THE DILEMMAS OF FEMINISM AND SOCIAL THEORY

Reviewed by Joyce Stevens

SUBORDINATION Feminism and Social Theory by Clare Burton. George Allen & Unwin, 1985. $8.95 paperback, 168 pages.

In Subordination Clare Burton attempts a very difficult project—a summary of the main socialist feminist theoretical debates which took place during the 'seventies, while adding some insights of her own. Inevitably, Subordination also raises issues still troubling socialist feminists and, as well as extending the theoretical discussion, suggests areas for women's political concentration and struggle today.

There are, of course, limitations to what a short book can do in summarising such debates, and it is also evidence of the volatile nature of these issues that some of the frameworks have altered since the end of the 'seventies.

Burton's main thesis about the nature of subordination is linked to studies of anthropology and the search for the origins of women's oppression as well as to theories on the family and domestic labour, psychoanalysis, the state and educational practices and feminist policies.

The central element to her thesis is that "the situation of women is not to be accounted for simply in terms of the immediate economic requirements of a particular system. Shifting attention from modes of production to processes of social reproduction makes possible a more comprehensive study of the processes of gender reconstruction."

She also draws conclusions about a number of other contentious issues among socialist feminists. For example, she asserts that "differences between women of different classes and within different parts of the working class are more significant than their common gender identity. She gives primacy neither to the family nor to the labour process in investigating women's oppression, and argues that gender and class are so inextricably linked that neither can assume a determining or primary place.

She also states that while the "intersections of marxist and feminist concerns have been extremely fruitful", it has also revealed the need for lines of inquiry that are more broadly conceived than either tradition has allowed in the past.

While warning against those who hope to find the ultimate answer to all problems of subordination in past societies, Burton nevertheless draws on the work of anthropologists and engages in a discussion on the differing ways Engels' Origin of the Family has been understood or interpreted by feminists.

These chapters are very important to the central themes of the book and occupy an important relationship to the basic theoretical assumptions.

In one sense, it is difficult to engage this particular section of the book unless one is also well versed in anthropological theories. This reviewer, for example, is unable to discuss whether the works chosen for discussion are an adequate representation of conflicting theories or whether a more detailed reading of the researchers chosen would lead me to the same conclusions that the author has reached.

While acknowledging my own inadequacies in this area, I must also confess that I was unconvincing on the evidence provided that "the male-female relationship can now be released from a determining position in relationship to social production."

The main reason Burton gives for this conclusion is that "it has not been convincingly demonstrated that men's control over biological reproduction, or the allocation of children to groups, is indispensable for the reproduction of society in the general sense ...."

Conversely, one might well ask whether it has been convincingly demonstrated that such control is not connected to social reproduction, and whether we should not maintain some elements of uncertainty.

This question is strengthened by the slight attention devoted to male control over female sexuality and whether there is any necessary connection between this control and modes of production or economic factors. In some ways, this question lies at the heart of radical feminist challenges to traditional marxist and socialist ways of explaining the world and must at least be convincingly dealt with when suggesting ways of understanding women's subordination.

As it is, Burton refutes the suggestion that women's oppression has been universal and considers that the basis of subordination is, as Engels indicated; "the existence of categories of people in different relationships to 'private property'."

In advancing our understanding of this, she suggests that we must adopt a complex method of analysis for which neither feminism nor marxism has, so far, provided the framework.

She suggests a critical need to shift attention "from production to social reproduction". The crucial role of ideology is acknowledged and the argument advanced that "occupational segregation and the social sexual division of labour with its
accompanying constructions of masculinity and femininity are deeply embedded in the process of capital accumulation, but also in the legitimation of capitalism as an economic and social form."

The family, domestic labour, psychoanalysis, education and the functions of the state are discussed in order to broaden the framework for looking at subordination.

Burton suggests that we must move beyond the feminist theory that has been uncritical in assuming "that the male necessarily benefits from the family institution". "The link between family and work must be explored," she states, "using research methods which assume a complex, even contradictory and amibalent response to the social world." Some of this, at least, has been done since Subordination was conceived in the debate in the United States around "Bringing it all back home" (See ALR, No. 80, 1982) and in Barrett and McIntosh's The Anti-Social Family.

In discussing the state, Burton suggests that we must look beyond policies and strategies that are directly related to women because women's interests are often bound up with more general policies and legal processes. The state is seen as a social process which is, to some extent, shaped by struggle and demands which require a broader feminist input.

The undoubted additional power enjoyed by some middle class women is referred to, and feminist struggles, it is suggested, do not necessarily represent the interests of working class women.

This is, in my view, a controversial way of attempting to discuss the class differences among women (even to attempt to establish what is middle class and what working class is not easy). But to pose the problem in the way suggested above may obscure rather than clarify.

It is difficult to know which of the feminist struggles did/do not necessarily represent the interests of working class women — opposition to rape, for women's refuges and health centres, for fertility control and abortion, the development of public awareness of incest, for child care or equal pay, improvements in the legal and social rights of lesbians, for the right to work and in all occupations?

It could well be argued that some of these, or others, did not represent the immediate priorities of working class women and that women benefited from achievements in an unequal way.

For example, there are some (probably a small minority of) tertiary-educated women who have accrued additional advantages from the feminist movement — opposition to rape, for women's refuges and health centres, for fertility control and abortion, the development of public awareness of incest, for child care or equal pay, improvements in the legal and social rights of lesbians, for the right to work and in all occupations?

The final sections of Burton's book take up a range of necessary priorities for feminists to pursue, including the importance of various forms of social legislation and the need to attack the sexual division of labour through the involvement of men in child nurturing.

"It is not childbirth," Burton concludes, "physical weakness, or any other presumed biologically determined differences that are the basis of women's subordination within capitalist societies. It is the social allocation to women of responsibilities for children. The obstacles to changing this connection lie within the capitalist system of production, the vicious circle of sex-segregated work and the division of labour within the household."

Subordination is a useful addition to the debates engaging socialist feminists. The complexity of the issues confronting us are duly acknowledged and it will help to fuel, in a constructive way, the ongoing debate.

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Parallel Paths from page 55.

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