Socialist—Feminist Theory: An Appraisal
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The Women's Liberation Movement is nearing the end of its first decade of activity. What has particularly distinguished this second wave of feminism from its nineteenth and twentieth century counterparts is its awareness that a program of democratic rights plus integration into social production is not sufficient to establish full equality between the sexes. This is also what distinguishes the feminist political perspective from the traditional socialist program for women's emancipation.

The traditional socialist program relied heavily on the work of Engels (1884) who argued:

... the emancipation of women and their equality with men are impossible and must remain so 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. (1)

The first period of feminism was also influenced by classical liberal philosophy such as that of John Stuart Mill. Essentially this projected the granting of certain legal and economic rights to women but with the understanding that childbearing and privatised childcare was a vocation and one that was necessarily feminine.

Many early feminists argued that women were capable of both home and work; few argued that women were not at least responsible for the home, whatever potential they might develop in addition to this. (2)

Many feminists certainly recognised that the source of inequality was the patriarchal society they lived in. Yet their analysis of this, and their plans for its change was mainly based on economic independence for women.

Alexandra Kollontai, a remarkable feminist theorist and bolshevik, saw personal relationships as an essential part of each individual's experience, and as such, central to the struggle of each individual for a better life.

The three basic circumstances distorting the modern psyche — extreme egoism, the idea that married partners possess each other, and the acceptance of the inequality of the sexes in terms of physical and emotional experience — must be faced if the sexual problem is to be settled.

But Kollontai still held that entry into social production was the answer.

Only a change in the economic role of women, and her independent involvement in production, can and will bring about the weakening of these mistaken and hypocritical ideas. (3)

The position of the early feminists has been summarised by Ellen Du Bois:

We should understand the inability of nineteenth century feminists to develop
solutions adequate to the oppression of women less as a failure of their political imagination or boldness than as a reflection of the state of historical development of capitalism and of male supremacy. (4)

With the examples of several decades of socialist states, contemporary feminists, while recognising the many advantages socialist women have, still point to the many important shortcomings as evidence that economic and legal liberation do not necessarily entail feminist liberation, i.e. full sexual equality.

Barbara Ehrenreich has detailed the three major kinds of evidence of the persistence of sex inequality as:

1. occupational segregation by sex;
2. sexual objectification;
3. low representation of women in positions of political leadership. (5)

The other reason for the dissatisfaction of contemporary feminists with traditional theories of equality has been the “successes” of capitalism — at the time of the emergence of a feminist movement the socialist program of “integration into social production” had been achieved to a significant extent within capitalism.

Thus contemporary feminism began with the realisation that the solutions to sexual inequality lay not only in the realm of political economy, but in an area which had so far received little attention from political movements — the realm of private life. (6)

Betsey Stone (1970) states that in particular,

The rise of black nationalism, with its questioning of every aspect of society, was key in creating a political climate in which ... deep prejudices about women could be unmasked. (7)

What has been important is that marxist theory has been subjected to reappraisal by the feminist movement in its search for strategy for action. Socialist feminists within the women’s liberation movement have seen women’s liberation as an issue which transcends class.

Feminism offers important insights into relations of domination and submission which exist between other social groups, such as classes and ethnic groups. By its insistence on a politics which embraces both the “private” and the political/economic sphere, feminism points the way to a more comprehensive socialist politics for the industrial capitalist countries. (8)

Eisenstein argues that socialist feminism has a political and intellectual commitment to understanding the problems of women’s oppression in terms of a real synthesis between the traditions of marxist analysis and feminist theory.

This doesn’t mean merely adding one theory to the other, but rather redefining each through the conflict that derives from and between both traditions. (9)

From the outset it becomes important for feminists to have a clearly defined analysis of the term ‘patriarchy’. Kate Millett established that ‘patriarchy’ is a*universal (geographical and historical) mode of power relationships’ and domination. According to this thesis, Juliet Mitchell writes,

... patriarchy is the sexual politics whereby men establish their power and maintain control. All societies and all social groups within these are sexist in the fundamental sense that their entire organisation, at every level, is predicated on the domination of one sex by the other. Specific variations are less significant than the general truth. (10)

The term ‘patriarchy’ has been further refined as part of our particular historical/political conjuncture to ‘capitalist patriarchy’ — a term which emphasises the mutually reinforcing dialectical relationship between capitalist class structure and hierarchical sexual structuring. (11)

If the division of labor is based in capitalism then the sexual division of labor reflects both this basis and that of patriarchy.

The sexual division of labor and society expresses the most basic hierarchical division in our society between masculine and feminine role. It is the basic mechanism of control for patriarchal culture. It designates the fact that roles, purposes, activity, one’s labor, are determined sexually. It
expresses the very notion that the biological distinction, male/female, is used to distinguish social functions and individual power. (12)

Eisenstein argues that to the extent that the concern with profit and the concern with societal control are inextricably connected (but cannot be reduced to each other), patriarchy and capitalism become an integral process; specific elements of each system are necessitated by the other. (13)

Nancy Hartsock contends that, at bottom, feminism is a mode of analysis. The power of the method feminists develop grows out of the fact that it enables women to connect their everyday lives with an analysis of the institutions which shape them.

By calling attention to the specific experiences of individuals, feminism calls attention to the totality of social relations, to the social formation as a whole. (14)

This feminist mode of analysis makes revolution necessary, leads to an integration of theory and practice, and leads to a transformation of social relations. (15)

This type of assertion makes it imperative that socialist movements/parties re-evaluate programs and strategies which rely only on a class-based analysis of capitalism. Feminist analysis will continue to challenge the traditional socialist formula and insist on a new kind of politics embracing both the 'private' and the 'public', the cultural and the economic. (16)

This feminist assertion obviously does not go unchallenged by left/socialist groups. Yet socialist feminists believe that until a feminist analysis of patriarchy is part of the marxist analysis of capitalism, any revolution would end much as has already been observed. Feminists are thus developing and refining theory with the goal that to understand the process is to understand the way the process may be changed.

Juliet Mitchell has written that the ideology of 'woman' presents her as an undifferentiated whole. Likewise the 'family' is presented as a unit that ensures across time and space. Within its supposed permanent structure, eternal women finds her place.

The 'true' women and the 'true' family are images of peace and plenty: in actuality they may both be sites of violence and despair. (17)

Historically and cross-culturally, women's mothering has become a fundamentally determining feature of social organisation. Nancy Chodorow argues that just as the actual physical and biological requirements of childbearing and childcare were declining, women's mothering role gained psychological and ideological significance and came increasingly to dominate women's lives, outside the home as well as within it. (18)

Chodorow argues that women's mothering creates ideological and psychological modes which reproduce orientations to, and structures of, male dominance in individual men and builds an assertion of male superiority into the very definition of masculinity. (19)

Talcott Parsons claims that the 'stabilisation and tension-management of adult personalities' is a major family function. Chodorow argues that the more correct reading is that the wife/mother does the tension-management and stabilising and the husband/father is thereby soothed and steadied. This focus on women's social/emotional role leads us away from noticing that this 'role' is work. (20)

Even today few recognise that housework as we know it was born in advanced industrial society, reflecting the transformation of women who had been manufacturers, farmers, skilled teachers, and healers into small-scale janitors. (21)

Much analysis has focussed on women in the home, as unpaid worker, socialiser of children, stabiliser of other workers, and as reproducer. The biological function of reproduction has in turn been more thoroughly analysed from the perspective of women's sexuality and the demand for control over her body.

A large movement has centred on women's unpaid housework. This has resulted in thorough analysis of women in the family, and political demands for wages for housework. This movement seems to be particularly strong in the UK and North
America, its impact in Australia seems to be slight.

Silvia Federici in arguing the case for wages against housework says that not only has housework been imposed on women, but it has been transformed into a natural attribute of female physique and personality, an internal need, an aspiration, supposedly coming from the depths of the female character. Its unwaged condition has been the most powerful weapon in reinforcing the common assumption that housework is not work. As well, housework involves a peculiar combination of physical, emotional and sexual services which women are performing basically for capital.

Federici argues that to demand wages for housework is to expose the fact that housework is already money for capital:

that capital has made and makes money out of our cooking, smiling, fucking. (22)

Recognition of housework, which is still the primary identification of women, as a moment of capitalist production, clarifies women's specific function within the capitalist division of labor and, most importantly, the specific forms women's attack must take against it. (23)

Cox and Federici argue that the family is essentially the institutionalisation of women's wageless labor, of women's wageless dependence on men, and consequently, the institutionalisation of a division of power which has successfully functioned in disciplining women and men as well. (24)

One result of this is that women become repressive figures, disciplinarians of all the members of the family, ideologically and psychologically. (25)

The essence of capitalist ideology is to glorify the family as a 'private world', the last frontier where men and women 'keep (their) souls alive'. This ideology opposes the family (or the community) to the factory, the personal to the social, the private to the public, productive to unproductive work. It is totally functional to women's unpaid work in that it makes it appear as an act of love.
But the way the wage relation has mystified the social function of the family is an extension of the way capital mystifies waged labor and the subordination of all social relations to the 'cash nexus'. (26)

However, Eisenstein doesn’t believe that the major argument is whether domestic labor can be squeezed into the pre-existing categories of wage labor, surplus value and 'productive' work. Rather, she argues, women's revolutionary potential emanates from the very nature and organisation of the work as domestic work — both in its patriarchal and in its capitalist elements.

To the degree domestic labor is a sexual organisation of economic existence, it is a cross-class reality that affects all women. This is the feminist, political concern which is left out of much of the discussion of domestic labor when the pre-existing analytical categories of class take priority. (27)

Weinbaum and Bridges introduce another consideration of women's domestic labor when they argue that the emphasis is not on housework as a kind of 'production'. Rather it is that housewives' activity is largely a reflection of the fact that capital organises the manufacture of goods and the provision of services.

Their analysis focusses on consumption:

The work of consumption, while subject to and structured by capital, embodies the needs — material and non-material — most antagonistic to capitalist production; and the contradiction between private production and socially determined needs is embodied in the activities of the housewife. (28)

They argue that housewives' work is scheduled by capital and the state. They must work in relation to schedules developed elsewhere — and unco-ordinated with each other. The consumption worker unlike the wage laborer, has no singular and obvious antagonist, but many: the state, the supermarket, the landlord, etc. (29)

This makes mockery of the oft-repeated cry 'housewives are their own boss!'

However, women's role in consumption is constructed by capital in complex ways: capital organises the distribution of income to the household, and this largely determines the distribution of households into neighbourhoods; at the same time capital organises distribution of particular goods and services to particular areas.

Weinbaum and Bridges go on to analyse the revolutionary potential of community-based struggles around consumption demands. They view these demands as threatening bourgeois hegemony; although they may be accommodated, they serve as a practice in self-management, an important component in the socialist alternative. They demonstrate that the possibilities of organised action show the constraints on political activity within capitalism. Community and household-based demands, they believe, insist that production and provision of services be oriented to social needs, and thus embody values antithetical to capitalist production. (30)

However, they make it quite plain they are not so naive as to believe that all housewives are politically active, much less revolutionary!

Just as wage laborers may feel 'inadequate' because their earnings are low or because they are not promoted, so housewives may internalise contradictions which are structural. (31)

Weinbaum and Bridges provide another alternative to the argument that women must enter the productive sphere to become revolutionary. One feels that their analysis is particularly important because it provides marxists with a necessary link in organising the revolutionary potential of women each locked in her family as the chrysalis in the cocoon that imprisons itself by its own work, to die and leave silk for capital. (32)

Women's involvement in the workforce presents problems or contradictions which are based in women's role in the home. Women have traditionally moved into areas of work which represent extensions of their 'private' life — in service industries and boring, repetitive, low-paid work.

Heidi Hartmann argues that job segregation by sex is the primary mechanism in capitalist society that maintains the superiority of men over women, because it enforces lower wages for
women in the labor market. Low wages keep women dependent on men because they encourage women to marry. Married women must perform domestic chores for their husbands. This domestic division, in turn, acts to weaken women's position in the labor market. Thus the hierarchical domestic division of labor is perpetuated by the labor market, and vice versa. (33)

Hartmann cites the anthropological work of Sherry Ortner: “female is to male as culture is to nature”, culture devalues nature; females are associated with nature in all cultures and are thus devalued. This view is compatible with Rosaldo, whose emphasis is on the public/private split, and Levi Strauss who assumes the subordination of women during the process of the creation of society. (34)

Hartmann posits that the ability of men to organise themselves played a crucial role in limiting women’s participation in the wage-labor market, i.e. guilds; the rise of male and the elimination of female professions during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Through the formative period of industrial capitalism, men appear to have been better able to organise as wage workers, this organisational knowledge growing out of their position in the family and in the division of labor. (35)

This argument has a little of the chicken and the egg in it. However, Hartmann argues that, with the separation of work from the home, men became less dependent on women for industrial production, while women became more dependent on men economically. Men increased their control over technology, production and marketing, as they excluded women from industry, education and political organisation. (36)

Zaretsky also follows this line of analysis but concludes that capitalism exacerbated the sexual division of labor and created the appearance that women work for their husbands. In reality, women who did domestic work at home were working for capital. (37)

All these arguments lead back to a consideration of patriarchal culture, for the reasons why the inequality of the sexes became part of our society. Marxists and feminists have in the past few years turned to a rereading of Freud in their attempts to explain the cultural subordination of women.

Without attempting to present Freud's theories, or those of Lacan, it is relevant to present some marxist-feminist debate on their importance.

Critical of Freud's work are probably as diverse as its interpretations. Eva Figes argues that the one serious criticism that must be levelled at Freud is his inability to see beyond the immediate social situation, so that he is constantly confusing cause and effect, and his obstinate refusal to recognise that his own present day was itself transitional. In a very real sense he appears to have subscribed to a view of human progress in which the here and now was the ultimate goal and seems to have excluded any idea of further change beyond his own lifetime. (38)

Campionni argues that the basic tenets of the science of psychoanalysis are without any doubt scientific, and it depends on the interpretation of these how far we can keep these free from the intervention of sex/class interests. She views this task as being pre-eminently one for marxist feminists — to salvage the important scientific concepts from idealist or sexist interpretations. The important scientific concepts being primal repression and the castration complex. (39)

All that can be said is, as women, we cannot accept the specificity of this concept, since it refers to an anatomical destiny and an invariant patriarchal structure, which are clearly determined by economical/political/patriarchal structure and which are unacceptable to any feminist. (39)

Campionni insists on a historical materialist perspective in examining the theory of psychoanalysis to come to an understanding of the nature and function of ideology:

It is not psychoanalysis which ultimately explains the oppression of women (in their function of bearers of specific sexed relations, i.e. 'wives' and 'mothers' and 'daughters'), but their social relations which explain their psychology. (40)

While there is still debate over specific resolution of issues for women — both as issues which must be confronted within
capitalism, as issues facing socialist societies, and, ultimately, as questions facing future communist societies — there does exist a feminist consensus on certain principles. These may be summarised as follows:

1. The establishment of women’s reproductive freedom and physical integrity as inalienable rights (this includes the rights to abortion and contraception regardless of population policy).

2. A social commitment to the eradication of male dominance in all its manifestations — authoritarian relations within the family, the sexual objectification of women, stereotyped images of women in the media and culture and so on.

3. Reappraisal of women’s domestic labor, aimed at an increased social valuation of women’s necessary and productive work within the home giving economic security to women, an increased sharing of domestic labor between the sexes, and the socialisation of functions which can be more effectively and satisfactorily performed outside the home.

4. Democratic control over the commodity ensemble produced for domestic and private consumption with regard to quality, intrinsic use value and ideological content. (41)

5. An end to all economic exploitation and discrimination against women, including full access to all occupations, backed up by provision of full community-based childcare.

In attempting to weave together various analyses of society and future demands of a socialist society it is easy to impart the impression of general agreement between feminists. This is far from the truth. Not only do sharp and, at present, irreconcilable divisions exist between various groups (especially along party political lines) but socialist feminists within the women’s liberation movement are divided on strategy proposals.

This in many ways reflects the position women are in through the current economic ‘crisis’, when many of their gains are being eroded and the women’s movement generally is losing its perspective of growth and becoming very diverse.

What must not be lost sight of are the questions of the relationship between the personal and the political, of the importance placed on group process and means, and of the importance of theory being tied to practice. These all reflect the basic issue of how feminism and marxism can be synthesised in practice. (42)

Petchesky sees four critical relationships, and within these, the dynamic interconnections between the public and the private, production and reproduction, are surfacing in a concrete and historically precise way. These are:

1. The relationship between kinship, or the family, and clan structure. The various ways that family and kinship systems both reflect and help to reshape social relations outside the family.

2. The relationship between control over the means of reproduction (specifically sexuality and childbirth) and male power. An important instrument of patriarchal and capitalist/imperialist domination.

3. The relationship between patriarchal ideology and the state, its form and its legitimacy. We are beginning to learn how patriarchy underwrites state power. This involves the functions of dominant anti-woman ideologies such as the ‘double standard’, misogynistic pollution taboos, cults of motherhood, etc., as major legitimations for the ancient and modern bourgeois state.

4. The relationship between all this and women’s consciousness and the nature of revolutionary transformations. (43)

Feminist analysis is an ongoing debate. This debate is critical to the further development of the marxist-feminist analysis of women’s position under capitalism and their position under the socialism that we are yet to achieve.

How the working class will ultimately unite organisationally, we don’t know. We do know that up to now many of us have been told to forget our own needs in some wider interest which was never wide enough to
include us. And so we have learnt by bitter experience that nothing unified and revolutionary will be formed until each section of the exploited will have made its own autonomous power felt. (44)

13. Ibid, p. 27.
15. Ibid, p. 64.
34. Ibid, p. 209.
40. Ibid, p. 35.

Also:
Benston, M., The Political Economy of Women’s Liberation. No publication information.
Matriarchy Study Group, Menstrual Taboos, Community Press, London.