

SEVEN

Women and Capitalism: Dialectics of Oppression and Liberation

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I

Women's liberation recently has been placed on the social agenda in America with a forcefulness and extensiveness that has few historical precedents. The new content and contours of the women's movement are doubtlessly attributable in part to its emergence within, and often in unavoidable opposition to, other social struggles. The expulsion of the proponents of a resolution on women from an SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] convention of the late sixties foreshadowed what would later become a self-imposed isolation. This isolation was at once organizational, theoretical, and developmental. Part of the movement's force and effectiveness has certainly been a function of its intensive focus on sexual oppression. Moreover, the organization of autonomy was an indispensable prerequisite for a clear formulation of the myriad problems surrounding male supremacy in general. At the same time, however, this isolation fostered a tendency to proclaim the socio-historical primacy of women's oppression over class, national, and racial oppression; and in the process this isolation itself was exaggerated.

In its conceptions and goals, the women's liberation movement is not homogeneous. Its decentralized organizational forms, while genuinely anti-authoritarian in intent, simultaneously reflect pronounced, even irreconcilable, theoretical differences within. Yet, in the midst of this

diversity, the predominant tendency of the more militant sector is probably represented by Robin Morgan when she invokes "the profoundly radical analysis beginning to emerge from revolutionary feminism: that capitalism, imperialism, and racism are *symptoms* of male supremacy – sexism.¹ Therefore, Morgan continues, "more and more, I begin to think of a worldwide Revolution as the only hope for life on the planet."² The potential impact of widespread female involvement and leadership in oppositional, even revolutionary, political practice should not be underestimated. Yet, the point of departure for this practice, typified by Morgan's words, has not promoted harmonious relations with other important struggles. It is against the backdrop of the unresolved tension between black liberation and women's liberation that the latter's failure to attract more than a negligible number of black women needs to be analyzed.³

The women's movement, as consensus has it, found its most enthusiastic adherents among young, "middle-class" white women. Intrusions of supremacy, as they were gradually brought to light, furnished, for the vast majority, the only conscious experience of the immediacy of social opposition. This may have exacerbated a theoretical inability to discover the threads connecting female oppression to the other visible social antagonisms. It hardly needs to be said that the view which accounts for class exploitation, colonial expansion, national and racial domination as symptoms of male authority has not tackled, but rather has dodged the problem.

Such a weakness – and from a Marxist viewpoint, it *is* considered weakness – attests to an inadequate theoretical basis. But it may well have a deeper, more fundamental origin. For the identical problem of uncovering the mutual interpenetration of ostensibly unrelated modes of oppression can be detected within almost every radical movement of the contemporary era. A prototypical instance is the difficult question, yet unresolved in practice, of the relation between racism and national oppression on the one hand and exploitation at the point of production on the other.

The acute disjunction of social struggles among themselves has tended to reduplicate a larger process. This is to say, it reflects the increasingly pointed and omnipresent fragmentation of capitalist social relations in an era of advanced technology.

The following reflections, however, will not include an extensive discussion of the composition of the present women's movement nor of

the larger societal influences to which it is subject. Rather, they will concentrate on a less sweeping and more narrowly theoretical problem. I will seek to inferentially discover in the works of Karl Marx, after establishing his early sensitivity to the problem, the broad outlines of women's oppression and its socio-historical development. Within the framework of Marx's theoretical reconstruction of history, I will attempt to specify the ways in which the subjugation of women and their ideological relegation to the sphere of nature were indissolubly wedded to the consolidation of capitalism.

The historical development of women's oppression is a highly interesting problem. However, I chose this approach for other reasons as well – reasons related to current theoretical controversies within the women's liberation movement itself. The exponents of the theory that sexual conflict is the matrix of all other social antagonisms frequently rely on historical arguments. Kate Millett, among others, has generous recourse to the notion that the male's enslavement of the female produced the first critical cleavage of human society. According to her method, all subsequent modes of domination are direct outgrowths of this primordial conflict.⁴

Human history is far more complex than this. Unlike the sphere of nature, from which it definitively differentiates itself during its capitalist phase, history evinces few simple causal relationships. Marx made, in fact, his most significant contribution when he ferreted out the deeper meaning of history and laid the basis for theoretical categories whose abstraction would not violate the profound complexities of human development.

Alongside awesome but increasingly irrational technological achievements, women filter through the prevailing ideology as anachronisms. Men (i.e., males) have severed the umbilical cord between themselves and nature. They have deciphered its mysteries, subdued its forces, and have forged their self-definition in contradistinction to the nature they have conquered. But women are projected as embodiments of nature's unrelenting powers. In their alienated portrait, women are still primarily undifferentiated beings – sexual, childbearing, natural. Thus Erik Erikson evokes female self-realization as a function of the “somatic design [which] harbors an ‘inner space’ destined to bear the offspring of chosen men, and with it, a biological, psychological, and ethical commitment to take care of human infancy.”⁵

As instinct is opposed to reflection, as receptivity and gratification are opposed to activity and domination, so the "female principle" is presumptuously (although sometimes in a utopian vein) counterposed to the "male principle." In the epoch of bourgeois rule, a recurring ideological motif proclaims women to be firmly anchored in nature's domain.

Such a characterization of women cannot escape the general ambivalence inherent in the bourgeois perception of nature. Nature is posited as hostility, mysterious inexorability, a resistance to be broken. In the Hobbesian model, human beings, left in the state of nature, are locked in a *bellum omnium contra omnes*. External nature and human nature alike must be conquered by science, industry, the state – and yet other social forces. Because the domination of nature by man has involved also, and above all, the domination of human being by human being, this vision of nature has been persistently accompanied by its own contradiction.

Nature is also portrayed as the realm of original innocence, the never-to-be-retrieved paradise of play, happiness, and peace. In its utopian dimensions, nature has come forth as an implicit – albeit too impotent – denunciation of social repression and the interminable antagonisms of capitalist society.

The ideology of femininity is likewise fraught with contradictions. It is an indictment of the capitalist performance principle⁶ and simultaneously one of its targets. As nature, women must be at once dominated and exalted. So, for instance, the toiling black women who populate the novels of William Faulkner are worshipped by virtue of their innocent and unfathomable communion with nature. Here, however, the utopian projection of women as nature loses its progressive content. Under the impact of racism, it emerges as a thinly veiled endorsement of oppression. The authentic but naive utopian implications of a great many portraits of women are not to be ignored. But generally even these are objectively and ultimately based in ideology, although as art they may be a critique and indictment of society. The non-ideological, perhaps revolutionary function of the female as antithesis to the performance principle remains a problem to be explored.

The hypostasized notion that woman, as contrasted with man, is only a creature of nature, is blatantly false and a camouflage for the social subjugation women daily experience. But even in its falsity, there is also

a hidden truth: the real oppression of women today is inextricably bound up with the capitalist mode of appropriating and mastering nature.

The definition of women as nature is ideology; it was engendered by and is a response to real conditions of oppression. As illusory consciousness, it is a distorted and obscuring representation of reality. It distorts the oppression of women by making it appear innocuous. It is at once a hint of what human relations might eventually become and a mockery of those relations. Finally, it obscures the whole history of a painful struggle between human beings and nature, the peculiar effect of this struggle on women – and specifically, on the women of the laboring classes.

In a critical, non-ideological sense, women are indeed natural beings; men, however, are equally natural. When Marx states that human beings are natural beings, this fact assumes a very precise dialectical meaning. For, armed with their biological powers and drives, living as they do in and through nature, human beings can only survive by *acting upon and transforming* the material of nature. Thus, “labor is a natural condition of human existence, a condition of material interchange between men and nature quite independent of the form of society.”⁷ In the course of collectively modifying nature – and labor is always social – human beings create and transform their own human nature.

Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (1844) describes the “essence” of human beings as consisting in their active, creative relationship to nature through labor. In a correctly organized society, the young Marx contends, social labor would creatively appropriate external nature as the “inorganic body of man [and woman].” External nature would be humanized and the vast potential of human nature could simultaneously unfurl.

The relationships of human beings among themselves are caught up in the process which defines the human posture toward nature. Uniquely crystallized in the female–male bond is the distance human beings have traveled in this process and specifically how far they have gone in awakening the slumbering powers within themselves.

The immediate, natural, necessary relationship of human being to human being is the *relationship of man to woman*. In this *natural* species-relationship man’s relationship to nature is immediately his relationship to man, as his relationship to man is immediately his relationship to

nature, to his own *natural* condition. In this relationship the extent to which the human essence has become nature for man or nature has become the human essence of man is *sensuously manifested*, reduced to a perceptible fact. From this relationship one can thus judge the entire level of mankind's development. From the character of this relationship follows the extent to which man has comprehended himself as a *generic* being, as *man*; the relationship of man to woman is the *most natural* relationship of human being to human being. It thus indicates the extent to which man's *natural* behavior has become *human* or the extent to which his human *essence* has become a *natural* essence for him. In this relationship is also apparent the extent to which man's *need* has become *human*, thus the extent to which the *other* human being, as human being, has become a need for him, the extent to which he in his most individual existence is at the same time a social being.⁸

This passage may not be immediately transparent. It presupposes a knowledge of the categories Marx used in developing the anthropology of the 1844 *Manuscripts* – and this is not the place to elaborate on them in any detail.⁹ The reproduction of this passage is nevertheless essential; it reveals that the young Marx construed the male–female bond to be a central ingredient of the social complex which must be overturned and remolded by the revolutionary process.

The *most natural* (in this sense, biologically necessary) relationship of human beings among themselves is that between woman and man. But human beings are not inexorably yoked to their biological constitution. Sexual activity, among other activities, can acquire a wealth of social meaning entirely lacking in its abstract, purely biological form. The woman–man union, in all its dimensions, is very much mutable and always subject to social transformation. But as long as social production takes place within the fetters of capitalist relations – as long as the appropriation of nature means the exploitation of human beings – this union between the sexes remains stunted and misshapen.

The worker's alienation has immediate consequences for the relationship between the sexes and, most significantly, for the woman herself. The products of labor are lost to the worker, who has brought them. He cannot creatively affirm himself as he works. He thus "feels he is acting freely only in his animal functions – eating, drinking and procreating . . . while in his human functions he feels only like an animal."¹⁰ To be sure, eating, drinking and procreation are genuine human functions. In abstraction, however, and separated from the remaining sphere of

human activities and turned into final and sole ends, they are animal functions.¹¹

The implications for the woman who shares in these activities and ministers to her man's needs are formidable. Compelled to make only minimal contributions, or none whatsoever, to social production – not even in and through the alienated patterns of work – she is effectively reduced to the status of a mere *biological* need of man.

An unmistakable inference of Marx's early theory of alienation may be formulated: a critical and *explicit* mission of communism must be to shatter and recast sexual and marital relations, as production itself is transformed. It is essential, of course, that a new, more human, more creative posture toward external nature be adopted. But the man–woman union will always be disfigured unless the woman has liberated herself *as woman*. It will only be radically remolded when she is no longer defined as if she were a natural prolongation of man. The woman must first break out of the female–male union. Only then can she and man come together on a new basis, both experiencing an equal and authentically human need for one another.

This brief discussion of the 1844 *Manuscripts* has served to establish that Marx directly addressed himself – albeit not systematically – to certain dimensions of women's oppression. The bulk of this paper will be concerned with Marx's historical approach to nature and its implications for women's oppression and future liberation. A few preparatory remarks about the transition from the early to the later thought are in order.

The early writings develop the idea that the capitalist ordering of social production has erected an insurmountable hurdle between the worker on the one hand and the material and products of labor on the other. This is equivalent to saying that the human being has been severed from nature and thus, for the young Marx, from his own "inorganic body." The creative interaction with nature is the keystone of human nature. Capitalism disrupts this unity, giving rise to a non-identity between man and his essence. Communism would be the return of man to his essence, "the genuine [definitive] resolution of the antagonism between man and nature, and between man and man."¹²

The mature Marx is far more conscious of the complexity of the human being/nature relationship and its thorough-going historical character. The notion of nature – the material and fruits of labor – as the inorganic body of the human being is discovered to be a peculiar

characteristic of pre-capitalist modes of production. This relationship is historically localized as the *naive unity* which binds the pre-capitalist producer to the earth and to other natural conditions of production.¹³

As general background for the remarks which follow, it should be borne in mind that in the later writings, communism is not projected as definitively eradicating the tension between the human being and nature. Social antagonisms rising out of class society are abolished. But labor, insofar as it is *necessary* labor, will always contain an element of restraint and unfreedom.¹⁴ The vestiges of non-identity between humans and nature can never be dissolved unless technology creates a radical metamorphosis at the heart of production itself. In any event, unless and until all work is creative and unrestrained, human beings will have to seek their self-realization, in large part, outside the realm of social production. It is precisely the communist reorganization of production that permits them to do this. In anticipation, it may therefore be proposed that the *full* emancipation of women must ultimately also transcend the goal of her full and equal participation in a new and reorganized system of production.

II

Labor, in the Marxian conception, is a "natural condition of human existence."¹⁵ In exploring the character of women's oppression during the phase of history preceding bourgeois ascendancy, the pre-capitalist function of labor should be revealing. The economic formation in question may be communal landed property, free petty land ownership, slavery, or serfdom; in all these cases, labor is geared by and large toward the production of *use-value*.

The purpose of this labour is not the *creation of value* . . . Its purpose is the maintenance of the owner and his family as well as the communal body as a whole. The establishment of the individual as a worker, stripped of all qualities except this one, is itself a product of *history*.¹⁶

Or, in slightly different words, "the object of production itself is to reproduce the producer in and together with [the] objective conditions of his existence."¹⁷ (The slave and serf are treated as "inorganic conditions of production," as animals or as appendages of the land; yet,

even as they are dominated, they and their communities are in possession of the means of their subsistence and enter into corresponding social relations among themselves.)¹⁸

Labor is stimulated by need; its product travels a more or less uninterrupted path towards consumption. Labor functions, therefore, as a natural mediator between external nature and the human community.¹⁹ Considering the character of their labor, pre-capitalist epochs, even the most advanced, retain certain structural features reminiscent of subhuman natural "societies." (It is, of course, capitalism which is always the measuring rod.) Thus when Marx characterizes the earth during those phases as a "natural laboratory," the community as a "natural community," the as "natural family," he is by no means romanticizing pre-capitalist history.

Through production, the needs of the community are projected onto nature; external nature is the "inorganic body" of the community.²⁰ The community, in turn, always bears the stamp of nature, for it is subject, in a fundamental way, to naturally imposed limitations. In appearance, the community and family are natural phenomena – eternal and indifferent to the designs of human beings. Women and men confront collective life, family life, not as human products, but rather as unchangeable preconditions of human existence. Such is the meaning of Marx's contention that whenever labor is bound, in the last instance, to agriculture, social production will always be locked in a natural unity with state, community, and family relations. This holds true with equal force where cities and city labor are ultimately dependent on agriculture.

Against this backdrop, the "natural" roles and the "natural" oppression of the women of these periods take on a significance which transcends the mere fact of their biological constitution. It is certainly conceivable that childbearing and other physiological factors might be the immediate basis for certain social roles carrying the mark of inferiority. But it is not entirely inconceivable that under different conditions these factors could be more or less unrelated to social inferiority. Moreover, even if women's oppression bore no clear relation to biological considerations, it would not, for this reason, be lacking in "natural" dimensions.

Evidence does indicate, however, that during pre-capitalist periods, women, as a rule, were socially tied to their reproductive role. A cluster of child-centered activities attached themselves to the biological fact of

maternity. The woman's attachment to the child tended to confine her to the domestic sphere. This allowed, in turn, for the evolution of a whole host of uniquely female household tasks. But even here, her roles were not determined by biological causation. Other and different *social* modes of coping with then insurmountable biological constants were not necessarily excluded from the realm of possibility. Had they arisen, they too, would have been both bound to and independent of natural determination.

Although not rigidly and biologically predetermined, a *sexual* division of labor asserted itself throughout capitalism's pre-history. In those primitive formations where, for example, hunting was necessary, this was generally outside the woman's domain. Likewise her roles were usually limited in those communities maintaining themselves through the military defense of their land.²¹ War is here, in Marx's words, "the great communal labor."²² Perhaps because of what Juliet Mitchell has termed the woman's lesser capacity for violence,²³ military activity was largely performed by the community's male members. Even when the division of labor reached levels of a far greater complexity, women's labor still remained sharply distinguished from the men's.

There are two important points to be made about the pre-capitalist character of women's labor and their related social status. First, the sexual division of labor does not militate against a greater unity – a unity which asserts itself in and through this separation. Because labor is bound up with the community's and family's *needs*, the differences between female and male labor are not *qualitative* in character. The woman's labor in and around the domestic quarters was equally essential and equally constitutive of social production. Recognizing that she experienced intense and drastic forms of oppression, it still remains that she was not exiled from *social production in general*. Rather she was barred from certain *concrete* forms of labor.²⁴

Secondly, insofar as the woman was anchored to a relation of servitude, she was unable to attain a critical posture from which to perceive the real meaning of this relation. Her status and attendant oppression was coated with a nature-like inexorability. And what is most important, such an attitude had its objective complement in the prevailing mode of existence. Part of her oppression consisted in her inability to contest her inferior role. The antagonisms inherent in the male-female union tended to remain dormant, lacking the *social* level which would permit their penetration into consciousness.

In a rigorous sense, the peculiar status and oppression of women during pre-capitalist history functioned not so much as a *result* of the prevailing modes of production, but rather as a concrete *precondition* of production. This does not vitiate the material origin of the status of women; the relation is formulated in this way in order to capture the blurred unity between production and the oppression of women. As Marx notes: "Where landed property and agriculture form the basis of the economic order . . . , the economic object is the production of use-values, i.e., the *reproduction of the individual* in certain definite relationships to this community, of which it forms the basis" (Marx's emphasis).²⁵

In respect to women in particular, the economy was colored by and tended to support the existing structure of woman's oppression in an equally great or even greater degree than her oppression was determined by the particular mode of production.

In the earliest primitive communities, so Marx infers, the division of labor required for production must have been synonymous with "the division of labour in the sexual act."²⁶ Marx goes on to say (in *The German Ideology*) that during history's most primitive epochs, the social relations of production in general were the same as the social relations incorporated in the family. Certainly as more advanced economic formations evolve, natural relations are socially modified; yet Marx insisted that before the dawn of the explosive forces rushing in the direction of capitalism, natural limitations decisively conditioned men and women's entire social life.

There prevailed a natural interpenetration of individual, family, community, and even the state on the one hand, and social production on the other. Marx observes, for example, that in a rural patriarchal form of manufacture, "when spinner and weaver lived under the same roof – the women of the family spinning and the men weaving, say, for the requirements of the family – the product of labor bore the specific imprint of the family relation with its naturally evolved division of labour."²⁷

In all pre-capitalist formations, according to George Lukács, "natural relations – both in the case of the 'metabolic changes' between man and nature and also in the relations between men – retained the upper hand and dominated man's social being."²⁸ Alfred Schmidt maintains:

Pre-bourgeois development had a peculiarly unhistorical character because in it the material prerequisites of labour – the instrument as well as the

material – were not themselves the *product* of labour, but were found already to hand in the land, in nature, from which the active subject as well as the community to which it belonged did not essentially differentiate themselves. Under capitalism, however, these subjective and objective conditions of production became something created by the participants in history. Relationships were no longer determined by nature but *set up* by society.²⁹

During the pre-capitalist phase of history, women's oppression, strictly construed, was heavily enshrouded in a natural determination not yet superseded or transformed by socio-historical forces. It experienced a corresponding transformation when capitalist society broke onto the scene of history. Then, it, like capitalist social relations in general, would also be *set up* by society.

III

While the pre-capitalist subjugation of women is related to socially insurmountable natural imitations, these limitations are articulated through socially prescribed roles. Highly interesting, in this connection, is the brutally unique situation into which black women were thrust during American slavery.³⁰ With the rise of capitalism and the subordination of slavery to an incipient commodity economy, black men and women were treated ruthlessly and literally as “inorganic conditions of production” (to use the term with which Marx describes the economic function of slaves). Other forms of slavery merely stamped with the mark of inferiority the social relations of slaves among themselves. But the American system demanded the almost total prohibition of an endemic social life within the community of slaves.

American slavery was not a natural economy based primarily on consumption; its goal was rather the production of commodities. The slaveholding class expressed its drive for profit by seeking the maximum extraction of surplus labor in utter disregard to the age or sex of the slave. Even very real biological limitations were frequently little more than occasions for flogging. As reported in slave narratives, special forms of punishment were meted out to pregnant women who were unable to meet the prescribed work pace. In some instances, a hole was carved in the ground permitting a pregnant woman to lie in a prone position while she was flogged by the overseer.

The family was either nonexistent or its sole and unmediated purpose was to produce future forgers of profit. It is true that the black woman was responsible for the domestic chores of the slave quarters. Yet, this role was not integrated into an overall structure articulating her dependence vis-à-vis the black man. External economic compulsions brought her into an equal partnership in oppression with the man. As a result, the black woman was not systematically molded into an inferior being insofar as the internal workings of the slave community – the relations of the slaves among themselves – were concerned.

This did not prevent the slave system from aspiring to foist upon her the putative inferiority of the woman. The use of her body as a breeding instrument and its sexual violation by the slave-holder were institutional assertions of the lower rank of the female slave. But this oppression was not part of a naturally conditioned order and was thus significantly different in structure from its pre-capitalist counterpart. As overt social coercion, the oppression of black women in slavery could not conceal its contingent social character.

IV

The American slave system was a notable exception in the world historical rise of capitalism. In its peculiar subordination to a commodity economy, it could only have arisen where incipient conditions of capitalism already prevailed. In the broadest sense, as Marx points out, it is the impact of economic exchange on a progressively large scale which overturns old structures and paves the way for the “free” wage laborer – the *sine qua non* of capitalism.

The ingression of exchange, when it occurs, begins to undermine fundamentally and drastically the entire texture of human life. As the central prerequisite for the genesis of capital, labor-power itself, like the products of labor, was eventually reduced to a universally exchangeable commodity. But first the producer had to be decisively severed from the land, from his implements of production, as well as from his control over the means of subsistence.³¹ And the natural bonds tying producer to producer, family structures included, had to be deprived of their seemingly objective and necessary mode of existence. Their relationship to production had to take on a contingent appearance. This is to say, the reproduction of the community of producers, and of the family as

its unit, could no longer be presumed to be the real goal of production. Use-value had to be supplanted by exchange-value and the aim of production had to become the reproduction of capital.

The family and community ceased to appear as extensions of nature (which has both positive and negative implications) in order to make way for a society composed of fragmented individuals, lacking any organic or human connection. Such a society, infinitely more advanced in its mode of production, is mediated by the abstract principle of exchange.

Marx never fails to accentuate the eminently progressive content of this development. There is progress in the very midst of its ruthlessness. Capitalism marked the release of productive forces which, for the first time in history, could systematically appropriate and transform the fruits of nature.³² From the vantage point of the producer, it was also an important advance, even as it merely modified the structure of his oppression. The worker was freed from the overt domination by another human being, from the alien and unqualified control over his body and movement. He attained freedom over his body and the liberty to dispose of his labor. The new owners of the means of production would have to bargain with him for the purchase of his labor-power. His wages would not be determined by the capitalist's whim, but rather by socially necessary labor time. As a person, he would be superfluous to production; only his abstract ability to work would be pertinent. Yet, even in this contingency, he could also discover beneficial features, for, with the notable exception of racism, caste-like distinctions should not interfere when he sold his labor-power on the market. The capitalist commodity is totally indifferent to the origin of the labor which produces it; labor becomes "abstract labor-power," and each worker of similar skills should always be equal to the next.

The immanent logic of capitalist production demands the universal equivalence of labor-power. If, for the purposes of analysis, this factor is isolated from other forces at work, it latently contains profound consequences for the social status of women. In face of the dissolution of the natural rigidity of the family, and especially as mechanization progresses, women of the working class should have undergone the same process of equalization as men. In earlier periods, specific forms of labor belonged exclusively to women. Part of the quality of their products consisted precisely in the fact that they were products of *female* labor. But when the product of labor became an exchangeable commodity, all

such distinctions began to vanish. An unprecedented potential thus works its way into history: *The capitalist mode of production unleashes the condition for the historical supersession of the sexually based division of labor.* The universal equivalence of labor-power conceptually implies the release of the woman from her naturally infused roles in labor.

This potentiality, needless to say, could not become more than an abstract promise of equal exploitation. Capitalism could not even proclaim for women this rudimentary egalitarianism. Instead it transmuted a more or less naturally conditioned oppression into an oppression whose content became thoroughly *socio-historical*. It was only then that women were effectively exiled from the sphere of social production – or permitted, at most, a tangential role. Their containment within the family became, not a natural necessity, but rather a peculiarly societal phenomenon. It is therefore only in bourgeois society that the oppression of women assumes a decisive *social* dimension and function.

The capitalist mode of production outstrips all previous modes in transcending virtually all extra-economic determinants. The unique status of women is not immediately implied in the capitalist organization of labor, as one of its preconditions. According to Marx: “For capital, the worker does not constitute a condition of production, but only labor. If this can be performed by machinery, or even by water or air, so much the better. And what capital appropriates is not the laborer, but his labor – and not directly, but by means of exchange.”³³

If it does not matter who does the work – only that it be done – then certainly women can be non-discriminately employed in production. Through the eyes of the commodity, in fact, women are indistinguishable from men. But, as it will be subsequently shown, their oppression is indeed a *result* of critical social forces in whose absence the mode of production could not effectively be sustained. A distinctive and indeed defining innovation of capitalist production lies in its *projection of female oppression onto a socio-historical continuum*. Once this occurs, women’s liberation, like the emancipation of the producers themselves, becomes a *real* historical possibility. The concrete promise of female liberation is bound up inextricably with the overturning of the social forces fundamentally nourished by her oppression.

V

The unfettering of the historical ingredients which ushered in the capitalist form of labor in its abstract, universal equivalence, has been examined from a very specific perspective. A closer glimpse at this development, emphasizing its impact on the worker's family as it was dispossessed of its natural foundation, reveals the special basis for women's oppression under capitalism. Engels was essentially correct to link the inferior status of the female to the hierarchical make-up of the family. For the numerous material and cultural manifestations of female inferiority are predicated on the woman's dependent rank within the family unit. This derives in turn, and certainly in the final instance, from the exigencies of capitalism's productive apparatus.

Within Marxist theory, most of the discussion about the insular bourgeois family has concentrated on its mode of existence among the bourgeoisie alone. The private, individual proprietor, it is asserted, needs his own miniature "society" over which he wields unrestricted authority. His wife – and children of undisputed fatherhood – must be his uncontested possessions. The private character of his remaining property must transcend his own mortal existence: his wife, through her child-bearing, must therefore protect it from future alienation and dissolution.

While all this is true and critically important to the functioning of capitalism, the special meaning of the insular family for the worker should not go unacknowledged. Engels insisted that the worker who has nothing to sell but his ability to work cannot be overly concerned about bequeathing this meager property to his undisputed heirs. But this does not mean that the bourgeois family structure was thus *externally* foisted upon the producers, serving no *real* objective purpose. On the contrary, the hierarchical family structure, as it exists among workers, possesses a unique and necessary relationship to the capitalist mode of production. As it will later be maintained, this family also responds to certain irrepressible needs of working human beings themselves.

The central prerequisite for the constitution of capital – and thus for the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie and its family – is the historical appearance of the *private individual* worker. (The emergence of the worker as individual is simultaneously the emergence of the producing individual defined vis-à-vis production only in his capacity as worker.)¹⁴ The further back we trace the course of history, the more does the

individual, and accordingly also the producing individual, appear to be dependent and belong to a larger whole. At first the individual, in a still quite natural manner is part of the family and of the tribe which evolves from the family. Later he is a part of a community.³⁵ And, prior to capitalism, the producer's relation "to the natural prerequisite of his production as *his own* is mediated by his natural membership in a community" (or a state).³⁶ Even the slave and the serf, it should be recalled, are in direct possession of the means of their subsistence.

As capital makes its ingression into history, the worker is transfigured into an isolated private individual – isolated from the means of production (hence also from the means of subsistence) and equally isolated from the community of producers. To a hitherto unprecedented degree, workers are fragmented among themselves to the point of perceiving their own social relations as the nexus of exchange binding commodity to commodity. The fragmentation of the community of producers thus complements the fetishistic appearance of the commodity, the veiled crystallization of social relations under capitalism.

When the serf or free peasant is ejected from the land; when the artisan is divested of the implements of his labor; when they are cut off from their peers as individual units of labor-power; it is actually, they and their miniature societies which are severed from nature and the human community. The worker is sealed off in the false privacy of the insular family.

The utter disintegration of the community of producers relegates, therefore, not the individual, but rather the family unit to a distant realm which bears no organic connection to the activity of social production. Although Marx does not explicitly discuss the process of individuation undergone by the worker as it is related to the fate of the family, a direct connection between these two processes seems to be apparent nevertheless. Marx's observations seem to raise the question of whether the individual worker – carrier of abstract labor-power – demanded by production, would not have to express somewhere the authority of his individuality, an authority without which individuality would not be obtained. Assuming an affirmative answer, this authority could very well express itself in the family – but within a family whose dynamic relation to production has been annulled. If this were so, it would be clear why the woman is not permitted to experience the ruthless – although in some respects beneficial – equalizing tendencies of

capitalist production. She remains inseparably anchored to the fabric necessary for the maintenance of the worker as individual.

The woman not only remains tied to the family, but must bear the major responsibility for the internal labor guaranteeing its preservation. These private domestic duties preclude more than marginal participation in *social* production. Moreover, she is enclosed within a family whose unity with social production has severely eroded; her labor within the household therefore takes on an entirely new character. In pre-bourgeois history, such work, essential to the maintenance of the family and of the larger community as well, was necessarily an important component of social production itself. With capitalism, household labor, generating only the value of utility, is no longer related to the productive apparatus. Production itself has undergone a profound metamorphosis; its fundamental aim is the creation of exchange-value. Thus, with respect to production, women experience a double inferiority. They are first prohibited, by virtue of their standing, from consistently and equally reaching the point of production. Secondly, the labor they continue to monopolize does not measure up to the characteristic labor of capitalist society.

Kinship, marital, and procreative relations are no longer balanced with the relations of production. The family itself ceases to incorporate the social – although for pre-capitalist history, natural – relations of production. But the *natural* functions of women are abstractly articulated in the family. These functions are rendered abstract exactly to the degree that they are stripped of their *immediate social character*. Through a dialectical inversion, it is the radical separation of the producer from nature that lays the basis for the *social* creation of women as eternally natural beings. This is to say, women are socially imprisoned within natural roles that are no longer naturally necessary.

Hence there occurs under capitalism a necessary dialectic between the potential equality of women, inherent in the apparatus of production, and the inevitable domination of women implied in (but not confined to) the family. This dialectic largely defines the structure of women's oppression (simultaneously signaling the negative conditions for its abolition) and confers upon this structure its overtly societal, therefore transmutable character. New relations of production render such factors as sex superfluous. But the intrinsic social necessity of these relations – the need to buttress the abstract, individual and fragmented nature of

labor-power – re-establishes sexual differences in the social edifice resting on the base of production.

These social differences go so far as to apportion to women a *qualitatively* different form of labor – the labor of utility as opposed to that of exchange. Margaret Benston observes that: “The appearance of commodity production has indeed transformed the way that men labor. . . . Most household labor in capitalist society remains in the pre-market stage. This is the work which is reserved for women and it is in this fact that we can find the basis for a definition of women.”³⁷

Yet Benston’s position implies that women are *objective* (and not just ideological) anachronisms. This dilemma can only be surmounted if their use-value producing labor is studied against the background of the objectively possible equalization of women by the commodity-producing apparatus.

As it will be subsequently shown, the equalization–repression dialectic has yet another moment, realized with the actual admission of women into capitalist social production. Female labor-power (not concrete labor), even as it is called upon for tasks identical to those performed by men, will be laden with cultural determination. This is not to mention the plethora of “female” occupations. Labor performed by women, even when it produces exchange-value, will not be “abstract labor-power in general” but rather a specific and socially inferior female ability to work.

VI

Reduced to its biological preconditions, the insular structure of the producer’s family announces and fortifies the rupture of the human community of producers. In this sense, the family is essential for the ideological reproduction of capitalist society as a whole. Yet, in the course of reinforcing the alienated relations crystallized in the commodity, the family – and more specifically, the woman – must also respond to *real human needs*. “Bourgeois civilization has reduced social relations to the cash nexus. They have become emptied of affection.”³⁸ With due consideration of the factor of sublimation, the human need for affective bonds cannot be eliminated beyond an absolute minimum. If these relations were divested of all immediate expression, human beings could hardly survive the desperate struggle for existence. Love and interpersonal emotions in general are needs which cease to demand at least

minimal fulfillment only when human beings have long since ceased to be human. In capitalist society, the woman has the special mission of being both reservoir and receptacle for a whole range of human emotions otherwise banished from society. This mission is directly related to her confinement, in labor, to the production of use-values.

Forbidden to flourish in society at large, and especially at the point of production, personal relations unfolding within the family inevitably are affected adversely. Indeed, from the very outset, the "legitimate" woman-man union already bears the inexorable stamp of exchange. Its legitimacy is a contrivance of the marriage *contract*; like the labor contract, this is also an "unjust exchange." Here, of course, the woman is always victim. All this considered, it must be recognized nonetheless that in the absence of even this far from ideal occasion for interpersonal bonds, capitalist society probably would be much more grotesque than it has actually proved to be. A case in point is Nazi Germany. The unarticulated purpose behind its irrational cult of the family and motherhood was to manipulate family-based emotions into an unmediated fusion with extreme national and racial chauvinism. In this respect, Nazi propaganda was designed, at bottom, to vitiate the family itself as a locus of personal emotions.³⁹

In its "bourgeois-democratic" form, capitalism requires the family as a realm within which the natural and instinctive yearning for non-reified human relations may be expressed. Herbert Marcuse discusses their relations:

Human relations are class relations, and their typical form is the free labor contract. This contractual character of human relationships has spread from the sphere of production to all of social life. Relationships function only in their reified form, mediated through the class distribution of the material output of the contractual partners. If this functional de-personalization were ever breached, not merely by that backslapping familiarity which only underscores the reciprocal functional distance separating men but rather by mutual concern and solidarity, it would be impossible for men to return to their normal social functions and positions. The contractual structure upon which this society is based would be broken.⁴⁰

Contrasted with prevailing social relations, the family and its web of personal relations add a qualitatively different dimension to social life. On precisely this basis, in fact, the woman is presented in the utopian fringes of bourgeois ideology as an antithesis to the capitalist perform-

ance principle. This positive (although still distorted) aspect of the ideology of femininity has been frequently suppressed by the women's liberation movement. In efforts to debunk the myth of the woman as an exclusively emotional being, an equally abstract position has been too often assumed. The abstract negation of "femininity" is embraced; attempts are made to demonstrate that women can be as non-emotional, reality-affirming and dominating as men are alleged to be. The model, however, is usually a concealed "masculine" one.

The most extreme case – extreme to the point of absurdity – of proposing as a solution to male supremacy the abstract negation of "femininity" is furnished by Valerie Solanas and her *SCUM Manifesto* (Society for Cutting Up Men). Her definition of sexuality is exceedingly revealing:

Sex is not part of a relationship, on the contrary, it is a solitary experience, non-creative, a gross waste of time. The female can easily – far more easily than she may think – condition away her sex drive, leaving her completely cool and cerebral, and free to pursue truly worthy relationships and activities [sic!]. . . . When the female transcends her body, rises above animalism, the male . . . will disappear.⁴¹

One thing is clear in this drastic formulation of the attack against male supremacy: such a position, in the final analysis, must be a duplication – conscious or unconscious – of the reified relations which have demanded the oppression of women in the first place. This position reinstates the same relations that have engendered a situation where women are exhaustively defined as "affective" – "affective" in a way that men cannot be – and where women's emotionality is presumed to exclude rationality. In order to shatter the ideology of femininity insofar as it implies reified affection, women must also combat the ideology of reified insensibility. If, as Marx has said, liberation is to ultimately also mean "the complete *emancipation* of all the human qualities and senses,"⁴² which include "not only the five senses, but the so-called spiritual senses, the practical senses (desiring, loving),"⁴³ then the positive qualities of femininity must be released from their sexual exclusiveness, from their distorted and distorting forms. They must be *aufgehoben* in a new and liberating socialist society.

Christopher Caudwell draws attention to the fact that within the

interstices of capitalism, non-reified modes of behavior continue to exist. He describes these as vestiges of pre-capitalist history:

Even today, in those few economic forms which still survive in a pre-bourgeois form, we can see tenderness as the essence of the relation. The commodity fetishism which sees in a relation between men only a relation between things has not yet dried it up. The economic relation of the mother to her foetus, of the child to the parent [primarily the mother] and vice versa retains its primitive form to show this clearly.⁴⁴

Caudwell envisions “love” as capable of proposing a fierce indictment of bourgeois society. This is undoubtedly utopian idealism, unless, that is, a socio-political mediation can draw love and tenderness into the revolutionary continuum. Love alone is impotent, yet without it, no revolutionary process could ever be truly authentic. From this vantage point, a critical kernel of truth emerges out of Caudwell’s vision:

Today it is as if love and economic relations have gathered at two opposite poles. All the unused tenderness of man’s instincts gather at one pole and at the other are economic relations, reduced to bare coercive rights to commodities. This polar segregation is a source of terrific tension and will give rise to a vast transformation of bourgeois society.⁴⁵

It cannot be too strongly emphasized that in seeking to discover the precise role of such categories as Caudwell proposes in developing a revolutionary theory, and particularly as these pertain to women, much caution is necessary. In advancing the most radical construction of the revolutionary function of utopian categories in general (a function possible only with advanced capitalism), Marcuse is always careful to avoid Icarus’s dilemma.⁴⁶ He reveals the threads which lead directly from utopia to science and back to utopia again.

Germaine Greer soars high with her utopian dreams of women’s potential capabilities. But finally she can discover no real solutions and must turn to abstract ethical imperatives. In the last chapter of her book – the chapter entitled “Revolution” – she says, significantly:

It would be genuine revolution if women would suddenly stop loving the victors in violent encounters . . . If soldiers were certainly faced with the withdrawal of all female favors, as Lysistrata observed so long ago, there would suddenly be less glamour in fighting.⁴⁷

Presumably, this is a way of reaching the new society, a society free of "masculine" (she does not say "imperialist") war.

The personal relations which cluster around women contain in germ, albeit in a web of oppression and thus distortedly, the premise of the abolition of alienation, the dissolution of a compulsive performance principle, thus, ultimately, the destruction of the whole nexus of commodity exchange. But yet this utopian content is only a promise and nothing more. Its radical implications remain impotent unless they are integrated into a practical revolutionary process.

In *capitalist* society, although these personal relations are a contrast to the normal flow of social life, they are, in their present form, woven into the warp and woof of capitalist relations as a whole. Even as a negation of these relations, they actually presuppose them and foster their continuance. It is a non-subverting negation. Marcuse characterizes social relations under capitalism as creating a "reciprocal functional distance separating men." It has already been shown that the break-up of pre-capitalist economic and social life gave rise to a historically unprecedented separation of human beings among themselves – in order to separate them from the means of production. The family, it was maintained, is the direct target of these divisive forces which establish a foundation for the most advanced phase of human development by instituting the most systematic method of human exploitation. This "reciprocal functional distance separating men" both requires, and issues out of, the new family structure, closed in upon itself especially for the woman.

A progressively increasing fragmentation among human beings has accompanied an ever more developed capitalism. In the era of advanced capitalism, the insularity is virtually complete. A salient example can be seen in the recently escalated flight toward the suburbs. Workers, especially white workers, have also joined in this exodus. The closed-in cubicle-like housing is a material extension of the ever increasing distance which dissevers them from their fellow producers. (The situation of the woman worker will be discussed later in the paper.) The plight of the woman in the suburbs is especially painful, for solidarity with other human beings is hardly attainable in this isolated environment. When it occurs, it is the artificial, backslapping type. Her shopping center is in the suburb as is the school for her children (she is often opposed to "busing"), her beauty parlor, her "entertainment." She drives virtually everywhere; nothing is in walking distance from her home. There is no

public transportation to speak of. If there is only one car in the family she is often confined to the house until her husband comes home from work. The husband returns each day, forgetting in this plastic environment exactly how toilsome his work has been. His comrade producers are but numbers and bodies to him – at most beer-drinking partners. The worker must thus surmount many insurmountable barriers before he can become aware that he and all other producers are the wellspring of the society. The achievement of solidarity, thus of a revolutionary class consciousness, has never been so difficult as during the present era. This particular phenomenon further attests to the inseparable unity of women's oppression and the exploitation of workers. The role society has given to women reinforces the mechanisms which guarantee the continued domination of the producers.

Perhaps the most concrete instance of the family providing an objective contrast to capitalist social relations as a whole can be sought in the oppressed communities of America. Among black people, for one, the potential for a different, more human quality of relations prevails – relations which often escape the false, “back-slapping” familiarity which is the distorted form of personal association. Families are frequently “extended” rather than “nuclear,” embracing more than two generations, as well as cousins and other relatives. The increasing use of “sister” and “brother,” which is by no means confined to the politically sophisticated, is an overt protest against the compartmentalization of existence. Though the use of those terms has a long tradition encompassing many and diverse associations, the fact that they now transcend political or religious affiliations and are widespread in the community as a whole, points to the yearning for human solidarity in the midst of a situation where solidarity has almost become obsolete.

As it normally functions, the family is a windowless monad of illusory satisfaction. It strengthens the distance between human beings in society. But like Leibniz's monad, it is also a reflection of a larger totality; its duplication of society is strikingly illustrated by its function in respect to the children it conceives. As the human, *natural* sphere par excellence, the family introjects society into the “human nature” of the child. Within the perimeters of the family, a psychological make-up harmonious, or at least compatible, with an exploitative and repressive environment must be reproduced. In this sense, the family's older place and role in the community has remained more or less intact. In pre-capitalist formations it was the family, the kinship group or earlier, the tribe,

which regulated and perpetuated a specific metabolism between its members and nature. When “nature” is superseded by the commodity form, and human beings relate to their environment and to one another through the nexus of exchange, the family initially forges a pre-established harmony between individual and capitalist society.

The family has been divested of many of its functions as an instrument of socialization. The educational system and the media – television in particular – surpass the family’s importance in the socialization process. Nevertheless, the very earliest formative months and years of the individual are still subject to the family’s – and especially the mother’s – guidance. As psychoanalysis has verified, the first months of childhood are critically important for the psychological constitution of the mature adult. It is not necessary to invoke the special categories of Freudian psychology to realize, for instance, that it is the mother who introduces the child to language and who first assists it to develop the powers of perception through which it will eventually “receive” the world.

The drudgery of full-time child rearing acquires, in this manner, a more profound and infinitely devastating meaning. Society assigns to women the mission of unknowingly creating human beings who will “feel at home” in a reified world.

VII

In *Capital*, Marx confidently asserted that: “modern industry, by assigning as it does an important part in the process of production, outside the domestic sphere, to women, to young persons, and to children of both sexes, creates a new economical foundation for a higher form of the family and of the relations between the sexes.”⁴⁸ But, in actuality, female participation in production has remained a mere foundation whose edifice was not – and could not be – erected. It has not greatly upset the structure of the family, nor has it significantly ameliorated the social status of women. While work outside the home has furnished some women with important advantages, most have had to accept its reaffirming and amplifying effect on their oppression. In Clara Colon’s words:

The woman, pivot of home and family life, can only set one foot into the world of opportunity as industrial worker. The other foot is still stuck to

the household doorstep. If she tries to combine home and work, she is restricted to performing half-way in each. The working mother finds employment outside the home is a tough and tedious chore, hardly a step toward equality.⁴⁹

As a dependent being, as someone else's "inorganic extension," the price of women's entry into production was surplus exploitation (grossly inferior wages) and jobs which, on the whole, were far less fulfilling than even the stultifying labor assigned to men. Marx pointed out that: "In England women are still occasionally used instead of horses for hauling canal boats, because the labor required to produce horses and machines is an accurately known quantity, while that required to maintain the women of the surplus population is below all calculation."⁵⁰

In America, one-third of all married women currently work outside the home – slightly more than one-half of all working women. But considering that the median earnings of women are about half that of men (and for black women even less), it is clear that female oppression has only sunk deeper into the apparatus. For if and when women's participation in social production becomes viable and necessary, the capitalist contracts the purchase, not of "abstract labor-power in general" but rather of an already socially stigmatized female labor-power.

The family-based structure of oppression – engendered in the final instance by the capitalist mode of production – is reduplicated and exacerbated by her entry into the labor force. For as long as the woman's "natural" place is proclaimed to be the home – in concrete terms: as long as she remains chained to a man and to a private domestic economy – her servile status is inevitable. No matter how excruciating, her overly exploitative job always remains a subsidiary activity. Combined with her multitudinous domestic duties, it shrinks her realm of leisure (strictly speaking, her only freedom beyond the necessity of labor) to practically naught.

It is not to be inferred, however, that women should refrain from seeking further penetration into social production. On the contrary, the demand for job equality – equal jobs and equal pay for the same jobs – is one of the indispensable prerequisites for an effective women's liberation strategy. Such a demand, it need not be said, loses much of its meaning and can fall back into the orbit of oppression unless it is accompanied by the fight for childcare centers, maternity leaves, free

abortions and the entire complex of solutions to uniquely female needs. Without such special and only apparently unequal treatment, "equality" tends towards its own negation.

The ultimate meaning of the fight for the equality of women at the point of production should transcend its immediate aim. These efforts must be seen as an essential ingredient of a broader thrust: the assault on the institutional structures which perpetuate the socially enforced inferiority of women. In the warped sexual equality foisted upon the black woman by slavery and subsequent national oppression, there is a revealing hint of the latent but radical potential of the attack on the productive apparatus. The singular status of black people from slavery to the present has forced the woman to work outside the home – at first as provider of profit for the slave-master, but later as provider for her own family. Certainly, as female, she has been objectively exploited to an even greater degree than the black man. It would therefore be cruel and extravagant to claim that the black woman has been released from the social stigma attached to women in general and particularly to the women of the laboring classes. The black woman's relative independence, emanating from her open participation in the struggle for existence, has always been but another dimension of her oppression. It has thus rendered her household and internal family responsibilities all the more onerous. From these, she had never been objectively freed. The important point, however, is the fact that she has not been – and could not be – exclusively defined by her special, "female" duties. As a result, far more meaningful social roles within the black community – oppressed from without – have been available to black women. Most importantly, black women have made critical contributions to the fight against racism and national oppression – from slavery to the present.

What has been prompted in the black woman by the utter necessity of trying to survive in face of ruthless and sustained national oppression, should be elevated by the women's movement to the status of a strategic goal. This is especially important as this movement gathers impetus within the existing social framework. Efforts to bring women into production – and always on an equal basis with men – need to be placed on the continuum of revolution. While immediate needs should be pacified, such efforts must assist in bringing to fruition among women a vast and hitherto untapped potential for anti-capitalist consciousness. As one mode of the women's struggle, the assault on sexism which permeates the productive apparatus – conjoined with agitation for all

the special female needs – can help women to rid themselves of the “muck of ages,” of their self-image as natural extensions of maleness. This is indispensable preparation for revolutionary consciousness and practice.

VIII

Broader strategic questions about the character and direction of women’s liberation may now be posed. What ought not to be the strategy of female liberation can be clearly stated. It ought not to be reduced and confined to the abstract and isolated attempt to shift the balance of “sexual politics.” In conferring absolute primacy on the sexual dimensions of woman’s oppression, the narrow bourgeois feminist approach distorts its social character and functions within existing social conditions. This approach has correctly discerned the oppression of women to be a thread linking even the most disparate eras of history. It is true that even the socialist countries have not achieved the emancipation of women. But to conclude that therefore the structures of sexual oppression are primary is to ignore the changing character of women’s oppression as history itself has advanced. The narrow feminist approach fails to acknowledge the specificity of the social subjugation of the women who live outside the privileged class under capitalism. It is qualitatively different from the comparatively *natural* oppression which was the lot of women in previous historical periods. And to the extent that some women continue to play subordinate roles in existing socialist societies, their oppression assumes yet another, but far less dangerous character.

Within the existing class relations of capitalism, women in their vast majority are kept in a state of familial servitude and social inferiority not by men in general, but rather by the ruling class. Their oppression serves to maximize the efficacy of domination. The objective oppression of black women in America has a class, and also a national origin. Because the structures of female oppression are inextricably tethered to capitalism, female emancipation must be simultaneously and explicitly the pursuit of black liberation and of the freedom of other nationally oppressed peoples.

An effective women’s liberation movement must be cognizant of the primacy of the larger social revolution: the capitalist mode of production

must be overturned, like the political and legal structures that sustain it. Conversely, the larger social revolution must be cognizant of the vital place and role of the thrust towards women's emancipation.

The socialist movement must never forget that while the economic struggle is indispensable, it is by no means the sole terrain of significant anti-capitalist activity. Thus, the unique features of the women's struggle cannot be restricted to economic agitation alone.

A socialist revolution will more or less reflect the struggles which led it to its triumphant phase. In this respect, the entire revolutionary continuum must be animated by the consciousness that the real goal of socialism is to shatter the automatism of the economic base. This, indeed, is the requisite condition for preparing the way for a sphere of freedom outside, and undetermined by, the process of production. Perhaps eventually, even work can become an expression of freedom, but this would be far in the distant future. However, even this total transfiguration of the nature of work would presuppose that the economy had long since ceased to be the center of society.

The edifice of the new society cannot spring *sui generis* from the economic and political reconstitution of its fabric. It is therefore misleading to represent women's liberation under socialism as equivalent to the achievement of full and equal female participation in production. Certainly women should perform a proportional part of social labor, but only as their necessary duties in a society oriented towards the satisfaction of its members' material and spiritual needs. Further, job discrimination under socialism attests to and fortifies the continued oppression of women.

Beyond this, women must be liberated from toilsome and time-consuming household duties; the private domestic economy must be dissolved. They must be permitted a maximum range of control over their bodies – exactly to the degree that this is objectively possible through science.

These are but a few of the negative preconditions for an affirmative release of women's human potentialities. That this release will demand an entirely new organization of the family is obvious. Most Marxists have been loath to speculate about new forms the family can assume under socialism. But, as Marcuse has emphasized on numerous occasions, utopian projections at the present phase of technological development must not necessarily lack a scientific and historical foundation. New theoretical approaches to the family – at once scientific and

imaginative – can be of immense assistance to the women's movement in the formulation of its long-range goals.

Within the present fabric of domination, the women's movement is confronted with urgent oppositional tasks. For if the material and ideological supports of female inferiority are not to be carried over intact into the socialist order,⁵¹ they must be relentlessly attacked throughout the course of building the revolutionary movement. Not only must there be agitation around the economic situation of women, but equally important, the entire superstructural nexus of women's oppression must be met with constant criticism and organized assaults. While moving towards the overthrow of capitalism, the ideology of female inferiority must be so thoroughly subverted that once the revolution is achieved, it will be impossible to refer with impunity to "my better half" or to be the "natural" place of the woman as in the home.

Perhaps the most significant message for the existing women's movement is this: the ultimate face of women's oppression is revealed precisely there where it is most drastic. In American society, the black woman is most severely encumbered by the male supremacist structures of the larger society. (This does not contradict the fact that a greater sexual equality might prevail inside the oppressed black community.) Its combination with the most devastating forms of class exploitation and national oppression clearly unmasks the socio-historical function of the subjugation of women.

Even as black women have acquired a greater equality as women within certain institutions of the black community, they have always suffered in a far greater proportion and intensity the effects of institutionalized male supremacy. "In partial compensation for [a] narrowed destiny the white world has lavished its politeness on its womankind. . . . From black women of America, however, this gauze has been withheld and without semblance of such apology they have been frankly trodden under the feet of [white] men."⁵²

If the quest for black women's liberation is woven as a priority into the larger bid for female emancipation; if the women's movement begins to incorporate a socialist consciousness and forges its practice accordingly; then it can undoubtedly become a radical and subversive force of yet untold proportions. In this way the women's liberation movement may assume its well-earned and unique place among the current grave-diggers of capitalism.

Notes

- 1 Robin Morgan, ed., *Sisterhood is Powerful* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), xxxiv (her emphasis).
- 2 *Ibid.*, xxxv.
- 3 Numerous critiques of the “white” women’s liberation movement have been proposed by blacks – and specifically by black women. Linda La Rue, for example, cautions against an alliance with the women’s movement, which she concludes would be inherently unwise (Linda La Rue, “The Black Movement and Women’s Liberation,” *The Black Scholar*, May 1970). Toni Morrison contends that there is something intrinsic in the experience and corresponding *Weltanschauung* of black women which renders women’s liberation irrelevant and superfluous. (Toni Morrison, “What the Black Woman Thinks about Women’s Lib,” *The New York Times Magazine*, August 22, 1971). At the other end of the spectrum, there is, for instance, the Third World Women’s Alliance, which stresses the critical importance of women’s liberation for women of color, while maintaining that their organizational structure and theoretical basis must be separate from and autonomous *vis-à-vis* the women’s movement among whites. (See their manifesto *Triple Jeopardy*, reprinted in *Triple Jeopardy*, vol. 1, no. 1, Sept.–Oct. 1971.)
- 4 The one classical Marxist text on the oppression of women – Friedrich Engels’s *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* – has ironically been invoked by many who seek to demonstrate the socio-historical primacy of women’s subjugation. Indeed, one of the flaws of this work is that Engels’s entire analysis is predicated on a hypothetical pre-historical ascendancy of the woman. What he calls “the world-historical defeat of the female sex” is proposed as the first instance of human beings dominating their own kind. This is the crucial moment of his analysis and thus, in his opinion, the key to an understanding of women’s oppression. While it is clearly necessary to recognize the infinitely long history of women’s subjugation, the impact of capitalism on women is critical for an understanding of women’s present status and oppression. Engels minimizes the qualitatively new form of socially enforced female inferiority which inserts itself into history with the advent of capitalism.
- 5 Erik Erikson, “Inner Space and Outer Space,” *Daedalus*, no. 93, 1964, 580–606.
- 6 Marcuse says in *Eros and Civilization*, “We designate [the specific reality principle that has governed the origins and the growth of this civilization] as *performance principle* in order to emphasize that under its rule society is

stratified according to the competitive economic performance of its members . . . The performance principle, which is that of an acquisitive and antagonistic society in the process of constant expansion, presupposes a long development during which domination has been increasingly rationalized." Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (London: Sphere Books, 1969), 50.

- 7 Karl Marx, *A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy* (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 36.
- 8 Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (1844), "Private Property and Communism," in Lloyd D. Easton and Kurt H. Guddat, trans. and eds, *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society* (New York: Doubleday and Co./Anchor Books, 1967), 303. Some mention should be made of the semantic problem posed, at least in the English language, by the unavoidable use of the same term to designate both the male of the species and the species itself. As has been repeatedly noted, the language itself exposes how deeply male supremacy is embedded in the fabric of society. It should be clear that in this passage, Marx is certainly not referring only to the male's relation to the natural human condition and neither does he equate this with his relationship to the female. The same principle is equally applicable to women, their inferior status under capitalism notwithstanding.
- 9 The notion of man [-woman] as a species-being is a key element of Marx's early anthropology. Although the biological connotation of species is contained within this term, this is not its essential meaning. The deeper meaning Marx attributes to "species-being" emerges from a philosophical tradition which sought to develop a philosophy of man [-woman], proposing various ideal definitions of the human species. "Species-being," as a result, also has ethical implications. Human beings, social "by nature," strive toward the realization of their social potential (which is a creative potential) by transforming nature and thereby making their surroundings more human. For the early Marx, thus, labor itself acquires an ethical, even eudaemonistic mission.
- 10 Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (1844), "Alienated Labor," in Easton and Guddat, 292.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Marx, "Private Property and Communism," 304.
- 13 In analyzing pre-capitalist formations, Marx asserts that for the spontaneously evolved community, "the earth is the great laboratory, the arsenal which provides both the means and materials of labor, and also the location, the *basis* is the community. Men's relation to it is naive: they regard themselves as its *communal proprietors*, and as those of the community which produces and reproduces itself by living labor." Karl Marx,

- Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations* (New York: International Publishers, 1965), 69.
- 14 Marx writes, “the realm of freedom actually begins only where labor which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases; thus in the very nature of things it lies beyond the sphere of actual material production. Just as the savage must wrestle with nature to satisfy his wants, to maintain and reproduce life, so must civilized man, and he must do so in all social formations and under all possible modes of production. With his development this realm of physical necessity expands as a result of his wants; but, at the same time, the forces of production which satisfy these wants also increase. Freedom in this field can only consist in socialized man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interrelations with nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of nature; and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favorable to, and worthy of, their human nature. But it nonetheless still remains a realm of necessity. Beyond it begins that development of human energy which is an end in itself, the true realm of freedom, which, however, can blossom forth only with this realm of necessity as its basis. The shortening of the working-day is its basic prerequisite.” Karl Marx, *Capital* (New York: International Publishers, 1968), vol. 3, 820.
- 15 Marx, *A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*, 36.
- 16 Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, 68.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 95.
- 18 “There is a third *possible form* [of property] which is to act as proprietor neither of the land nor of the instrument (i.e., nor of labor itself), but only of the means of subsistence, which are then found as the natural condition of the laboring subject. This is at bottom the formula of slavery and serfdom” (Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, 101).
- 19 In describing the transition from various pre-bourgeois formations to capitalism, Marx contends that “closer analysis will show that what is dissolved in all these processes of dissolution are relations of productions in which use-value predominates; production for *immediate* use” (my emphasis) (*ibid.*, 105).
- 20 Marx proposes this generalization about pre-capitalist epochs as a whole: “They all evince a unity of living and active human beings with the natural, inorganic conditions of their metabolism with nature, and therefore their appropriation of nature” (*ibid.*, 86). Moreover, in describing “the *pre-bourgeois* relationship of the individual to the objective conditions of labor, and in the first instance to the natural objective conditions of labor,” Marx says: “just as the working subject is a natural individual, a natural being, so the first objective condition of his labor appears as nature, earth, as an

inorganic body. He himself is not only the organic body, but also inorganic nature as a subject. The condition is not something he has produced, but something he finds to hand; something existing in nature and which he presupposes" (ibid., 85).

- 21 There are obviously exceptions to this rule. A salient example is provided by John Henrik Clarke when he discusses the critical role of African women in resisting the encroachments of the slave trade: "In the resistance to the slave trade and the colonial system that followed the death of the Queen [Nzingha of Angola], African women, along with their men helped to mount offensives all over Africa. Among the most outstanding were: Madame Tinubo of Nigeria; Nandi, the mother of the great Zulu warrior Chaka; Kaipldre of the Hereto people of South West Africa; and the female army that followed the great Dahomian King, Behanzin Howell." John Henrik Clarke, "The Black Woman: A Figure in World History," Part I, *Essence Magazine*, May 1971.
- 22 Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, 71.
- 23 Juliet Mitchell, *Women: The Longest Revolution*, pamphlet reprinted from Nov.–Dec. 1966 issue of *New Left Review* (Boston: New England Press), 8.
- 24 Engels fails to emphasize this pre-capitalist structural necessity, a necessity which is invalidated only by capitalism. Consequently, women's oppression during both pre-capitalist and capitalist history appears, in his analysis, to be essentially homogeneous.
- 25 Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, 81.
- 26 Karl Marx, *The German Ideology* (New York: International Publishers, 1963).
- 27 Marx, *A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*, 33.
- 28 George Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (London: Merlin Press, 1971), 233.
- 29 Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx* (London: New Left Books, 1971), 178.
- 30 What follows in highly condensed form is a section of a recent essay: Angela Y. Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," *The Black Scholar*, vol. 3, no. 4 (Dec. 1971).
- 31 See note 18. Also consider this paragraph: "Such historic processes of dissolution are the following: the dissolution of the servile relationship which binds the laborer to the soil, but in fact assumes his property in the means of subsistence (which amounts in truth to his separation from the soil); the dissolution of relations of property which constitute a laborer as yeoman, or free, working, petty landowner or tenant (colonus), or free peasant; the dissolution of guild relations which presuppose the laborer's property in the instrument of production and labor itself, as a certain form

of craft skill not merely as the source of property but as property itself; also the dissolution of the relations of clientship in its different types, in which *non-proprietors* appear as co-consumers of the surplus produce in the retinue of their lord, and in return wear his livery, take part in his feuds, perform real or imaginary acts of personal service, etc. Closer analysis will show that what is dissolved in all these processes of dissolution are relations of production in which use-value predominates; production of immediate use. Exchange-value and its production presuppose the dominance of the other form.” Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, 104–5.

- 32 Consider, for example, the following passage from *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*: “The ancient conception, in which man always appears (in however narrowly national, religious or political a definition) as the aim of production, seems very much more exalted than the modern world, in which production is the aim of man and wealth the aim of production. In fact, however, when the narrow bourgeois form has been peeled away, what is wealth, if not the universality of needs, capacities, enjoyments, productive powers, etc., of individuals, produced in universal exchange? What, if not the full development of human control over the forces of nature – those of his own nature as well as those of so-called ‘nature’? What, if not the absolute elaboration of his creative dispositions, without any preconditions other than antecedent historical evolution which makes the totality of this evolution – i.e., the evolution of all human powers as such, unmeasured by *any previously established yardstick* – an end in itself? What is this, if not a situation where man does not reproduce himself in any determined form, but produces his totality? Where he does not seek to remain something formed by the past, but is in the absolute movement of becoming? In bourgeois political economy – and in the epoch of production to which it corresponds – this complete alienation, and the destruction of all fixed, one-sided purposes, is the sacrifice of the end in itself to a wholly external compulsion. Hence in one way the childlike world of the ancients appears to be superior; and this is so, in so far as we seek for closed shape, form and established limitation. The ancients provide a narrow satisfaction, whereas the modern world leaves us unsatisfied, or, where it appears to be satisfied with itself, is *vulgar and mean*” (84–5).
- 33 *Ibid.*, 99.
- 34 “The establishment of the individual as a worker, stripped of all qualities except this one, is itself a product of history” (*ibid.*, 68).
- 35 Marx, *A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*, 189. Engels comments, in a footnote to this passage, that actually the process is just the reverse. That is to say, the tribe is primary and the smaller family eventually evolves from it.
- 36 Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, 88–9.

- 37 Margaret Benston, "The Political Economy of Women's Liberation," *Monthly Review*, vol. 21, no. 4 (Sept. 1969), 15. She goes on to say: "This assignment of household work, as the function of a special category, 'women,' means that this group *does* stand in a different relation to production than the group, 'men.' We will tentatively define women, then, as that group of people who are responsible for the production of simple use-values in those activities within the home and family" (15-16).
- 38 Christopher Caudwell, *Studies in a Dying Culture* (New York: Dodd Mead and Co., 1949), 148.
- 39 According to one student of Nazi culture, the Nazis regarded the family as the original social unit, the "germ cell of the people, an *aid to the state rather than a rival unit of social organization*. The ideal family is a firmly knit group rooted in the soil, contributing numerous racially pure offspring, each child reared to unswerving love for the Nazi State" (my emphasis). Clifford Fitzpatrick, *Nazi Germany: Its Women and Family Life* (New York: Bobbs Merrill, 1938), 101.
- 40 Herbert Marcuse, "On Hedonism," *Negations* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 164.
- 41 Valerie Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, quoted in *The Female State, A Journal of Female Liberation* (Somerville, Mass.), issue 4 (April 1970), 57.
- 42 Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* ("Private Property and Communism"). The translation is Bottomore's: T. B. Bottomore, trans. and ed., Karl Marx, *Early Writings* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), 160. Easton and Guddat translate *Eigenschaften* as "aptitudes" instead of "qualities" (308).
- 43 *Ibid.*, Bottomore, 161. Easton and Guddat use "moral" instead of "practical" (309).
- 44 Caudwell, *Studies in a Dying Culture*, 148-9.
- 45 *Ibid.*, 157.
- 46 "The dynamic of their productivity [i.e., the productivity of contemporary societies] deprives 'utopia' of its traditional unreal content: what is denounced as 'utopian' is no longer that which has 'no place' and cannot have any place in the historical universe, but rather that which is blocked from coming about by the power of the established societies. 'Utopian' possibilities are inherent in the technical and technological forces of advanced capitalism and socialism: the rational utilization of these forces on a global scale would terminate poverty and scarcity within a very foreseeable future." Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 4-5). The unleashing of long repressed emotional potentials is objectively possible exactly to the degree that the abolition of scarcity is possible. For the latter is indeed predicated on a relaxing of the rigidity of the performance principle.

- 47 Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (London: Paladin, 1971), 317.
- 48 Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 495–6.
- 49 Clara Colon, *Enter Fighting: Today's Woman. A Marxist-Leninist View* (New York: Outlook Publishers, 1970), 8.
- 50 Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 391.
- 51 A socialist scholar has alluded to the family as an “instance of an alienated social institution that has been taken over lock, stock, and barrel by socialism from the capitalist system.” He says that “the traditional form of the family has not only survived, but also it defies any reasonable forecasts about its further development.” Adam Schaff, *Marxism and the Human Individual* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), 136.
- 52 W. E. B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (New York: AMS Press, 1969 [original edition, 1920]), 182.