Women — Liberation — Revolution

WOMEN’S LIBERATION is the result of an incredible response amongst women everywhere to a very real need in society. For the first time in the history of mankind, women have united to establish their rights as human beings. To discuss the subject of women’s liberation is to unleash a great amount of long pent-up emotion and subjective animosity, frustration, disenchantment and anti-male feminism.

We have, till now, laid great stress on objective reality, objective fact. We said that to assess objective fact is the best basis for understanding reality. But there are some realities which seem to defy objective analysis, realities that by their very nature are obscured by subjectivity and subtlety.

The unrelenting objectivity of those who speak of “breaking old bonds”, “making frontal attacks” and “confronting capitalism”, sometimes sadly fail to reach their less objective sisters (and brothers) who need to be reached on an individual basis as well as on a collective one. You cannot win the people if you neglect their souls and yearnings, are unable to relate to them as subjects, and singly as well as collectively.

Two lines of attack seem to me to develop from these two approaches. The aggressive, objective outlook stresses economic reforms, changing the social order, eliminating class struggle. The aggressive subjective outlook stresses personal confrontation, soul cleansing, discussion ad infinitum and so on. These two forces are discernible in the movement. Women’s Liberation requires a blending of both forces and it is here that the very crux of the question lies.

How can you unite industrial, less articulate, women who readily recognise immediate reforms and social demands (e.g. wage justice, child care, job opportunity) and their better educated, more articulate, sisters on campus and elsewhere, who find great emotional and psychological release in analysis, discussion, elucidation and polemic? How can one achieve the seemingly impossible, i.e. a fusing of forces?

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These problems are neither confined to economic reforms nor to so-called “middle class” idealism. The question is really that of inspiring and motivating all women, especially the great majority now entering the work force, to unite and struggle for reforms and against the more far-reaching and subtle manifestations of oppression, victimisation and male chauvinism. I find it almost impossible to establish which, if any, are the most basic of the demands being made by radical women, but those which strike me as extremely fundamental to woman’s vision of herself and how she is viewed in society are the ones revolving around sexual liberty and the sexual role.

The one factor which distinguishes primitive man from civilised man is the development of sexual role playing, that is a preordained behaviour pattern and achievement potential based on sex alone. In early communistic societies there was no such thing as domination of one sex over the other. All adults were responsible for all children. Although adult society was differentiated into areas of work (women caring for children, food gatherers, etc., men mainly hunters) each sex worked within the community as a collective and therefore the “divide and rule” principle which developed in later societies did not exist. In the earliest social organisation of human beings (which forms lasted for hundreds of thousands of years) the nuclear family was non-existent, sexual relations were free amongst both sexes; both sexes regarded themselves as the parents and providers for all the children in the community, as well as caring for the sick and aged.

In such a primitive, classless society all were providers, all were consumers, none were oppressed and none oppressor. In many cases, in fact, a matriarchy or maternal line of descent was the rule. The child’s father, being hard to trace, in a promiscuous free-love community, as the earliest human communities to an extent were, the mother was the obvious choice on which to base lineage and kinship. Thus, in many primitive communities, women were highly regarded and respected. The very thing which modern society now regards as making women basically inferior and handicapping her (the child-bearing function) was in earliest times the quality which made her greatly respected and honored. As Engels says in Origin of the Family:

That woman was the slave of man at the commencement of society is one of the most absurd notions that have come down to us from the eighteenth century.

How did it happen then that what we regard as woman’s most serious handicap (child bearing) gave her a superior role in primitive society? In 1927, an anthropologist, Robert Briffault, wrote a book entitled The Mothers in which he described how in their
early struggles to feed and care for their offspring, the women developed highly complex forms of labor and social activity. Primitive women progressed from food collecting to primitive agriculture (digging stick to primitive plough) from collecting small animals (e.g. our tribal Aboriginal women who collect small mammals, reptiles, insects, etc.) to animal husbandry. Similarly, related crafts and techniques — pottery, weaving, leather-making, chemistry, medicine, botany, house building and other forms of primitive knowledge — were developed.

Once woman became a solitary wife and mother in an individual home and was trapped in a new system of private property and monogamous marriage, she was rendered powerless. We should not be fooled into believing that there is any truth in the fable that marriage as an institution, and the family as we now know it, has always existed and is therefore imperishable. Woman's sexual role has changed historically. In early civilisations she became a chattel and virtual slave to her husband. To quote Engels again:

Familus means (in Latin) domestic slave and familia is the aggregate number of slaves belonging to one man. The expression was invented by the Romans to designate a new social organism, the head of which had a wife, children and a number of slaves under his authority and according to Roman law the right of life and death over all of them.

For centuries, in fact, right up to the middle ages, marriage as a legal contract was only for the privileged classes. Amongst the peasants, both parties worked to support the family and were economically independent of each other, yet also dependent on the collective. “When woman ceased to be a producer she became a dependant.” (Reuter & Rumer, The Family.)

To continue specifically with the historic sexual role of women, not just within the family as wife and mother, but as courtesan, prostitute, servant, concubine and, finally, sophisticated starlet, popsie, bunny girl, nude model, bathing beauty and female escort, we see a continuing chain of women as property to be bought and sold; an ethic (if one can call it that) not altered by capitalist society, but simply brought up to date and developed further by it.

It is capitalism that has found the most sophisticated methods for sexual exploitation and male chauvinism. There are countless examples to be found in advertising, women's magazines, films and novels. Here are two examples selected from the writings of John Miles in The Advertiser (Adelaide) in March and May 1971:

I hope that mothers do not go out of style. I feel that 'incubators' Day could not be an emotional or commercial success. It lacks the heart-strings appeal. And yet it appears that, if a couple of the main planks of the Women's Lib. movement are achieved, many mums of the future will be unmarried ladies who demand abortions at the drop of a tear.
I am not for chaining mum to the kitchen sink. But I feel it is much more important for us all that women should be successful wives and mothers than that they be crash-hot big shots in commerce, industry and the professions . . . Motherhood, the making of homes, the implementing of moral values and the care, love and companionship which support husbands is surely more than a part-time job . . . But it should also be kept clearly in mind that selling pantyhose or pounding a typewriter or feeding a computer or “having a career” in the boardroom or the courts or the hospitals and the Houses of Parliament is peanuts compared with the real role of a woman as a creator, a lover and a mainstay of family life.

Women need to be liberated from a sense of inferiority when they stay at home and do what they love doing most — looking after their families . . . Women are mad on love. Most men can take it or leave it.

But there is one thing that every man finds absolutely indispensable at some stage of his life, and that’s a mother.

and

Women have a special gift, according to Prince Philip — a special gift of being able to dissociate their minds from what their hands are doing — a special gift which makes them capable of working without thinking about what they are doing . . . women tend to live nearer the end of their tether than men. Therefore, they are more on edge, more aroused, and less likely to go to sleep or become inefficient on a purely repetitive job . . . And there is in women the need to talk, and the opportunity to do this in a repetitive task is really one of the job’s main attractions.

It is interesting to note how in what is loosely described as today’s permissive society, two incredible sides to this “sex gulf” emerge. On the one side we find the patriarchal establishment and all that that implies, fanatically jumping up and down and screaming anti-abortion, anti-birth control, anti-free love, anti-equality epithets and on the other a more enlightened partially professional, militant group, who describe what they term “the new sexual ethic”. Dr. Bryan Furnass, for example, Director of the Australian National University Health Service, speaking at a meeting of GP’s in South Australia remarked:

In biological terms it would seem more logical to require a licence to have children than to marry — though this would strike at the root of the legal concept of property in present-day matrimonial contracts . . . in the sexual field concern for human happiness should involve the training rather than the thwarting of instinct and emphasise the positive rather than the negative aspects of the problem. (Advertiser, 3.5.71.)

Should such views as this prevail the wheel will have come full circle and we could envisage a society where marriage as a legal contract is forgotten.

At the present time, however, women carry out their sexual role, or are manipulated by it, in a variety of ways. The jobs that women seek are often an extension of the wife-mother role: the nurse, teacher, doctor, cleaner, shop assistant, laundress, tailoress, or immediately related to her sexual exploitation:
mannequin, hairdresser, cosmetician, etc., i.e. man’s plaything — a decoration. Women in the mother-role are manipulated by society too, especially in fields of employment. They are denied adequate child care, accouchement leave, sick leave, long service continuity, permanency, etc., but also in respect to social services, child endowment, maternity allowance and pensions. Lastly with regard, specifically, to sexual oppression, women have been duped and manoeuvred by fashion and cosmetics and all other forms of consumerism.

A prevailing myth of the consumer economy is that the new innovations create leisure time for the consumer . . . especially . . . the housewife consumer . . . special cleaners for windows, floors, carpets, sinks, toilets, furniture etc. are supposed to release women from household drudgery. In actuality they impose a highly elaborate routine on that drudgery. Cleaning the home becomes a more highly specialised routine linked to the consumption of highly specialised cleaning products. The cosmetic industry does this too, new more involved methods of make-up come onto the market each year. Women (in advertising lingo) must be liberated to desire new products. (Media Images by Alice Embee).

The modern society’s ideal woman is young, well-proportioned, wears the right hair style, clothes, jewellery, perfume, cosmetics, deodorant (all types). What tortures so many women suffer because they cannot emulate this synthetic ideal! The business of preying on the fears and aspirations of thousands and millions of women is one of the most profitable and insidious forms of sexual exploitation, and the promotion of fashion with its manipulation of women is one of the principal methods of perpetuating their inferior status by inferring their continual need to please men and decorate themselves for the male society in which they move.

In the realm of consumerism once again, we only have to look in good old Woman’s Day (never a whole week of living in it) to see to what extent women are seduced and baited by high pressure, highly sophisticated advertising; the worst features of this pressure being the unhealthy querying of woman’s sense of inadequacy, ability, acceptance, capability and intelligence.

Before we close on the subject of role playing and the way in which society has moulded and oppressed the male and female sections of it, I would like to spare a few moments to take stock of the effect that role playing has on men as well as women. We have discovered that to be continually regarded as passive, submissive, malleable creatures is in fact a “non-existence”. Have we ever thought what it must be like to have to just as artificially manufacture the opposite attributes as men are required to do, e.g. activeness, aggressiveness, rigidity and strength? Many women have regarded men as the lucky ones. I am not so sure any more.
In an interview with men carried out by Sally Vincent, entitled “Being a Man Isn’t Easy”, the interviewee tells her:

... it struck me (then) that all male behaviour was learned, that everybody who behaves as a real male is doing so in order to get the approval that we are all seeking from the outside because none of us knows who we are from within... men are supposed to be dominant, aggressive, attractive to the female, ruthless sexually, advanced intellectually... Masculinity means to me being responsible for one’s feeling and feelings. Responsible for one’s act. Therefore masculinity is something a woman can and should experience as well. It is a part of the emergence of a feeling in the species since there is no differential between the male and female except in their physical attributes. So masculinity must only be the authority that the human being feels as a human being emerging. (emphasis added)

Women’s Liberation literature has challenged the concepts that assume feminine passivity and male aggression to be natural. To understand some of these questions we may begin to understand ourselves and those we love.

In further considering the role of the family, it is important to note its present changes and possible future ones. The family of the 1970’s is not the same as the family in the immediate post-war period. There are more married women at work, especially young women, and therefore more pre-school children being cared for by some other agent. There are fewer teenage children at work, as now more are at school or tertiary level education.

One of the greatest attacks on the Women’s Liberation movement is the charge that it wants to overthrow the family, destroy the role of mother and institutionalise all children, and this should be answered. The changing structure of the family is not new; the family has in fact undergone many changes in the history of human society. The roles of mother and father as played out in modern capitalist society are not permanent either, as we’ve seen from looking at primitive society. Even as recently as the Victorian era few women were employed outside the home. Men were dictators in their own homes and in society at large, and the wife and/or mother was legally, socially and economically completely dominated by him. This has changed greatly even in what, historically, is a short space of time. As Anna Yeatman points out:

we observe... changes in the family stimulated by the transition from a mechanised to a “technological” economy... the role of women is clearly going to be considerably modified... “sexual emancipation” and “egalitarian values” will serve to increase the viability of the marriage family institution so far as it will become humanised and more adaptive to individual need. (ALR No. 28).

The family as we know it has served capitalism faithfully, as it was intended to do. It isolated people into communities, made them rely on small groups for protection, affection, security and
shelter. It promoted the concept of individualism versus collectivism, the concept on which capitalism is based. It will not necessarily disappear; in fact monogamous partnerships may well provide a suitable social answer for individuals. But a more communal and collective influence will penetrate the high white picket taboos of present families, especially in the fields of education, social experience, problem solving, labor saving, consumer goods usage, population control and world pollution. Dr. Furnass comments:

Pre-marital and extra-marital links may eventually form part of a pattern in which nuclear families gradually coalesce into extended family relationships similar to those in some primitive tribal communities. It seems unlikely that such radical departures from existing taboos and restrictions will be achieved overnight, although the present generation of adolescents may well be in the vanguard of instituting such a change.

One thing that is obvious is that the family as we know it oppresses all its members—women, men and children. The woman is forced into a totally dependent position, and pays for her keep with "emotional-physical labor", 99.6 hours a week, in fact, according to the survey by the Chase Manhattan Bank.

How can oppression by the modern family be alleviated? Birth control, contraception and abortion are important, as are the questions related to the right for women to work. For when women achieve full economic independence (and this can be through struggle on economic reforms like child care facilities, equal pay, accouchement leave, etc.) they will create an independent view of their own, they will liberate themselves and their menfolk. This struggle for economic independence should be tied to a social and personal analysis of the individuals in society and of the pressures they have suffered from generations of authoritarian and segregated education and conditioning in sex-determined roles. In this way we can try to ascertain how and why the changes in men's and women's lives came about and how and why we can change them. As Peter Fryer says in the very last paragraph of his book The Birth Controllers (and he in turn is quoting a report of the Royal Commission on population in the UK):

Only when no one at all need fear unwanted pregnancy shall we be able to speak, not merely of a "big extension of man's control over his circumstances", but of woman's control over hers. (emphasis added).

and, I would add, enabling her to enrich the community.

We should now try to assess whether the struggle for woman's liberation is or is not part of the class struggle. Our present western society is split into two main classes, the employed class and the employing class. Women, of course, occur in both these classes and in the main relate to the values, ideals and aspirations.
of the class to which they belong. For example, it is unlikely that a wealthy, propertied woman would have any feeling for, or sympathy with, the many economic demands made by working class women in the work force. On basic questions concerning private property, privileged position, and profit control, wealthy women will defend the status quo and in so doing they betray their working class sisters.

However, despite this fact, there are still many issues which over-ride class barriers and unite women as a sex. Contraceptive freedom and the right for abortion are two examples of such issues. We should remember that the struggle between the two classes is the force for real social change and human liberation, especially women's liberation. However we may and should criticise socialist countries for many still prevailing backward attitudes to women, we should remember also that the enormous achievements made for women in these countries came about not by sex war, but by class war. It is a dangerous diversion to try to make the class struggle into a sexual hostility towards men (or vice versa). The common interests of workers as a class over-ride the special interests of woman as a sex.

However, there is one aspect of class we have not discussed. That is the role of the housewife. With regard to class, she is, it seems, in a unique position. I would term it "a dispossessed sub-class". Marx pointed out that classes could be described by their relationship to the means of production, but here we have a large section of the community who provide their labor for no wages.

In a society in which money determines value, women are a group who work outside the money economy. In essence women are still back in feudal times. We work outside capitalism as unpaid labor — and it is the structure of the family that makes this possible, since the employer pays only the husband and, in fact, gets the rest of the family's services for free. (Robin Morgan in her Introduction to Sisterhood is Powerful.)

I would like to extend this description also to the housewife who goes to work, for she is now doing two jobs, one underpaid, and one not paid at all. What kind of social freaks are we? This double role is reinforced and openly encouraged by the mass media, e.g. Woman's Day 22.2.71. In response to a previous article entitled "How to Minimise the Drag of Housework" many readers wrote in their favourite tips for easing the drag. One of the "best" said in part:

For the working housewife especially, I can recommend the "Time Method". By doing two hours of housework each of the five working days — in addition to the preparation of meals, washing-up and making beds — it is a simple matter to keep the home attractive, things running on the proverbial oiled wheels, and keep the week-ends free for shopping, pleasure and relaxation.
Of course the two allotted hours can be fitted in to suit the individual, but I found that one hour in the morning and one in the evening is best for me. (emphasis added).

How long will we be content to be employed at two jobs for one wage packet?

One aspect of life where woman is supporter is highlighted in the cultural sphere. For thousands of years, through all forms of class struggle and social change, women have supported and assisted men in their struggle, which was social reform (Pitt, Shaftesbury, Stuart Mill, Marx, Engels, etc.) or cultural achievement (writers, artists, composers too numerous to mention) the names of women on their star-spangled ladder are conspicuous by their infinitesimal presence. Why? Are we in fact more dumb, less creative, less imaginative, have less drive, integrity and motivation?

Women have been forced to adopt the roles of housewife and mother, so that male creative geniuses could go on creating and not be bothered with their next meal, bed, clothing, etc., or with the care and nurture of their offspring. Madame de Stael (1766-1817) said “Genius has no sex” and Thomas Carlyle’s wife sadly observed “I married for ambition. Carlyle has exceeded all that my wildest hopes ever imagined for him, and I am miserable”. One can correlate creative genius with political consciousness. This is a bitter pill. How many women’s consciousnesses are developed at the expense of their husbands’? Who were, or are, Mrs. Kosygin, Mrs. Nixon, etc.? — wives and reflected glory.

Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size. (Virginia Woolf.)

We should try our hardest to achieve a plan of concrete action on which we can establish unity with and for the vast numbers of women who are mainly only depressed by their oppression without understanding it, the women who when their mother role is played out are told by the doctor they are “going through the change of life”. How many of these cases are aggravated because these women have no need to stay at home any longer, but have been in domestic chains so long that their hands have become grafted to their chains. It is no wonder that so many middle-aged women in our communities, whose children have grown up and away from them, have become hypochondriacs and barbiturate swallowers.

Can anyone justify this incredible state of affairs? For my part, I recall the words of Christabel Pankhurst as a guide for action to change the situation:

Remember the dignity of your womanhood. Do not appeal, do not beg, do not grovel. Take courage, join hands, stand beside us, fight with us!