Discussion:

MEN AND WOMEN: EQUALITY AND DIFFERENCE

MAVIS ROBERTSON hopes her article (ALR No. 28) will "provoke some reaction". It has. This is not an attempt to lay down a programme for the Women's Liberation movement, but to dispose of some popular fallacies, and clear the ground for a constructive approach. Comrade Robertson rightly condemns the lunatic "anti-man" fringe of the movement, but seems inclined toward the more wide-spread and equally fallacious view that, to prove themselves equal to men, women must prove themselves almost identical with men.

Of course, no one denies that there are innate and incurable physiological differences between men and women. Dispute arises over psychological differences. Although Margaret Mead's researches on popular stereotypes of "masculinity" and "femininity" in various primitive cultures have shown that these differences are socially conditioned to a much greater extent than was previously believed, the question of how far they are innate, if at all, could only be certainly answered by observing how men and women develop and react to each other in a society in which there is no social, educational, economic or political discrimination between the sexes. There being no such society, most people tend to answer purely on the basis of prejudice and wishful thinking, taking the question outside the scope of rational discussion.

A true Marxist approach must be based on such objective criteria as are available, and be subject to frequent review in the light of new knowledge and experience. Cde Robertson thinks Engels failed to explain sufficiently why women came to their present inferior position. Maybe so; but the explanation is not to be sought in "the extent to which the reproductive role of women limited their mobility and, at a particular historic stage, made them vulnerable" to a wicked conspiracy by men to enslave them. Conspiracies on such a vast scale do not occur.

Rather, privileged classes become established by distorting some already existing social relationship and perpetuating it long after it has outlived its usefulness to the rest of society, being powerfully assisted in this by the firm belief of the average man (and woman) that he (or she) happened to enter the world at the precise time and place at which moral philosophy attained ultimate perfection. Cde Robertson's analysis also fails to explain what she calls "the myth that only men can do hard work". All other privileged groups in history have considered themselves divinely ordained for intellectual or heroic pursuits, leaving heavy manual labour to the "lower orders". Surely, even the most extreme feminists would hardly regard a morbid love of hard yakka as one of the peculiarly masculine vices?

The female of all mammalian species, including man, is vulnerable during her gestation and lactation periods, not only to aggressive individuals of her own species, but also to predators and competitors. Most such species, again including man, have met this threat to their survival by evolving a protective instinct of the male towards the female, which among some peoples has developed into chivalry. While feminists are justified in objecting to the kind
of “chivalry” that costs them a large cut in salary, they would be ill advised to try to outlaw chivalry altogether; it represents too deep-seated an instinct to be repressed completely without serious neurotic consequences.

Further, woman's "vulnerability" is due, not only to her "restricted mobility", but perhaps even more to the rather drastic modifications to her skeleton and musculature necessitated by her child-bearing function, rendering her much less mechanically efficient than man, and therefore less well adapted to such pursuits as hunting and fighting. Primitive tribes who depended on their hunting prowess to stave off the constant threat of starvation, and were subject to frequent attack by large carnivores and by rival hordes of hominids, had to develop a division of labour whereby the women, children and physically handicapped men performed all the necessary tasks of which they were physically capable, leaving the able-bodied men free to devote their superior athletic prowess entirely to the chase and to defence against predators and competitors. Such a division of labour persists even into modern times among nomadic hunting peoples such as the Australian and American Aborigines. This division of labour reinforced the condition that brought it about, for natural selection favoured the tribes with the strongest and swiftest males. Woman, having less need of great strength and speed in the performance of her normal tasks, was left behind in this development. This accounts for the great disparity between men's and women's records in nearly all branches of athletics.

This real inferiority of women in the performance of certain tasks led rather naturally, if not very logically, to a wide-spread impression that women were inferior to men in a more general sense also. The development of agriculture had little effect on the drudgery of “women's work”, but gave men more leisure for cultural pursuits. Probably this factor, rather than any innate difference, accounts for men's traditional supremacy in most of the arts and sciences.

It would be most remarkable, however, if an evolutionary process that produced such profound physiological differences failed to give rise to innate psychological differences between the sexes, to fit them for their different roles in both the reproductive and the economic processes. Psychometrists have found such differences, but feminists brush them aside as the result of social conditioning. This is probably only a small part of the truth. It is not hard to relate most of the observed psychological differences between the sexes to their different roles in primitive society, and, since our ancestors lived in such societies for tens of thousands of generations, innate characteristics evolved during that period can hardly have changed perceptibly during the few hundred generations since they began to form agricultural settlements, still less through half a dozen or so generation of urban industry.

"Women's work" being at least as essential as men's though often less spectacular, it is not surprising that women are, on the average, superior to men in some forms of mental ability and of skilled labour, though inferior in others. They are also less prone to violent crime, military heroism and other forms of hooliganism, though more prone to such passive vices as unquestioning obedience to unreasonable authority rules and regulations. Women's liberationists, then rather than try to imitate men, should insist that, in a world tending more and more toward drab uniformity, it is a matter for rejoicing that there is at least one delightful difference that can by no means be eliminated.
Man's claim to supremacy on the basis of superior athletic prowess is out­dated in an age when the athlete is purely ornamental, the hunter an anachron­ism, the unskilled labourer a poor substitute for a machine, and the warrior an unmitigated pest. Moreover, tertiary sex differences are mostly a matter of averages rather than absolutes: some men are better fitted for some kinds of "women's work" than most women, and vice versa. In an era when the very survival of our species is menaced by our command of forces of nature threat­ening to outstrip our ability to manage them intelligently, we dare not waste any kind of intellectual ability because it comes in the same package as the "wrong" sex, pigmentation, accent or what have you.

In short, equality does not mean identity or egalitarianism, but equal opportu­nity for all, whether male or female, black or white, highbrow or lowbrow, to find the niche in life best suited to their abilities and ambitions. This can only be fully realised in a society freed of all exploitation, oppression and discrim­ination; but, in working for the maximum possible degree of women's liberation within existing society, we can help to burst its bonds and build a new and free world.

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PATERNALISM ON WOMEN'S LIBERATION

IT IS WITH REGRET that I cross swords with my old Queensland comrade, Ted Bacon, who, I am certain, over many years has given sterling service to the Communist Party Women's Committee in that state. However, in seeking to refute charges of paternalism in the work and attitudes of the C.P. (Judy Gillett and Betty Fisher, ALR No. 28), Ted exudes paternalism in almost every paragraph. Further, having charged Gillett and Fisher with a failure to carry out a concrete analysis of the position, he himself commits that very crime in the next two paragraphs.

To assert that "apparently only women (and selected women at that) are regarded as competent to speak about a major revolutionary task concerning both men and women, though some men may perhaps qualify if, like Marx and Engels, they are dead or if they are non-Communist", is a travesty of reality. The days of "selected" women were in the past, and current practices are putting an end to this, as the very well-attended discussions among women held over the past six months in Sydney and elsewhere will testify. Many of these women, like me, have not had such opportunity for years to participate in discussion and policy-making as is currently available to us, and to the men in at least two of the discussion I have attended. And did men in fact speak up very much in the Good Old Days on this subject? Peruse the files of the Communist Review Ted, and you'll find the same old things being said, at the appropriate times, by much the same people, nearly all women.

The other feature of the current situation which is exhilarating to large numbers of party women is that today new and truly revolutionary things are being said. Perhaps they are often said in crude, abrupt, one-sided ways, but they are just as often mature, considered and scientific. At all events, the emphasis is on a Marxist approach, and in the tremendous upheaval going on at present in the thinking of women, for the first time in my experience (and I read Origin of the Family 30 years ago), we are getting deeper than lip-service. We have rejected the paternalism which said that women are half