

MARXISM AND FEMINISM

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Marxism and Feminism

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Introduction

This lecture was delivered by Herbert Marcuse at Stanford University on March 7, 1974. The text was written and re-written after intensive, rigorous and often heated discussions with women. In these discussions I gained insight into largely neglected problems of socialism and into the radical potential of the Women's Movement as a subversive force. With grateful appreciation, this text is dedicated to: Catherine Asmann ; Carol Becker ; Anne-Marie Feenberg ; Ruth George ; Antonia Kaus and Susan Orlofsky.

I SHALL TAKE the liberty of beginning and ending with some rather personal remarks. For the beginning I just want to say that this is the only invitation to lecture which I have accepted during the entire academic year. The reason is a very simple one. I believe the Women's Liberation Movement today is, perhaps the most important and potentially the most radical political movement that we have, even if the consciousness of this fact has not yet penetrated the Movement as a whole.

Explanation of terms :

REALITY PRINCIPLE

—the sum total of the norms and values which govern behavior in an established society, embodied in its institutions, relationships, etc.

PERFORMANCE PRINCIPLE

—a Reality Principle based on the efficiency and prowess in the fulfillment of competitive economic and acquisitive functions.

EROS, as distinguished from SEXUALITY

—sexuality : a partial drive, libidinal energy confined and concentrated in the erotogenic zones of the body, mainly : genital sexuality.

—Eros : libidinal energy, in the struggle with aggressive energy, striving for the intensification, gratification, and unification of life and of the life environment : the Life Instincts versus the Death Instinct (Freud).

REIFICATION, VERDINGLICHUNG

—the appearance of human beings, and relationship between human beings, as objects, things and as relationships between objects, things.

Now, two preliminary remarks on the situation of the Women's Liberation Movement as I see it. The Movement originates and operates within patriarchal civilization ; it follows that it must be initially discussed in terms of the actual status of women in the male dominated civilization.

Secondly, the Movement operates within a class society—here is the first problem ; women are not a class in the Marxian sense. The male-female relationship cuts across class lines but the immediate needs and potentialities of women are definitely class-conditioned to a high degree. Nevertheless there are good reasons why “woman” should be discussed as a general category versus “man.” Namely the long historical process in which the social, mental and even physiological characteristics of women developed as different from and contrasting with those of men.

Here, a word on the question whether the “feminine” or “female” characteristics are socially conditioned or in any sense “natural,” biological. My answer is : over and above the obviously physiological differences between male and female, the feminine characteristics are socially conditioned. However, the long process of thousands of years of social conditioning means that they may become “second nature” which is not changed automatically by the establishment of new social institutions. There can be discrimination against women even under socialism.

In patriarchal civilization, women have been subjected to a specific kind of repression, and their mental and physical development has been channeled in a specific direction. On these grounds a separate Women's Liberation Movement is not only justified, but it is necessary. But the very goals of this Movement require changes of such enormity in the material as well as intellectual culture, that they can be attained only by a change in the entire social system. By virtue of its own dynamic, the Movement is linked with the political struggle for revolution, freedom for men *and* women. Because beneath and beyond the male-female dichotomy is the human being, common to male and female : the human being whose liberation, whose realization is still at stake.

The Movement operates on two levels ; first, the struggle for full economic, social and cultural equality. Question : is such economic, and social and cultural equality attainable within the capitalist framework? I will come back to this question, but I want to submit a preliminary hypothesis : there are no economic reasons why such equality should not be attainable within the capitalist framework, although a largely modified capitalism. But the potentialities, the goals of the Women's

Liberation Movement go far beyond it, namely into regions which never can be attained within a capitalist framework, nor within the framework of any class society. Their realization would call for a second stage, where the Movement would transcend the framework within which it now operates. At this stage “beyond equality”, liberation implies the construction of a society governed by a different Reality Principle, a society where the established dichotomy between masculine and feminine is overcome in the social and individual relationships between human beings.

Thus, in the Movement itself is contained the image, not only of new social institutions, but also of a change in consciousness, of a change in the instinctual needs of men and women freed from the requirements of domination and exploitation. And this is the Movement’s most radical, subversive potential. It means, not only a commitment to socialism (full equality of women has always been a basic socialist demand), but commitment to a specific form of socialism which has been called “feminist socialism.” I will return to this concept later.

What is at stake in this transcendence is the negation of the exploiting and repressive values of patriarchal civilization. What is at stake is the negation of the values enforced and reproduced in society by male domination. And such radical subversion of values can never be the mere by-product of new social institutions. It must have its root in the men and women who build the new institutions.

What is the meaning of this subversion of values in the transition to socialism? And secondly, is this transition, in any sense, the liberation and ascent of *specifically feminine* characteristics on a social scale.

To start with the first question, here are the governing values in capitalist society : profitable productivity, assertiveness, efficiency, competitiveness ; in other words, the Performance Principle, the rule of functional rationality discriminating against emotions, a dual morality, the “work ethic,” which means for the vast majority of the population condemnation to alienated and inhuman labor, and the will to power, the display of strength, virility.

Now, according to Freud, this value hierarchy is expressive of a mental structure in which primary aggressive energy tends to reduce and to weaken the life instincts, that is, erotic energy. According to Freud, the destructive tendency in society will gain momentum as civilization necessitates intensified repression in order to maintain domination in the face of the ever more realistic possibilities of liberation, and intensified repression in turn leads to the activation or surplus aggressiveness, and its channeling into socially useful aggression. This total mobilization of

aggressiveness¹ is only too familiar to us today : militarization, brutalization of the forces of law and order, fusion of sexuality and violence, direct attack on the life instincts in their drive to save the environment, attack on the legislation against pollution and so on.

These tendencies are rooted in the infrastructure of advanced capitalism itself. The aggravating economic crisis, the limits of imperialism, the reproduction of the established society through waste and destruction, make themselves increasingly felt and necessitate more intensified and extended controls in order to keep the population in line, controls and manipulation which go down into the depth of the mental structure, into the realm of the instincts themselves. Now, to the degree to which the totalization of aggressiveness and repression today permeates the entire society, the image of socialism is modified at an essential point. Socialism, as a *qualitatively* different society, must embody the *antithesis*, the definite negation of the aggressive and repressive needs and values of capitalism as a form of male-dominated culture.

The objective conditions for such an antithesis and subversion of values are maturing, and they make possible the ascent, at least as a transitory phase in the reconstruction of society, of characteristics which, in the long history of patriarchal civilization, have been attributed to the female rather than the male. Formulated as the antithesis of the dominating masculine qualities, such feminine qualities would be receptivity, sensitivity, non-violence, tenderness and so on. These characteristics appear indeed as opposite of domination and exploitation. On the primary psychological level, they would pertain to the domain of eros, they would express the energy of the life instincts, against the death instinct and destructive energy. And the question here arises : Why do these life-protecting characteristics appear as specifically *feminine* characteristics? Why did the very same characteristics not also shape the dominant masculine qualities? This process has a history of thousands of years, during which the defence of the established society and of its hierarchy originally depended on physical strength, and thereby reduced the role of the female who was periodically disabled by bearing and then caring for children. Male domination, once established on these grounds, spread from the originally military sphere to other social and political institutions. The woman came to be regarded as inferior, as weaker, mainly as support for, or as adjunct to man, as sexual object, as tool of reproduction. And only as worker had she a form of equality, a repressive equality, with man. Her body and her mind were erified, became objects. And just as her intellectual development was blocked, so was her erotic development. Sexuality was objec-

1 Embs Note : Misspelling preserved.

tified as a means to an end, procreation or prostitution.

A first countertrend became effective at the very beginning of the modern period, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and, highly significantly, in direct context with the great and radical heretic movements with the Cathars and the Albigensians. In these centuries, the autonomy of love, the autonomy of the woman was proclaimed, contrasting and counteracting male aggressiveness and brutality. Romantic Love : I am perfectly well aware of the fact that these terms have become entirely pejorative terms, especially within the Movement. Still, I take them a little more seriously, and I take them in the historical context in which these developments should be taken. This was the first great subversion of the established hierarchy of values : the first great protest against the feudal hierarchy and the loyalties established in the feudal hierarchy, with its specifically pernicious repression of the woman.

To be sure, this protest, this antithesis was largely ideological, and confined to the nobility. However, it was not entirely ideological. The prevailing social norms were subverted in the famous Courts of Love, established by Elinor d'Aquitaine, where the judgment was practically always in favor of the lovers and against the husband, the right of love superseding the right of the feudal lord. And it was a woman who reportedly defended the last stronghold of the Albigensians against the murderous armies of the northern barons.

These progressive movements were cruelly suppressed. The weak beginnings of feminism, anyway on a weak class basis, were destroyed. But nevertheless, the role of the woman gradually changed in the development of industrial society. Under the impact of technical progress, social reproduction depends increasingly less on physical strength and prowess, either in war or in the material process of production, or in commerce. The result was the enlarged exploitation of women as instruments of labor. The weakening of the social basis of male dominance did not do away with the perpetuation of male dominance by the new ruling class. The increasing participation of women in the industrial work process, which undermined the material grounds of the male hierarchy, also enlarged the human base of exploitation and the surplus exploitation of the woman as housewife, mother, servant, in addition to her work in the process of production.

However, advanced capitalism gradually created the material conditions for translating the ideology of feminine characteristics into reality, the objective conditions for turning the weakness that was attached to them into strength, turning the sexual object into a subject, and making feminism a political force in the struggle against capitalism, against the

Performance Principle. It is with the view of these prospects that Angela Davis speaks of the revolutionary function of the female as antithesis to the Performance Principle, in a paper written in the Palo Alto Jail, "Women and Capitalism," December, 1971.

The emerging conditions for such a development are mainly :

- the alleviation of heavy physical labor,
- the production of pleasant and cheap clothing,
- the liberalization of sexual morality,
- birth control,
- general education.

These factors indicate the social basis for the antithesis to the Performance Principle, the emancipation of female and feminine energy, physical and intellectual, in the established society. But at the same time, this emancipation is arrested, manipulated, and exploited by this society. For capitalism cannot possibly allow the ascent of the libidinal qualities which would endanger the repressive work ethic of the Performance Principle and the constant reproduction of this work ethic by human individuals themselves. This, at this stage, these liberating tendencies, in manipulated form, are made part of the reproduction of the established system. They became exchange values, selling the system, and sold by the system. The exchange society comes to completion with the commercialization of sex : the female body not only a commodity, but also a vital factor in the realization of surplus value. And the working woman continues, in ever large numbers, to suffer the double exploitation as worker and housewife. In this form, the reification of the woman persists in a particularly effective manner. How can this reification be dissolved? How can the emancipation of the woman become a decisive force in the construction of socialism as a qualitatively different society?

Let's go back to the first stage in the development of this Movement, and assume the achievement of complete equality. As equals in the economy and politics of capitalism, women must share with men the competitive, aggressive characteristics required to keep a job and to get ahead in the job. Thus, the Performance Principle, and the alienation implied in it would be sustained and reproduced by a larger number of individuals. In order to achieve equality, which is the absolute prerequisite of liberation, the Movement must be aggressive. But equality is not yet freedom. Only as an equal economic and political subject can the woman claim a leading role in the radical reconstruction of society. But beyond equality, liberation subverts the established hierarchy of needs—a subversion of values and norms which would make for the emergence of a society governed by a new Reality Principle. And this, in my

view, is the radical potential of *feminist socialism*.

Feminist socialism : I spoke of a necessary modification of the notion of socialism, because I believe that in Marxian socialism there are remnants, elements of the continuation of the Performance Principle and its values. I see these elements, for example, in the emphasis on the ever more effective development of the productive forces, the ever more productive exploitation of nature, the separation of the “realm of freedom” from the work world.

The potentialities of socialism today transcend this image. Socialism, as a qualitatively different way of life would not only use the productive forces for the reduction of alienated labor and labor time, but also for making life an end in itself, for the development of the senses and the intellect for pacification of aggressiveness, the enjoyment of being, for the emancipation of the senses and of the intellect from the rationality of domination : creative receptivity versus repressive productivity.

In this context, the liberation of the woman would indeed appear “as the antithesis to the Performance Principle,” would indeed appear as the revolutionary function of the female in the reconstruction of society. Far from fostering submissiveness and weakness, in this reconstruction, the feminine characteristics would activate aggressive energy against domination and exploitation. They would operate as needs and eventual goals in the socialist organization of production, in the social division of labor, in the setting of priorities once scarcity has been conquered. And thus, entering the reconstruction of society as a whole, the feminine characteristics would cease to be specifically feminine, to the degree to which they would be universalized in socialist culture, material and intellectual. Primary aggressiveness would persist, as it would in any form of society, but it may well lose the specifically masculine equality of domination and exploitation. Technical progress, the chief vehicle of productive aggressiveness, would be freed from its capitalist features and channelled² into the destruction of the ugly destructiveness of capitalism.

I think there are good reasons for calling this image of socialist society *feminist socialism* : the woman would have achieved full economic, political, and cultural equality in the all round development of her faculties, and over and above this equality, social as well as personal relationships would be permeated with the receptive sensitivity which, under male domination, was largely concentrated in the woman : the masculine-feminine antithesis would then have been transformed into a synthesis—the legendary idea of *androgynism*.

2 Embs Note : Spelling preserved.

I will say a few words about this extreme of (if you wish) romantic or speculative thought, which I think is neither so extreme nor so speculative.

No other rational meaning can possibly be attributed to the idea of androgynism than the fusion, in the individual, of the mental and somatic characteristics, which in patriarchal civilization were unequally developed in men and women, a fusion in which feminine characteristics, in cancellation of male dominance, would prevail over their repression. But, no degree of androgynous fusion could ever abolish the natural differences between male and female as individuals. All joy, and all sorrow are rooted in this difference, in this relation to the other, of whom you want to become part, and who you want to become part of yourself, and who never can and never will become such a part of yourself. Feminist socialism would thus continue to be riddled with conflicts arising from this condition, the ineradicable conflicts of needs and values, but the androgynous character of society might gradually diminish the violence and humiliation in the resolution of these conflicts.

To conclude :

The Woman's Movement has gained political significance because of recent changes in the capitalist mode of production itself which provided the movement with a new material base. I recall the main features :

- 1) the increasing number of women employed in the production process,
- 2) the increasingly technical form of production, gradually diminishing the use of heavy physical labor power,
- 3) the spread of an *aesthetic* commodity form : systematic commercial appeal to sensuousness, luxuries ; the diversion of purchasing power to pleasurable things and services.
- 4) the disintegration of the patriarchal family through "socialization" of the children from outside (mass media, peer groups, etc.)
- 5) the ever more wasteful and destructive productivity of the Performance Principle.

Feminism is a revolt against decaying capitalism, against the historical obsolescence of the capitalist mode of production. This is the precarious link between the Utopia and reality : the social ground for the movement as a potentially radical and revolutionary force is there, this is the hard core of the dream. But capitalism is still capable of keeping it a dream, of suppressing the transcending forces which strive for the subversion of the inhuman values of our civilization.

The struggle is still a political one, for abolition of these conditions, and in this struggle, the feminist movement plays an ever more vital part. Its mental and physiological forces assert themselves in the political education and action, and in the relationship between the individuals, at work and at leisure. I stressed that liberation cannot be expected as a by-product of new institutions, that it must emerge in the individuals themselves. The liberation of women begins at home, before it can enter society at large.

And here is my concluding personal statement. You may if you wish interpret it as a statement of surrender, or a statement of commitment. I believe that we men have to pay for the sins of a patriarchal civilization and its tyranny of power : women must become free to determine their own life, not as wife, not as mother, not as mistress, not as girl friend, but as an individual human being. This will be a struggle permeated with bitter conflicts, torment and suffering (mental and physical). Only the most familiar example today, which occurs again and again, where a man and a woman have jobs or can get jobs at places distant from each other, and the question naturally arises : who follows whom?

An even more serious example, the conflicting erotic relationships, which inevitably will arise in the process of liberation. These erotic conflicts cannot be resolved in a facile, playful way, nor by being thought, nor by establishing exchange relationships. That you should leave to the exchange society where it belongs. Feminist socialism will have to develop its own morality, which will be more, and other, than the mere cancellation of bourgeois morality.

Women's Liberation will be a painful process, but I believe it will be a necessary, a vital stage in the transition of a better society for men and women.³