology). The oppressed consciousness of all groups contributes to the nature of this socialist ideology – if any oppressed awareness is missing from its formation that is its loss. Feminist consciousness has been inadequately represented in the formation of socialist ideology, as the oppression of women has, so far. been inadequately combatted in socialist revolutions.

Part Two

The Oppression of Women

Chapter Five

The Position of Women: 1

Radical feminism attempts to solve the problem of analysing the oppression of women by making it *the* problem. The largest, first and foremost. While such a theory remains descriptive of the experience, it *does* nevertheless stress the magnitude of the problem. What we need is a theory that is at once large enough and yet is capable of being specific. We have to see *why* women have always been oppressed, and *how* they are oppressed now, and how differently elsewhere. As radical feminists demand, we must dedicate ourselves to a theory of the oppression of all women and yet, at the same time, not lose sight of the historical specificity in the general statement. We should ask the feminist questions, but try to come up with some Marxist answers.

The situation of women is different from that of any other oppressed social group: they are half of the human species. In some ways they are exploited and oppressed like, and along with, other exploited classes or oppressed groups – the working-class, Blacks, etc. . . . Until there is a revolution in production, the labour situation will prescribe women's situation within the world of men. But women are offered a universe of their own: the family. Women are exploited at work, and relegated to the home: the two positions compound their oppression. Their subservience in production is obscured by their assumed dominance in their own world – the family. What is the family? And what are the actual functions that a woman fulfils within it? Like woman herself, the family appears as a natural object, but is actually a cultural creation. There is nothing inevitable about the form or role of the family, any more than there is about the character or role of women. It is the function of ideology to present these given social types as aspects of Nature itself. Both can be exalted, paradoxically, as ideals. The 'true' woman and the 'true' family are images of peace and plenty: in actuality they may both be sites of violence and despair. The apparently natural condition can be made to appear more attractive than the arduous advance of human beings towards culture. But what Marx wrote about the bourgeois myths of the Golden Ancient World describes precisely women's realm.

... in one way the child-like world of the ancients appears to be superior; and this is so, insofar as we seek for closed shape, form and established limitation. The ancients provide a narrow satisfaction, whereas the modern world leaves us unsatisfied, or, where it appears to be satisfied with itself, is *vulgar* and *mean*. [Marx, Pre-capitalist Economic Formations]

The ideology of 'woman' presents her as an undifferentiated whole – 'a woman', alike the world over, eternally the same. Likewise the 'concept' of the family is of a unit that endures across time and space, there have always been families. ... Within its supposed permanent structure, eternal woman finds her place. So the notion goes. ... Any analysis of woman, and of the family, must uncoil this ideological concept of their permanence and of their unification into a monolithic whole, mother and child, a woman's place ... her natural destiny. Theoretical analysis and revolutionary action must destructure and destroy the inevitability of this combination.

Past socialist theory has failed to differentiate woman's condition into its separate structures, which together form a complex – not a simple -unity. To do this will mean rejecting the idea that woman's condition can be deduced derivatively from the economy (Engels), or equated symbolically with society (early Marx). Rather, it must be seen as a *specific* structure, which is a unity of different elements. The variations of woman's condition throughout history will be the result of different combinations of these elements – we will thus have not a linear narrative of economic development (De Beauvoir) for the elements will be combined in different ways at different times. In a complex totality each independent sector has its own autonomous reality though each is ultimately, but only ultimately, determined by the economic factor. This complex totality means that no contradiction in society is ever simple. As each sector can move at a different pace, the synthesis of the different time-scales in the total structure means that sometimes contradictions cancel each other out, and sometimes they reinforce one another. Because the unity of woman's condition at any time is in this way the product of several structures, moving at different paces, it is always 'over-determined'.

The key structures of woman's situation can be listed as follows: Production, Reproduction, Sexuality and the Socialisation of Children. The concrete combination of these produce the 'complex unity' of her position; but each separate structure may have

reached a different 'moment' at any given historical time. Each then must be examined separately in order to see what the present unity is, and how it might be changed. The notes that follow do not pretend to give a historical account of each sector. They are only concerned with some general reflections on the different roles of women and some of their interconnections.

1. *Production*

The biological differentiation of the sexes into male and female and the division of labour that is based on this have *seemed*, throughout history, an interlocked necessity. Anatomically smaller and weaker, woman's physiology and her psychobiological metabolism appear to render her a less useful member of a work-force. It is always stressed how, particularly in the early stages of social development, man's physical superiority gave him the means of conquest over nature which was denied to women. Once woman was accorded the menial tasks involved in maintenance while man undertook conquest and creation, she became an aspect of the things preserved: private property and children. Marx, Engels, Bebel, De Beauvoir – the major socialist writers on the subject – link the confirmation and continuation of woman's oppression after the establishment of her physical inferiority for hard manual work with the advent of private property. But woman's physical weakness has never prevented her from performing work as such (quite apart from bringing up children) – only specific types of work, in specific societies. In Primitive, Ancient, Oriental, Medieval and Capitalist societies, the *volume* of work performed by women has always been considerable (it has usually been much more than this). It is only its form that is in question. Domestic labour, even today, is enormous if quantified in terms of productive labour. It has been calculated in Sweden, that 2,340 million hours a year are spent by women in housework compared with 1,290 million hours in industry. The Chase Manhattan Bank estimated a woman's overall working week averaged 99.6 hours. In any case women's physique alone has never permanently or even predominantly relegated them to menial domestic chores. In many peasant societies, women have worked in the fields as much as, or more than, men.

Physical Weakness and Coercion

The assumption behind most socialist analyses is that the crucial factor starting the whole development of feminine subordination was women's lesser capacity for demanding physical work. But, in fact, this is a major oversimplification. Even in these terms, historically it has been woman's lesser capacity for violence as well as for work, that has determined her subordination. In most societies woman has not only been less able than man to perform arduous kinds of work, she has also been less able to fight. Man not only has the strength to assert himself against nature, but also against his fellows. *Social coercion* has interplayed with the straightforward division of labour, based on biological capacity, to a much greater extent than is generally admitted. Women have been forced to do 'women's work'. Of course, this force may not be actualized as direct aggression. In primitive societies women's lesser physical suitability for the hunt is assumed to be evident. In agricultural societies where women's inferiority is socially instituted, they are given the arduous task of tilling and cultivation. For this coercion is necessary. In developed civilizations, and more complex societies, woman's physical deficiencies again become relevant. Women are thought to be of no use either for war or in the construction of cities. But with early industrialization, coercion once more becomes important. As Marx wrote: 'insofar as machinery dispenses with muscular power, it becomes a means of employing labourers of slight muscular strength, and those whose bodily development is incomplete, but whose limbs

are all the more supple. The labour of women and children was, therefore, the first thing sought for by capitalists who used machinery' [Marx, *Capital*, I].

Rene Dumont points out that in many zones of tropical Africa today men are often idle, while women are forced to work all day. 'The African woman experiences a three-fold servitude: through forced marriage; through her dowry and polygamy, which increases the leisure time of men and simultaneously their social prestige; and finally through the very unequal division of labour'. This exploitation has no 'natural' source whatever. Women may perform their 'heavy' duties in contemporary African peasant societies, not for fear of physical reprisal by their men, but because these duties are 'customary' and built into the role structures of the society. A further point is that coercion implies a different relationship from coerced to coerced than does exploitation. It is political rather than economic. In describing coercion Marx said that the master treated the slave or serf as the 'inorganic and natural condition of its own reproduction'. That is to say, labour itself becomes like other natural things – cattle or soil:

The original Conditions of production appear as natural prerequisites, *natural conditions of the existence of the producer*, just as his living body, however reproduced and developed by him, is not originally established by himself, but appears as his *prerequisite*. [Marx, Pre-capitalist Economic Formations]

This is pre-eminently woman's condition. For far from woman's physical weakness removing her from productive work, her social weakness has in these cases evidently made her the major slave of it.

This truth, elementary though it may seem, has nevertheless been constantly ignored by socialist writers on the subject, with the result that there is an unfounded optimism in their predictions of the future. For, if it is just the biological incapacity for the hardest physical work which has determined the subordination of women, then the prospect of an advanced machine technology, abolishing the need for strenuous physical exertion, would seem to promise, therefore, the liberation of women. For a moment industrialization itself thus seems to herald women's liberation. Engels, for instance, wrote:

The first premise for the emancipation of women is the reintroduction of the entire female sex into public industry.... And this has become possible only as a result of modern large-scale industry, which not only permits of the participation of women in production in large numbers, but actually calls for it and, moreover strives to convert private domestic work also into a public industry. [Engels, *op. cit.*, II]

What Marx said of early industrialism is no less, but also no more true of an automated society:

... it is obvious that the fact of the collective working group being composed of individuals of both sexes and all ages, must necessarily, *under suitable conditions*, become a source of human development; although in its spontaneously developed, brutal, capitalist form, where the labourer exists for the process of production, and not the process of production for the labourer, that fact is a pestiferous source of corruption and slavery.' [Marx, *Capital*, I]

Industrial labour and automated technology both promise the preconditions for women's liberation alongside man's – but no more than the preconditions. It is only too obvious that the advent of industrialization has not so far freed women in this sense, either in the West or in the East. De Beauvoir hoped that automation would make a decisive,

qualitative difference by abolishing altogether the physical differential between the sexes. But any reliance on this in itself accords an independent role to technique which history does not justify. Under capitalism, automation could possibly lead to an ever-growing structural unemployment which would expel women (along with immigrants) – the latest and least integrated recruits to the labour force and ideologically the most expendable for a bourgeois society – from production after only a brief interlude in it. Technology is mediated by the total structure, and it is this which will determine woman's future in work relations. It is the relationship between the social forces and technology that Firestone's 'ecological' revolution ultimately ignores.

Physical deficiency is not now, any more than in the past, a sufficient explanation of woman's relegation to inferior status. Coercion has been ameliorated to an ideology shared by both sexes. Commenting on the results of her questionnaire of working women, Viola Klein notes: 'There is no trace of feminine egalitarianism – militant or otherwise – in any of the women's answers to the questionnaire; nor is it even implicitly assumed that women have a "Right to Work."⁹ Denied, or refusing, a role in *production*, woman does not even create the preconditions of her liberation. But even her presence in the work force does not erode her oppression in the family.

2. *The Reproduction of Children*

Women's absence from the critical sector, of production historically, of course, has been caused not just by their assumed physical weakness in a context of coercion – but also by their role in reproduction. Maternity necessitates withdrawals from work, but this is not a decisive phenomenon. It is rather women's role in reproduction which has become, in capitalist society at least, the spiritual 'complement' of men's role in production. Bearing children, bringing them up, and maintaining the home – these form the core of woman's natural vocation, in this ideology. This belief has attained great force because of the seeming universality of the family as a human institution. There is little doubt that Marxist analyses have underplayed the fundamental problems posed here. The complete failure to give any operative content to the slogan of 'abolition' of the family is striking evidence of this (as well as of the vacuity of the notion).

The biological function of maternity is a universal, atemporal fact, and as such has seemed to escape the categories of Marxist historical analysis. However, from it is made to follow the so-called stability and omnipresence of the family, if in very different forms.¹⁰ Once this is accepted, women's social subordination – however emphasized as an honourable, but different role (cf. the equal-but-'separate' ideologies of Southern racists) – can be seen to follow inevitably as an *insurmountable* bio-historical fact. The causal chain then goes: maternity, family, absence from production and public life, sexual inequality.

The lynch-pin in this line of argument is the idea of the family. The notion that 'family' and 'society' are virtually Co-extensive or that an advanced society not founded on the nuclear family is now inconceivable, despite revolutionary posturings to the contrary, is still widespread. It can only be seriously discussed by asking just what the family is – or rather what women's role in the family is. Once this is done, the problem appears in quite a new light. For it is obvious that woman's role in the family -primitive, feudal or bourgeois partakes of three quite different structures: reproduction, sexuality, and the socialization of children. These are historically, not intrinsically, related to each other in the present modern family. We can easily see that they needn't be. For instance, biological parentage is not necessarily identical with social parentage (adoption). Thus it is essential to discuss not the family as an unanalysed entity, but the separate structures

which today compose it but which tomorrow may be decomposed into a new pattern.

As I have said, reproduction is seen as an apparently constant atemporal phenomenon – part of biology rather than history. In fact this is an illusion. What is true is that the ‘mode of reproduction’ does not vary with the ‘mode of production’; it can remain effectively the same through a number of different modes of production. For it has been defined till now by its uncontrollable, natural character and to this extent has been an unmodified biological fact. As long as reproduction remained a natural phenomenon, of course, women were effectively doomed to social exploitation. In any sense, they were not ‘masters’ of a large part of their lives. They had no choice as to whether or how often they gave birth to children (apart from precarious methods of contraception or repeated dangerous abortions); their existence was essentially subject to biological processes outside their control.

Contraception

Contraception which was finally invented as a rational technique only in the nineteenth century was thus an innovation of world-historic importance. It is only just now beginning to show what immense consequences it could have, in the form of the Pill. For what it means is that at last the mode of reproduction potentially could be transformed. Once childbearing becomes totally voluntary (how much so is it in the West, even today?) its significance is fundamentally different. It need no longer be the sole or ultimate vocation of woman; it becomes one option among others.

History is the development of man’s transformation of nature, and thereby of himself – of human nature – in different modes of production. Today there are the technical possibilities for the transformation and ‘humanization’ of the most natural part of human culture. This is what a change in the mode of reproduction could mean.

We are far from this state of affairs yet. In Italy the sale of contraceptives remains illegal. In many countries it is difficult to get reliable means. The oral contraceptive is still the privilege of a moneyed minority in a few western countries. Even here the progress has been realized in a typically conservative and exploitative form. It is made only for women, who are thus ‘guinea-pigs’ in a venture which involves both sexes.

The fact of overwhelming importance is that easily available contraception threatens to dissociate sexual from reproductive experience – which all contemporary ideology tries to make inseparable, as the *raison d'être* of the family.

Reproduction and Production

At present, reproduction in our society is often a kind of sad mimicry of production. Work in a capitalist society is an alienation of labour in the making of a social product which is confiscated by capital. But it can still sometimes be a real act of creation, purposive and responsible, even in the conditions of the worst exploitation. Maternity is often a caricature of this. The biological product – the child – is treated as if it were a solid product. Parenthood becomes a kind of substitute for work, an activity in which the child is seen as an object created by the mother, in the same way as a commodity is created by a worker. Naturally, the child does not literally escape, but the mother’s alienation can be much worse than that of the worker whose product is appropriated by the boss. The child as an autonomous person, inevitably threatens the activity which claims to create it continually merely as a *possession* of the parent. Possessions are felt as extensions of the self. The child as a possession is supremely this. Anything the child

does is therefore a threat to the mother herself, who has renounced her autonomy through this misconception of her reproductive role. There are few more precarious ventures on which to base a life.

Furthermore even if the woman has emotional control over her child, legally and economically both she and it are subject to the father. The social cult of maternity is matched by the real socio-economic powerlessness of the mother. The psychological and practical benefits men receive from this are obvious. The converse of woman's quest for creation in the child is man's retreat from his work into the family: 'When we come home, we lay aside our mask and drop our tools, and are no longer lawyers, sailors, soldiers, statesmen, clergymen, but only men. We fall again into our most human relations, which, after all, are the whole of what belongs to us as we are ourselves.'

Unlike her non-productive status, her capacity for maternity is a definition of woman. But it is only a physiological definition. Yet so long as it is allowed to remain a substitute for action and creativity, and the home an area of relaxation for men, woman will remain confined to the species, to her universal and natural condition.

3. *Sexuality*

Sexuality has traditionally been the most tabooed dimension of women's situation. The meaning of sexual freedom and its connection with women's freedom is a subject which few socialist writers have cared to broach. 'Socialist morality' in the Soviet Union for a long time debarred serious discussion of the subject within the world communist movement. Marx himself – in this respect somewhat less liberal than Engels early in his life expressed traditional views on the matter:

... the sanctification of the sexual instinct through exclusivity, the checking of instinct by laws, the moral beauty which makes nature's commandment ideal in the form of an emotional bond – (this is) the spiritual essence of marriage. [Marx, *Chapitre de Mariage, Oeuvres Complètes*]

Yet it is obvious that throughout history women have been appropriated as sexual objects, as much as progenitors or producers. Indeed, the sexual relationship can be assimilated to the statute of possession much more easily and completely than the productive or reproductive relationship. Contemporary sexual vocabulary bears eloquent witness to this – it is a comprehensive lexicon of reification -'bird, fruit, chick . . .' Later Marx was well aware of this: '*Marriage . . . is incontestably a form of exclusive private property.*'¹³ But neither he nor his successors ever tried seriously to envisage the implications of this for socialism, or even for a structural analysis of women's conditions. Communism, Marx stressed in the same passage, would not mean mere 'communalization' of women as common property. Beyond this, he never ventured.

Some historical considerations are in order here. For if socialists have said nothing, the gap has been filled by liberal ideologues. Fairly recently, in his book, *Eros Denied*, Wayland Young argues that western civilization has been uniquely repressive sexually, and, in a plea for greater sexual freedom today, compares it at some length with oriental and ancient societies. It is striking, however, that his book makes no reference whatever to women's status in these different societies, or to the different forms of marriage-contract prevalent in them. This makes the whole argument a purely formal exercise – an obverse of socialist discussions of women's position which ignore the problem of sexual freedom and its meanings. For while it is true that certain oriental or ancient (and

indeed primitive) cultures were much less puritanical than western societies, it is absurd to regard this as a kind of 'transposable value' which can be abstracted from its social structure. In effect, in many of these societies sexual openness was accompanied by a form of polygamous exploitation which made it, in practice, an expression simply of masculine domination. Since art was the province of man, too, this freedom finds a natural and often powerful expression in art – which is often quoted as if it were evidence of the total quality of human relationships in the society. Nothing could be more misleading. What is necessary, rather than this naive, hortatory core of historical example, is some account of the co-variation between the degrees of sexual liberty and openness, and the position and dignity of women in different societies.

Sexuality and the Position of Women: Some Historical Examples

Some points are immediately obvious. The actual history is much more dialectical than any liberal account presents it. Unlimited juridical polygamy – whatever the sexualization of the culture which accompanies it – is clearly a total derogation of woman's autonomy, and constitutes an extreme form of oppression. Ancient China is a perfect illustration of this. A sensual culture and a society in which the father as head of the household wielded an extraordinary despotism. The Chinese paterfamilias was 'a liturgical (semi-official) policeman of his kin group'. In the West, however, the advent of monogamy was in no sense an *absolute* improvement. It certainly did not create a one-to-one equality – far from it. Engels commented accurately:

Monogamy does not by any means make its appearance in history as the reconciliation of man and woman, still less as the highest form of such a reconciliation. On the contrary, it appears as the subjugation of one sex by the other, as the proclamation of a conflict between the sexes entirely unknown hitherto in prehistoric times. [Engels, *op. cit.*, II]

But in the Christian era, monogamy took on a very specific form in the West. It was allied with an unprecedented regime of general sexual repression. In its Pauline version, this had a markedly anti-feminine bias, inherited from Judaism. With time this became diluted – feudal society, despite its subsequent reputation for asceticism, practised formal monogamy with considerable actual acceptance of polygamous behaviour, at least within the ruling class. But here again the extent of sexual freedom was only an index of masculine domination. In England, the truly major change occurred in the sixteenth century with the rise of militant puritanism and the increase of market relations in the economy. Lawrence Stone observes:

In practice, if not in theory, the early sixteenth century nobility was a polygamous society, and some contrived to live with a succession of women despite the official prohibition on divorce.... But impressed by Calvinist criticisms of the double standard, in the late sixteenth century public opinion began to object to the open maintenance of a mistress.

Capitalism and the attendant demands of the newly emergent bourgeoisie accorded woman a new status as wife and mother. Her legal rights improved; there was vigorous controversy over her social position: wife-beating was condemned. 'In a woman the bourgeois man is looking for a counterpart, not an equal.' At the social periphery woman did occasionally achieve an equality which was more than her feminine function in a market society. In the extreme non-conformist sects women often had completely equal rights: the Quaker leader Fox argued that the Redemption restored Prelapsarian equality and Quaker women thereby gained a real autonomy. But once most of the sects

were institutionalized, the need for family discipline was re-emphasized and woman's obedience with it. As one historian, Keith Thomas, says, the Puritans 'did something to raise women's status, but not really very much'. The patriarchal system was retained and maintained by the new economic mode of production -capitalism. The transition to complete effective monogamy accompanied the transition to modern bourgeois society as we know it today. Like the capitalist market system itself, it represented a historic advance, at great historic cost. The formal, juridical equality of capitalist society and capitalist rationality now applied as much to the marital as to the labour contract. In both cases, nominal parity masks real exploitation and inequality. But in both cases the formal equality is itself a certain progress, which can help to make possible a further advance.

Sexuality and the Position of Women: Today

The situation today is defined by a new contradiction. Once formal conjugal equality (monogamy) is established, sexual freedom as such -which under polygamous conditions was usually a form of exploitation – becomes, conversely, a possible force for liberation. It then means, simply, the freedom of both sexes to transcend the limits of present sexual institutions.

Historically, then, there has been a dialectical movement in , which sexual expression was 'sacrificed' in an epoch of more-or-less puritan repression, which nevertheless produced a greater parity of sexual roles and in turn creates the pre-condition for a genuine sexual liberation, in the dual sense of equality *and* freedom – whose unity defines socialism.

Love and Marriage

This movement can be verified within the history of the 'sentiments'. The cult of *love* only emerges in the twelfth century in opposition to legal marital forms and with a heightened valorization of women (courtly love). It thereafter gradually became diffused, and assimilated to marriage as such, producing that absurdity – a *free* choice for *life*. What is striking here is that monogamy as an institution in the West, anticipated the idea of love by many centuries. The two have subsequently been officially harmonized, but the tension between them has never been abolished. There is a formal contradiction between the voluntary contractual character of 'marriage' and the spontaneous uncontrollable character of 'love' – the passion that is celebrated precisely for its involuntary force. The notion that it occurs only once in every life and can therefore be integrated into a voluntary contract, becomes decreasingly plausible in the light of everyday experience -once sexual repression as a psycho-ideological system becomes at all relaxed.

Obviously, the main breach in the traditional value-pattern has, so far, been the increase in premarital sexual experience. This is now virtually legitimized in contemporary society. But its implications are explosive for the ideological conception of marriage that dominates this society: that it is an exclusive and permanent bond. An American anthology, *The Family and the Sexual Revolution*, reveals this very clearly:

As far as extra-marital relations are concerned, the anti-sexualists are still fighting a strong, if losing, battle. The very heart of the Judaeo-Christian sex ethic is that men and women shall remain virginal until marriage and that they shall be completely faithful after marriage. In regard to premarital chastity, this ethic seems clearly on the way out, and in many segments of the populace is more and more becoming a dead letter.

The current wave of sexual liberalization, in the present context, could become conducive to the greater general freedom of women. Equally, it could presage new forms of oppression. The puritan-bourgeois creation of 'counterpart' (not equal) has produced the *precondition* for emancipation. But it gave statutory legal equality to the sexes at the cost of greatly intensified repression. Subsequently – like private property itself – it has become *a brake* on the further development of a free sexuality. Capitalist market relations have historically been a precondition of socialism; bourgeois marital relations (contrary to the denunciation of the *Communist Manifesto*) may equally be a precondition of women's liberation.

4. *Socialization of Children*

Woman's biological 'destiny' as mother becomes a cultural vocation in her role as socializer of children. In bringing up children, woman achieves her main social definition. Her suitability for socialization springs from her physiological condition: her ability to produce milk and occasional relative inability to undertake strenuous work loads. It should be said at the outset that suitability is not inevitability. Several anthropologists make this clear. Levi-Strauss writes:

In every human group, women give birth to children and take care of them, and men rather have as their speciality hunting and warlike activities. Even there, though, we have ambiguous cases: of course, men never give birth to babies, but in many societies ... they are made to act as if they did.

Evans-Pritchard's description of the Nuer tribe depicts just such a situation. Margaret Mead comments on the element of wish-fulfilment in the assumption of a *natural* correlation of femininity and nurturance:

We have assumed that because it is convenient for a mother to wish to care for her child, this is a trait with which women have been more generously endowed by a careful teleological process of evolution. We have assumed that because men have hunted, an activity requiring enterprise, bravery and initiative, they have been endowed with these useful attitudes as part of their sex-temperament.

However, the cultural allocation of roles in bringing up children – and the limits of its variability – is not the essential problem for consideration. What is much more important is to analyse the nature of the socialization process itself and its requirements.

The sociologist, Talcott Parsons, in his detailed analysis claims that it is essential for the child to have two 'parents', one who plays an 'expressive' role, and one who plays an 'instrumental' role. The nuclear family revolves around the two axes of generational hierarchy (parents and children), and of the two parental roles (mother-expressive and father-instrumental). The role division derives from the mother's ability and the father's inability to breast-feed. In all groups, Parsons and his colleagues assert, even in those primitive tribes where the father appears to nurture the child (such as those discussed by Evans-Pritchard and Mead), the male plays the instrumental role *in relation* to the wife-mother. At one stage the mother plays an instrumental and expressive role vis-a-vis her infant: this is in the very first years when she is the source of approval and disapproval as well as of love and care. However, after this, the father, or male substitute (in matrilineal societies the mother's brother) takes over. In a modern industrial society two types of role are clearly important: the adult role in the family of procreation, and the adult occupational role in outside work. The function of the family as such reflects the function of the women within it. It is primarily expressive. The person playing the integrated-adaptive-expressive role cannot be off all the time on instrumental-

occupational errands – hence there is a built-in inhibition of the woman's work outside the home. Parsons's analysis makes clear the exact role of the maternal socializer in contemporary American society. It fails to go on to state that other aspects and modes of socialization are conceivable. What is valuable in Parsons' work is simply his insistence on the central importance of socialization as a process which is constitutive of any society (no Marxist has provided a comparable analysis). His general conclusion is that:

It seems to be without serious qualification the opinion of competent personality psychologists that, though personalities differ greatly in their degrees of rigidity, certain broad fundamental patterns of 'character' are laid down in childhood (so far as they are not genetically inherited) and are not radically changed by adult experience. The exact degree to which this is the case or the exact age levels at which plasticity becomes greatly diminished, are not at issue here. The important thing is the fact of childhood character formation and its relative stability after that.

Infancy

This seems indisputable: one of the great revolutions of modern psychology has been the discovery of the decisive specific weight of infancy in the course of an individual life a psychic time disproportionately greater than the chronological time. Freud began the revolution with his work on infantile sexuality; Melanie Klein radicalized it with her work on the first year of the infant's life. The result is that today we know far more than ever before how delicate and precarious a process the passage from birth to childhood is for everyone. It would seem that the fate of the adult personality can be largely decided in the initial months of life. The preconditions for the later stability and integration demand an extraordinary degree of care and intelligence on the part of the adult who is socializing the child, as well as a persistence through time of the same person.

These undoubted advances in the scientific understanding of childhood have been widely used as an argument to reassert women's quintessential maternal function, at a time when the traditional family has seemed increasingly eroded. The psychologist, Bowlby, studying evacuee children in the Second World War, declared: 'essential for mental health is that the infant and young child should experience a warm, intimate, and continuous relationship with his mother,' setting a trend which has become cumulative since. The emphasis of familial ideology has shifted from a cult of the biological ordeal of maternity (the pain which makes the child precious, etc.) to a celebration of mother-care as a social act. This can reach ludicrous extremes:

For the mother, breast-feeding becomes a complement to the act of creation. It gives her a heightened sense of fulfilment and allows her to participate in a relationship as close to perfection as any that a woman can hope to achieve.... The simple fact of giving birth, however, does not of itself fulfil this need and longing.... Motherliness is a way of life. It enables a woman to express her total self with the tender feelings, the protective attitudes, the encompassing love of the motherly woman.

The tautologies, the mystifications, the sheer absurdities point to the gap between reality and ideology.

Family Patterns

This ideology corresponds in dislocated form to a real change in the pattern of the family. As the family has become smaller, each child has become more important; the actual act of reproduction occupies less and less time, and the socializing and nurturance process increase commensurately in significance. Contemporary society is obsessed by

the physical, moral and sexual problems of childhood and adolescence. Ultimate responsibility for these is placed on the mother. Thus the mother's reproductive role has retreated as her socializing role has increased. In the 1890s in England a mother spent fifteen years in a state of pregnancy and lactation: in the 1960s she spent an average of four years. Compulsory schooling from the age of five, of course, reduces the maternal function very greatly after the initial vulnerable years.

The present situation is then one in which the qualitative importance of socialization during the early years of the child's life has acquired a much greater significance than in the past – while the quantitative amount of a mother's life spent either in gestation or child-rearing has greatly diminished. It follows that socialization cannot simply be elevated to the woman's new maternal vocation. Used as a mystique, it becomes an instrument of oppression. Moreover, there is no inherent reason why the biological and social mother should coincide. The process of socialization is, in itself, invariable – but the person of the socializer can vary. Observers of collective methods of child-rearing in the kibbutzim in Israel note that the child who is reared by a trained nurse (though normally maternally breast-fed) does not suffer the back-wash of typical parental anxieties and thus may positively gain by the system. This possibility should not be fetishized in its turn (Jean Baby, speaking of the post-four-year-old child, goes so far as to say that 'complete separation appears indispensable to guarantee the liberty of the child as well as the mother'.) But what it does reveal is the viability of plural forms of socialization – neither necessarily tied to the nuclear family, nor to the biological parent, or rather to *one* of the biological parents – the mother.

Conclusion

The lesson of these reflections is that the liberation of women can only be achieved if *all four* structures in which they are integrated are transformed – Production, Reproduction, Sexuality and Socialization. A modification of any of them can be offset by a reinforcement of another (as increased socialization has made up for decreased reproduction). This means that a mere permutation of the form of exploitation is achieved. The history of the last sixty years provides ample evidence of this. In the early twentieth century, militant feminism in England and the U.S.A. surpassed the labour movement in its violence. The vote – a political right – was eventually won. None the less, though a simple completion of the formal legal equality of bourgeois society, it left the socio-economic situation of women virtually unchanged. The wider legacy of the suffrage was practically nil: the suffragettes, by and large, proved unable to move beyond their own initial demands, and many of their leading figures later became extreme reactionaries. The Russian Revolution produced a quite different experience. In the Soviet Union in the 1920s, advanced social legislation aimed at liberating women above all in the field of sexuality; divorce was made free and automatic for either partner, thus effectively liquidating marriage; illegitimacy was abolished, abortion was free, etc. The social and demographic effects of these laws in a backward, semi-literate society bent on rapid industrialization (needing, therefore, a high birth-rate) were – predictably – catastrophic. Stalinism soon produced a restoration of traditional iron norms. Inheritance was reinstated, divorce made inaccessible, abortion illegal, etc.

The State cannot exist without the family. Marriage is a positive value for the Socialist Soviet State only if the partners see in it a lifelong union. So-called free love is a bourgeois invention and has nothing in common with the principles of conduct of a Soviet citizen. Moreover, marriage receives its full value for the State only if there is progeny, and the consorts experience the highest happiness of parenthood.

From the official journal of the Commissariat of justice in 1939.

Women still retained the right and obligation to work, but because these gains had not been integrated into the earlier attempts to free sexuality and abolish the family no general liberation has occurred.

In China, today there is still another experience. At this stage of the revolution all the emphasis is being placed on liberating women in *production*. This has produced an impressive social promotion of women. But it seems to have been accompanied by a tremendous repression of sexuality and a rigorous puritanism (rampant in civic life). This corresponds not only to the need to mobilize women massively in economic life, but to a deep cultural reaction against the brutality, corruption and prostitution prevalent in Imperial and Kuo Ming Tang China (a phenomenon unlike anything in Czarist Russia). Because the exploitation of women was so great in the *ancien régime* women's participation at village level in the Chinese Revolution was uniquely high. As for reproduction, the Russian cult of maternity in the 1930s and 1940s has not been repeated for demographic reasons: indeed, China may be one of the first countries in the world to provide free State authorized contraception on a universal scale to the population. Again, however, given the low level of industrialization and fear produced by imperialist encirclement, no all-round advance could be expected.

Probably it is only in the highly developed societies of the West that an authentic liberation of women can be envisaged today. But for this to occur, there must be a transformation of all the structures into which they are integrated, and all the contradictions must coalesce, to explode – a *unite de rupture*. A revolutionary movement must base its analysis on the uneven development of each structure, and attack the weakest link in the combination. This may then become the point of departure for a general transformation. What is the situation of the different structures today? What is the concrete situation of the women in each of the positions in which they are inserted?

Further Reading:

[De Beauvoir](#) | [Kate Millett](#) | [Firestone](#)

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