

Women

and the Political Economy

How, why and in what circumstances does a situation present itself to the writer as 'something to say'? Literature is born when something in life goes slightly adrift. In order to write, the first essential condition is that reality should no longer be taken for granted; only then can one both perceive it, and make others do so. (Simone de Beauvoir, The Prime of Life, p.291)

by Milnor Alexander

I used to take it for granted that women's role in our western (liberal) society could be changed through the democratic (political) process. It is only since I perceived that it also takes a change in the economic system that I have felt moved to write on the subject. Women must be educated to see the futility of trying to change their secondary status without also changing the political economy.

I am not going to quote all the people who see socialism as necessary to changing the status of women, but I will comment on some of them and indicate the books or articles which should be read in order to get their point of view. One should start, of course, with Frederick Engels' The Origin of the

Family, Private Property, and the State with the Eleanor Leacock introduction (New World Paperbacks, 1973). Even though Engels relied on anthropological evidence which was too scanty, his general theoretical position can hardly be disputed. It was the advent of the concept of private property which reduced the role of women to a secondary position. Joan Hinton's article on "Politics and Marriage" in the June 1976 issue of New China (published by the US-China Peoples Friendship Association) indicates what is happening in China, where people have attempted to do away with the concept of private property and are beginning to build a new, more humane society. William Mandel's book, Soviet Women, (Anchor Books, 1975), is useful in

order to understand better what is happening in the Soviet Union.

John Kenneth Galbraith is a current economist who must be read to understand the "convenient social virtue" concept and what it does to women. His book, Economics and the Public Purpose (Houghton Mifflin, 1973), and his article in Ms magazine, "How the Economy Hangs on Her Apron Strings" (May 1974), are essential reading. The capitalist economy does indeed hang on the unpaid role of women in the home and the low-paid role of women in the marketplace. (Many socialist writers have not supported the "Wages for Housework" idea, because it would seem to be a way to keep women in the home; on the other hand, some advocate it as a tactical measure because, if women were adequately paid for all their work, it would probably break the back of the capitalist system. See All Work and No Pay; Women, Housework, and the Wages Due, edited by Wendy Edmond and Suzie Fleming, published by Power of Women Collective and Falling Wall Press, England, 1975.)

Margaret Benston, in her article "The Political Economy of Women's Liberation" (Monthly Review, September 1969), opened up the whole area of the "woman question" being generally ignored in analyses of the class structure of society. She makes it quite clear why the material basis for the inferior status of women is to be found in the definition of women as a group who work outside the money economy. Her point is well illustrated

by the example that if a man marries his housekeeper, he reduces the national income, since the money he gives her is no longer counted as wages.

Mickey and John Rowntree followed up her article with another one, entitled "More on the Political Economy of Women's Liberation," in the January 1970 issue of Monthly Review. They stressed the changing sex composition of the labour force since the Second World War, which belied Benston's emphasis on women as houseworkers, thereby minimizing their role as wage labourers. Their point is that it is both women's unpaid labour in the home and their low-paid labour in the marketplace that supports the capitalist system.

Charnie Guettel's book, Marxism and Feminism, (Women's Press, 1974), is a short but critical examination of feminist thought since the eighteenth century, from a Marxist perspective. It was written as a response to the type of feminist writing which declared simply that men oppress women, without examining why. She looked at some of the early proponents of women's rights such as J.S. Mill and the suffragists, and clarified Engels' contribution. She also looked at the explanations by Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett, Juliet Mitchell and Shulamith Firestone. Guettel makes the case that the oppression of women is a consequence of capitalism and that fighting against women's oppression is a necessary part of the class struggle. She feels that the liberation of women depends on so-

cialism and that the further development of socialism depends in part on the further liberation of women.

Ellen Willis, in a paper "Consumerism and Women," published by the Hogtown Press in Toronto (no date), offers a critique of the consumerism theory which she feels has taken on the "invulnerability of religious dogma." The consumerism theory is the idea that we are psychically manipulated by the mass media to crave more and more consumer goods, thus powering an economy that depends on constantly expanding sales. This theory is supposed to be particularly applicable to women for women do most of the actual buying and many products which they buy are directly related to their oppression (makeup, detergents, etc.). According to this theory, society defines women as consumers and, further, the purpose of the media image of women as passive sexual objects is to sell products. Therefore, it follows that the beneficiaries of this depreciation of women are not individual men, but rather the corporate power structure.

Willis has four major propositions:

- (1) that it is not "psychic manipulation" that makes people buy but rather that their buying habits are by and large a rational self-interested response to their limited alternatives within the system;
- (2) that the chief function of media stereotypes of women is not to sell goods but to reinforce the ideology and therefore the reality of male supremacy;

- (3) that most of what the "consuming" women do is actually labour, specifically part of women's domestic and sexual obligations;
- (4) that the consumerism theory has its roots in class, sex and race bias, and that its ready acceptance among radical women is a function of movement elitism. Therefore she feels that consumerism encourages radical women to patronize and put down other women for trying to survive as best they can and maintains individualist illusions. Willis concludes that if we are to build a mass movement we must recognize that no personal decision, such as rejecting consumerism, can alleviate our oppression. She feels that the task of the women's liberation movement is to collectively combat male domination in the home, in bed and on the job. In other words, when we create a political alternative to sexism, the consumer problem will take care of itself. (The problem with this kind of analysis is that it assumes that combating male domination without changing the economic system will create a political alternative. The main place to look to see if this will work is Scandinavia and, for all the progress being made there in the status of women, it does not seem to me that women in these countries would say that a real political alternative to sexism has yet been achieved.)

Evelyn Reed was one of the early writers (Problems of Women's Liberation, Pathfinder Press, 1969) from a Marxist point of view. She discussed women and the

family--a historical view--using the Engels approach; the myth of women's inferiority; how women lost control of their destiny and how they can regain it; whether women are a caste, a class or an oppressed sex; cosmetics, fashions and the exploitation of women; and the feminine mystique. She, too, is committed to the Marxist proposition that (1) women were not always the oppressed or "second" sex; that throughout so-called primitive society (which was the epoch of tribal collectivism) women were the equals of men and recognized by men as such. (2) The downfall of women coincided with the breakup of the matriarchal clan commune and its replacement by class-divided society with its institutions of the patriarchal family, private property and state power.

Anthropologists quibble about the idea of a matriarchal clan commune at some time in the past but it seems quite obvious that anthropologists (being mostly male) are afraid to admit the implications of the evidence because it would destroy the extremely important myth of the immutability of "human nature" (meaning the inevitability of a patriarchal society).

Feminism and Socialism, edited with an introduction by Linda Jenness (Pathfinder Press, 1972), includes articles by thirteen socialist-feminists on such matters as a defense of Engels on the matriarchy, a reply to Dr. Spock on child care, an answer to Norman Mailer's Prisoner of

Sex, why women's liberation is important to black women and Chicanas, whether feminism and socialism are related, a Marxist evaluation of Kate Millett's Sexual Politics, essays on women and political power, abortion, the Equal Rights Amendment, red-baiting and a socialist programme for women's liberation. A mass feminist movement according to these authors, requires the emergence of women from their dependence on individual men within the home into full participation in public life and social production. The Socialist Workers Party point of view as represented by this book states that "while a socialist revolution is a precondition for the complete liberation of women, a socialist revolution cannot be complete until women are totally free. The development of a powerful women's liberation movement now, before the socialist revolution, means that this movement will not only strengthen the struggle against capitalism, but will also be a powerful stimulus in the period of the construction of the new society to revolutionary changes in the family system and other institutions that oppress women."

One of the most interesting books to appear is Women, Resistance and Revolution by Sheila Rowbotham (Pelican Books, 1974). Her narrative extends from the seventeenth century (Anne Hutchinson in Massachusetts Bay) to contemporary struggles in Vietnam, Cuba, Algeria, the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. She shows how women have struggled, in both revo-

lutionary and repressive situations, to achieve liberation. Male revolutionary thought has been slow to accept the validity of feminism, regarding it as a limiting and reformist movement which can only distract from the main area of struggle. Sheila Rowbotham in this book re-evaluates the relationship between women's liberation and the revolutionary left. She says that in her book "feminism and Marxism come home to roost. They cohabit in the same space somewhat uneasily. . . . They are at once incompatible and in real need of each other."

Another author who is concerned about questions of feminism and socialism is Rosemary Reuther. Her article "The First and Final Proletariat: Socialism and Women's Liberation" in Soundings (Vanderbilt University, Fall 1975), discusses such writers as Engels and Rowbotham, the problem of the incomplete sexual revolution in the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China and the need for human liberation. Her ideas are more fully treated in New Woman/New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation (Seabury, 1976).

The Canadian Women's Educational Press published an anthology of the Canadian Women's Movement, Women Unite!, in 1972, which includes a section on the Economics of Working Women. Alice James writes about "Poverty: Canada's Legacy to Women;" Jean Rands writes "Toward an Organization of Working Women;" Lynn Lang writes about "Women on Welfare;" and Jane Likely has a short but provoca-

tive article on "Women and the Revolution." She discusses the great controversy about the place of women in the coming revolution and the danger of assuming that all will be well after the revolution. Given the fact that "Men have not learned to treat women, or each other, as human beings because nothing in their role demands humanity," she feels that women's liberation demands that "liberation pre-empt revolution."

Janice Acton, Penny Goldsmith and Bonnie Shepard edited another book for the Canadian Women's Educational Press in 1974, Women at Work: Ontario 1850-1930. This book contains several excellent articles showing the relationship of women to the economic system in ways that extend far beyond just Ontario. As Dorothy Kidd points out in the last chapter, "Women's Organization; Learning from Yesterday," the class struggle adapts itself to changes in the capitalist system and woman's political power does not derive solely from her entry into waged work. "Her presence in the workplace has no real permanence; it is always dependent upon the changing whims of capital. And capital still needs women working at home. . . . The bargaining position of woman in waged work is affected by her weak position as a housewife."

Dorothy E. Smith in her article "Women, the Family and Corporate Capitalism" (in Women in Canada, edited by Marylee Stephenson, New Press, 1973), undertakes an explanation of the peculiar nature of the oppression of women in our society.

She considers the form of oppression for the middle-class woman as differentiated from that experienced by the working-class woman. She describes the "two double-binds" for the wife and mother: with regard to the husband, she must support him in his role but she must also maintain the image of the external order in the home. So, paradoxically, in order to be a "good wife," she must sometimes side with the external moral order against her husband. And with regard to the children, she must "manage" her children so that they appear well behaved (acceptable to the external order) and yet they "misbehave" and she may not be angry with them without guilt, since the "good family" image makes it obligatory for her to be happy and smiling with her children. All of this relates to her analysis of the nature of corporate capitalism and how women in particular experience life under it.

Karen Sacks, in an article entitled "Class Roots of Feminism" in the Monthly Review (New York, February 1976), documents how the women's movement in the U.S. from about 1820 to 1920 was not a single movement, but rather three movements: industrial-working-class women's movement, a black women's movement and a white middle-class movement for legal equality. As she points out, class is the key, because the material conditions of black and working-class women were very different from the material conditions of white middle-class women.

The social ideologies of these groups were therefore also different. A double standard based on class came into being for women whereby propertied women were "ladies of leisure," and industrial workers and plantation workers were women like Sojourner Truth, who cried out, "Ain't I a Woman too?" Collective action by textile-mill women preceded that of middle-class women, the first factory strike taking place in 1824. At the first national convention of the Knights of Labor in 1878, labourers voted for equal pay for equal work and began to include women workers in separate locals as well as in male-female locals. The middle-class movement became mainly a suffrage movement. Any members of the middle-class movement who actually spoke out about the big-business interests and the government as being the real enemies of women got the same treatment as working-class women strikers--namely, police brutality and jail.

Rosemary Brown, the NDP member from B.C. who ran for the leadership of the party but unfortunately did not win, gave an extremely interesting speech on "Feminism and Socialism" at the meeting of the Committee on Socialist Studies in Edmonton in June, 1975. She began her talk by quoting a statement made in 1910 by August Bebel in which he said "There can be no liberation of mankind without social independence and equality of the sexes." Brown believes that social independence and equality are the important issues and that the women's movement is vital and

significant to revolutionary changes. Whenever there is an upsurge of consciousness on the part of a major group or class within a society, which calls into question the ideas of the ruling class, that new consciousness acts like a battering ram breaking the old order into pieces. Brown pointed out that the women's movement is fortunate to have within its ranks a large and growing number of women who are capable of undertaking the kind of analysis needed and who are addressing themselves single-mindedly to that task. She mentioned some that I have not covered--Kate Millett, Juliet Mitchell, Shulamith Firestone, to name only a few. She also uses Canadian statistics to show that the position of working women relative to their male counterparts in the labour force is almost the same today as it was at the beginning of the industrial revolution. Women still earn, on the average, only half the wage of the equivalent male, and women are still employed largely in semi-skilled trades, or in clerical jobs below the managerial level.

Rosemary Brown had also recently been to Sweden, where she was looking specifically at the status of women because she wanted to see how a social democratic country handled these questions. The women's movement there is much older than it is in most other countries and extensive legislation has been introduced so that equality before the law is an established fact. However, social inequalities still exist, particularly within the nuclear family. Single women felt they were

completely free and could move up through their work system but the women in the home felt that, although they could go out and work, the responsibility for the home was still theirs. The men might "help," but basically, the women still had two jobs and therefore the men would continue to run the show in the business and political worlds. However, as we know, Sweden is not a socialist country, and women are beginning to achieve the social equality she is talking about in a socialist country like the People's Republic of China. There is a long way to go, of course, but they have made a beginning. The point that the Chinese situation makes obvious is a "cultural revolution" such as China experienced is necessary after the socialist revolution, to begin to alter consciousness.

Socialism as a philosophy is committed to the removal of all barriers that make one human being dependent on another. As Rosemary Brown says, the function of woman as consumer, as cheap labour, and as unpaid home manager, under capitalism ensures her continued oppression. Socialism, with its commitment to social independence and equality of sexes, addresses itself to these oppressions, and is a necessary precondition to a truly egalitarian society. However, there is considerable evidence about how difficult it is to achieve the kind of change needed even under socialism. Hilda Scott in her book Does Socialism Liberate Women? (Experiences from Eastern Europe, Beacon Press, 1974) examines the successes and failures in

post-Second World War Eastern European countries. It is important to know as much as possible about how suggested solutions work and where they have disappointed their advocates. Her evidence would indicate that, although most women in the Eastern European countries are not yet realizing their potentialities and are not always even sure that they want to be working, the vast majority of them have emerged from the narrow confines of home and that is the first step. She believes that the theoretical impasse in which the socialist countries find themselves is that of trying to combine the theory of emancipation as proposed by Marx, Engels and Lenin, with the form of the family which is characteristic of mid-twentieth-century industrial society (the nuclear family with patriarchal overtones). It is maintained that eventually socialist production relations will, through the advance of science and technology, make it possible for woman to be both man's equal in the outside world and a successful housewife and mother. This still implies that women will carry two responsibilities and execute both jobs as well as man does his one. Implicit in this European socialist position is the idea that vestiges of bourgeois prejudice in the minds of men will gradually be overcome and men will voluntarily give up more of their free time, take over some of the housekeeping and child-care tasks, thus freeing women to take over more skilled jobs and positions of power.

The lesson of European and Chinese socialism is that men will not voluntarily do this. Only an intensive, sustained, compulsory thought reform program such as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, repeated again and again, can force the change over a period of time. Men as well as women must be convinced not only that roles in the home must be changed but also that roles in the outside world of industry, politics, science and culture must be changed. It will not be until this new consciousness dawns that real equality will be possible. It will take a radical reallocation of society's resources to finance adequate nurseries and communal services and to alter working conditions and pay scales so that the same criteria apply to men and women in all industries and professions.

Ruth Sidel, in her book Women and Child Care in China (Penguin Books, 1973), presents an interesting and informative comparison of the kibbutzim in Israel, the Soviet Union and China, in one of her chapters. Katie Curtin, in her book Women in China (Pathfinder Press, 1975), also shows the progress already made in China and the barriers still to be overcome. This book is an important corrective to those who tend to over-state the progress in China. William Mandel's book --previously mentioned-- is also important, with regard to both the Soviet Union and China. One of the points to be remembered is that even though socialism provides the basis for liberation for that

proportion of the population which is entirely heterosexual, there is still a long way to go, psychologically, in terms of understanding the proportion of the population which is bisexual or

homosexual. In other words, there is not a very high level of appreciation as yet in socialist countries for the varieties of expression of human sexuality. This is crucial for both female and male liberation.

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