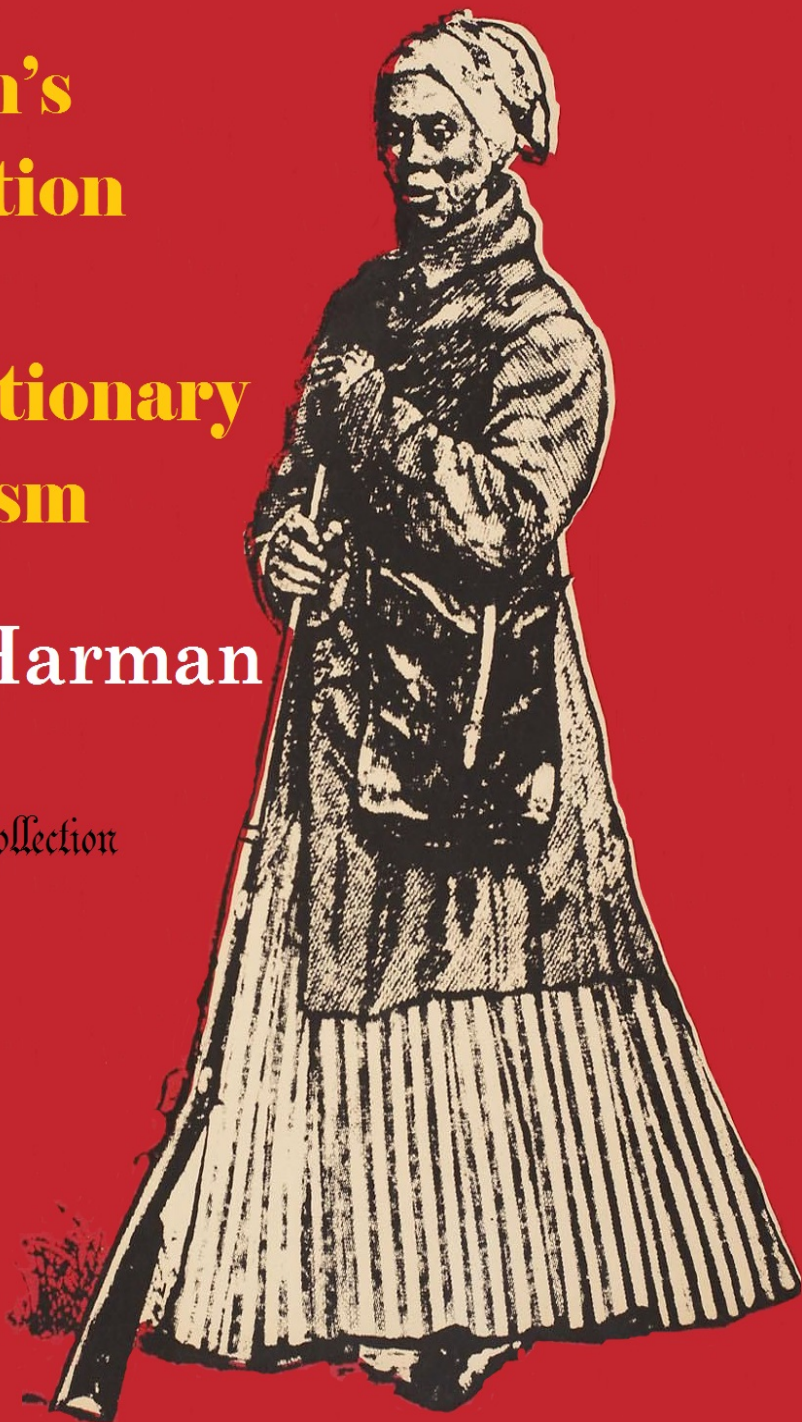


**Women's
Liberation
and
Revolutionary
Socialism**

Chris Harman

Ross Collection



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Revolutionary Marxists differ from all other people who stand for women's liberation in one important respect. We do not believe women's oppression is something that has always existed – either because of the biological differences between the sexes or because of something inherent in the male psyche. [1]

We hold that women's oppression arose at a particular point in history – at the point at which society began to divide in classes. [2]

In all class societies women are oppressed; the evidence suggests that in at least some pre-class societies there was no such oppression.

The reason why the oppression of women arises with the division of society into classes is simple enough. Class divisions began to occur once advances in the forces of

production enabled human beings to produce a surplus over and above what was necessary for the bare subsistence of the whole of society. This surplus was not enough for everyone to live above the subsistence level; but it was great enough for *some* people to. And this then made possible the further development of the forces of production and with them the growth of civilisation, art and culture.

Hence the growth of the surplus was accompanied by an increasing split between an exploiting class and an exploited class.

The growth of the surplus was accompanied by a growing division of labour. It was those who occupied certain positions in this division of labour who developed into the controllers of the surplus – the first exploiting class.

At this point the biological differences between men and women took on an importance they had never had before. Weighed down with the burden of child bearing, women tended to be channelled towards certain productive roles and away from others – away from those which provided access to the surplus. So for instance when societies move from hoe cultivation, which can be done by women despite the burden of pregnancy, to the use of heavy ploughs or to cattle rearing, women tend to be displaced from key productive roles, and the surplus comes to be controlled by males. [3]

Where fully developed ruling classes developed, women members of that ruling class tended to play a subordinate role – to be treated virtually as the possessions of the male rulers. And very much the same situation prevailed in independent peasant and artisan households: one man (the patriarch) controlled the interaction of the household with the outside world, and his wife was as much his subordinate as were the children and servants (the exception proves the rule: where a widow took her dead husband's place she

dominated all the other men and women in the household [4]; where situations arose in which the productive role played by women tended to produce a marketable surplus, the women tended to challenge some aspects of the stereotyped patriarchal household) [5].

So in pre-capitalist class societies women of all classes were under the domination of men. But they were not under the domination of all men. For certain *men* were oppressed also. The male slaves of antiquity and the male toilers of the patriarchal household had no more freedom than did the women (even if some of the males in the patriarchal household might hope one day to escape from servitude by taking the patriarch's place).

The oppression of women in every case arose out of the way the development of the forces of production necessitated certain relations of production. It was based in the material history of society.

Of course, once the relations of production led to the oppression of women, this found its expression ideologically. The inferiority of women and their subordination to men came to be regarded as part of the natural order of things, and was backed up by elaborate systems of beliefs, religious rituals, legal enactments, the mutilation of the female body and so on. But you cannot understand the origin of any of these things without understanding their origins in the development of the forces and relations of production.

Capitalism is the most revolutionary form of class society. It seizes hold of the institutions of previous class societies and reshapes them in its own image. It does not bow down to their hierarchies or their prejudices. Rather it creates new hierarchies in opposition to the old, and completely transforms old prejudices so as to use them in its drive to accumulate.

Hence it is with all the institutions it encountered at its birth -organised religions, monarchies, hereditary castes, land tenure systems, belief systems. Capitalism puts a straight alternative to all these: either be transformed in the interests of capital accumulation or be smashed.

It is exactly the same with the family. Capitalism does take hold of certain elements of the pre-capitalist family. But it does so in order to recast them completely and to adapt them to its needs.

Capitalism is not driven forward by a desire to maintain the family (and with it women's oppression) any more than it is driven forward by a desire to propagate religion, maintain monarchies, advance obscurantist beliefs etc. It has only one driving force – the exploitation of workers in order to accumulate. The family, like religion, the monarchy etc. is only of use to capitalism in so far as it helps this goal.

Because of this, the capitalist family is not some fixed, unchanging entity. As Marx and Engels noted in the **Communist Manifesto**, the drive to accumulate means a continual recasting of the very institutions capitalism itself has created:

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form, was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast frozen relations, with their train of ancient and removable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts away into air, all that is holy is profaned ...

The capitalist family

In its earliest phase industrial capitalism had a tendency not only to destroy the pre-capitalist patriarchal peasant and artisan household, but to destroy family ties completely among the new working class. It cared little that this conflicted with old belief systems. Thus Marx and Engels referred in the **Communist Manifesto** to ‘the practical absence of the family among the proletarians.’

But the capitalist class as a whole soon found this was undermining the basis of further accumulation – the reproduction of the working class. There had to be some way of making sure workers were able to refresh themselves for further work and of bringing up the next generation of workers so they could meet the physical and mental requirements of paid labour.

Capitalism did not have the resources or technology to provide for socialised reproduction (through baby farms, nurseries, communal restaurants and so forth) and so the most far sighted representatives of the capitalist class looked to creating a new family structure for the working class. This would both cater for the material needs of the existing generation of workers and take responsibility for the upbringing of the next generation.

Having destroyed the old patriarchal household, capitalism now took certain elements from it and recombined them into the new working class family and, of course, they used much of the ideology associated with the old patriarchal household (religious texts and rituals etc.) in order to persuade both workers and individual capitalists to accept the new family. But it was not patriarchal ideology

which motivated the capitalist class as a whole, but its material interest in ensuring supplies of labour power.

The new working class family was essentially the nuclear family of a man, a woman, and their children. The man was expected to work full time and to earn a wage capable of providing a minimal living standard for the whole family. The woman was expected to take charge of refreshing the man's labour power as well as giving birth to children and bringing them up.

Of course, this ideal family was seldom realised in practice. Individual capitalists were rarely prepared to pay a 'family wage' to their male workers. Working class wives were forced by economic pressures to get whatever jobs were available to them (seasonal work in the sweated trades, home work, etc.) while bearing the burden of childrearing and housework. But there was a sense in which the ideal fitted in with the needs of long term capital accumulation. These needs, rather than some patriarchal conspiracy between male employers and male workers explains why it was the ideal.

The new working class family did have its ideological advantages for the system. Although the male worker differed from the old patriarch in that he did not control any surplus, he could imagine himself as the old patriarch: he controlled the funds which the whole family had to subsist on, and could imagine the wage was his to spend as he liked. He could believe he was master in his own home – although, from the point of view of the system he was only master of the means to enable him and his children to be wage slaves.

The new family created a split in the working class, as it encouraged the male workers to identify with certain of the values of their exploiters.

At the same time, the isolation of women in the home could cut them off from wider social movements. Their

oppression reduced their ability to struggle against the system much of the time, and so opened them up to conservative views of society. Institutions like the Church exploited their situation in order to try to get them to oppose social change.

That was why Marx and Engels argued the precondition for the liberation of women was their incorporation into social production – albeit capitalist production under the conditions of the most extreme exploitation. Nevertheless it would be wrong to see either working class women or working class men as offering any massive resistance to the imposition of the new working class family.

There was some resistance by women to being displaced from relatively well paid jobs. But by and large the ideal of a family in which they would be maintained while bringing up their children was bound to appeal to women for whom the alternative was grim – dangerous abortions, repeated miscarriages, slaving 12 hours a day in a factory and then having to care for children, or self-enforced celibacy. [6]

The system created the ideal of the new working class family because it wanted the next generation of workers to be able to toil for it; but this at least implied some sort of concern for the health of the present generation of working class mothers. It was hardly surprising, then, that the resistance of working class women was not so much to the ideal as to the failure of reality to live up to the ideal.

Women were oppressed in the new family structure, in that they were forced into dependence on their husbands and cut off from the world outside. But the burden of suffering imposed by child birth and child rearing was reduced.

For working class men too the new family was an advantage. They had to be responsible for the upkeep of the family, and often resented this. But in return they were

provided with the bare physical inputs needed to keep fit and well.

For both working class men and working class women the family had one other advantage. It seemed to provide a haven from a world of loneliness and psychological alienation. As capitalism drew workers into the cities, it often tore them apart from old friends and relatives. The family seemed to provide a way of guaranteeing friendship and affection. Again, the failure of reality to measure up to the ideal did not stop people hankering after the ideal.

The new family was not, as some feminists claim, the result of a conspiracy between capitalist males and working class males. But it was a reform to the system's benefit which those workers, both male and female, who did not see the possibility of ending the system, were likely to identify with. That was why the slogan of 'defence of the family' was always one which reactionary forces could use in order to get support from workers – including women workers.

Women's oppression under capitalism

The way the nuclear family serves to reproduce the labour force is the material root of working class women's oppression under capitalism today. It is the burden of child rearing and housework which restricts the working class women's contact with the world outside the home and makes her dependent on working class men.

That is why working class women's oppression cannot be ended short of the massive social change necessary to socialise housework and child rearing.

Of course, the oppression is not simply material. Material oppression is backed up by a whole barrage of ideological factors. So the oppression does not stop when women go out of the home, if they decide not to have children, or if their children have grown up. Material and ideological pressures combine, for instance, to persuade women to work for wages less than most men would accept.

When it comes to the ideology of oppression another factor also has to be taken into consideration. This ideology is not generated by the working class itself, but has to be imposed on it from above, by the representatives of the bourgeoisie. As Marx put it, 'the ruling ideas are the ideas of the ruling class'. How working class women and men see and relate to each other is determined not only by their own material conditions, but also by the ideology generated by the ruling class family.

Under capitalism there is an oppression of bourgeois women which parallels that of working class women, although it is quite different in its origin and content.

The classic bourgeois family was one in which women were relieved of much of the burden of child rearing (by the employment of numerous domestic servants), but were also denied any role in production. Their husbands had control of the surplus and they were regarded very much as commodities – as adornments to their husbands' homes, with marriage being virtually a form of trade between male dominated families. Ruling class women were confined to their homes, but in idleness, not in toil as with working class women.

The ideology which corresponded to this state of affairs depicted women as having qualities quite different from those of 'industrious', 'confident', 'aggressive' males – the passive, gentle, caring, emotional, frivolous, 'feminine' female.

Such a view did not match at all the real position of working class women, toiling at home, in domestic service or in the factory. But it did provide the set of stereotyped images with which not only ruling class men and women, but also working class men and women, were expected to see each other. For, insofar as they take for granted existing society, workers are always under enormous pressure to accept their exploiters' definition of the world.

The working class man would fantasise about what he would do if only he could succeed in bourgeois society – and one of the things he could do would be to possess women as commodities. The working class woman would fantasise about 'succeeding' if only she could cultivate the attributes of femininity allegedly possessed by upper class women (fantasies encouraged by magazine stories and soap operas featuring working class women who manage to marry above their class of origin).

All this served to idealise and sanctify the real situation of the working class family and so to perform a very real function for capitalism. It acted as a mechanism to hold the working class family together and to keep the system going. Religion, pornography, the soap opera, the women's magazine, the law, all acted together to make the family seem necessary and inevitable, the most stable of institutions in an ever changing world.

But under capitalism no institution can remain unchanged for ever. Nothing is so sacred that it can avoid being revolutionised by the further advance of the forces of production.

Within a few decades of the establishment of the stereotyped working class family it began to be undermined by changes in the material condition of capitalist society.

In the mid 19th century, the reproduction of the labour force was only possible if the average working class wife had

eight or ten pregnancies (in London nearly 60 percent of infants died by the age of five in 1850) and so spent virtually all her life after marriage either pregnant or nursing young children.

But the very expansion of the productive forces produced by capitalism had, as a by product, the development of new technologies that radically reduced the effort that needed to be put into the reproduction of the labour force. Improvements in health care meant that fewer children died.

New methods of birth control became available that were vastly superior to the rough and ready methods available in capitalism's infancy – first the condom and the cap, then, in the early 1960s, the pill and the IUD. The birth rate could decline and working class women be relieved of some of the burden of child birth. Yet the need of the system for labour power was not threatened.

At the same time, new technology began to be applied to the tasks of child rearing and of tending for the male workers. The washing machine, the vacuum cleaner, the refrigerator, the displacement of the coal stove by modern heating systems, all had the effect of reducing enormously the amount of sheer drudgery taking place in the home.

As many writers on housework have pointed out, this did not overcome the tedium and the alienation of the woman who continued to be stuck in the home, especially if she was responsible for small children. But it did mean she could begin to think in terms of getting employment outside the home, in a way which her mother or her grandmother could not. For, especially after the couple of children she had were five or six years old, she could earn enough by selling her labour power to pay for ways of reducing (although not eliminating) the tedium and the drudgery (paid baby minders, convenience foods, nappy services, service washes

in the laundrette, once a week expeditions to the supermarket instead of the daily round of the local shops, and so on).

From the point of view of capital accumulation, the old stereotyped family came to be very wasteful. Women were now expending more labour in the home than was strictly necessary to reproduce labour power for the system.

If the average number of children born to a family is eight or more, it is probably more economical for the system for virtually all the upbringing of the children to take place in the individual home. But once the number of children is down to two or so, things begin to be the other way round. An average nursery will have one adult looking after six children. So for every extra worker who has to be taken on to do paid child care, two women more are freed for exploitation through the labour market. This is especially the case if the women have to pay for the child care out of their own earnings: the system then gets surplus value out of them without having to worry itself about the cost of paying for socialised child care!

From the point of view of ageing capitalism, a woman stuck in the home caring for only two children and her husband is a waste of potential surplus value. The fact that she labours all day is no consolation for the system; her labour is labour that could be done more efficiently, relieving her for wage slavery.

Hence there has been a long term tendency for the number of women in paid labour to grow. In Britain today more than half married women now work, as opposed to less than one in five in 1950; in the US the proportion of 20-25 year old married women who worked rose from 31 per cent in 1957 to 43 per cent in 1968. This rise has been taking place since the 1920s; the slump of the 1930s did not reverse it, nor has the slump of the last ten years. [7]

It is true that the vast influx of women into paid labour during the two world wars was followed by measures to replace them by men when the wars ended – but that experience could not stop a long term rise in the proportion of married women working over more than half a century.

The capitalist state, charged with maintaining the underlying conditions needed for capital accumulation, has been forced in all countries to respond to this change. It has had increasingly to take measures itself designed to complement the family in the reproduction of labour power – the provision of welfare benefits, preschool education, and so on. [8]

The changes have been cumulative. The more working class women have entered the workforce the more they have demanded the facilities to make this possible. As they have begun to gain independent sources of income they have begun to question the old assumptions of complete dependence on their husbands. They have begun to demand more effective contraception, safe abortions, to have fewer children, some shift of responsibility for household tasks on to the shoulders of their husbands. They have increasingly taken the initiative in bringing to an end unhappy marriages.

The system is experiencing today what Marx thought it would a hundred years ago – a tendency to undermine the family. However, this tendency can never come to fruition because of counter-factors.

1. The full socialisation of child care would require a level of investment which the capitalist system is loath to make, even in periods of expansion.

2. The ideology of the family continues to be very important for the stability of the system. Women's belief that looking after their children should be their primary concern leads them to work for less than men. Organisations like the church which exploit the isolation of women, using the slogan of the defence of the family, still can provide some valuable ideological ballast for the system. So you find that governments pass anti-abortion laws and are slow to liberalise divorce laws, even though such questions are not in themselves important to the economic needs of the system.

3. Finally, the new period of economic crisis since the mid 1970s has reduced the pressures to increase the supply of labour power by getting more women into the workforce and has increased the dependence of the system on backward looking forces which use the slogan of 'defence of the family'. This has not stopped some continued expansion of the number of women looking for work; but it has dissuaded the system from making the investment needed to help them in this.

The development of the forces of production has put pressure on the old social relations embodied in the working class family. But it has not been enough to

smash them.

There can be no end to women's oppression under capitalism

There can be no end to women's oppression without an end to privatised reproduction. But that, in turn, is not possible without a complete revolutionising of social relations. This is only possible in two circumstances:

1. If capitalism were able to enter into a new period of virtually uninterrupted expansion of the productive forces. The system could then, undoubtedly, replace privatised reproduction with socialised, mechanised housework, and even the building of Brave New World type baby farms etc.

But merely to pose the alternative like this is to see how impossible it is in practice. The system cannot enter such a new period of expansion. The stagnation of ageing capitalism cuts off any road to women's liberation by reform of the system.

2. If socialist revolution occurs. Some of the massive resources wasted under

capitalism could then be devoted to providing the real material base for socialisation of child care and housework. And an insurgent working class would see this as a first priority, since it would seem a great boon not merely to working class women, but to working class men as well. Of course, after such a revolution, the ideological heritage of capitalism would persist, and that heritage would include sexist attitudes. But it would be relatively easy to fight back against that heritage once its material base had been destroyed.

A comparison is possible between the social structures which produce women's oppression under capitalism and certain other oppressive structures which have been thrown up in the course of capitalist development, like the Jim Crow structures in the Southern US and Orangism in Northern Ireland.

These structures discriminated against a certain section of the population on the basis of race or religion. They came to be seen as archaic by many supporters of the system during its long period of economic expansion in the 1950s and 1960s. Capital accumulation seemed to depend upon access to labour power, regardless of its race or religion. There was a general spread of ideologies which reiterated the old liberal doctrine that everyone should have equal access to the market. Movements grew up which pressed for bourgeois civil rights. The system seemed able to cope with these, even though they roused some of the most oppressed sections of the population to political action. But then, with

the first signs of economic crisis in the late 1960s, it had to retreat from granting more than token equality to the oppressed sections.

The early women's liberation movement was very much an offshoot of this general agitation for the formal equality the system promises to all those who live under it. Its demands were pushed initially by middle class women who wanted freedom to lead the same sorts of lives as middle class men. But they fitted in with the changed attitudes of many working class women, who for the first time felt themselves to be life time members of capitalism's paid labour force. At this stage the demands seemed reconcilable with the system's need to reshape the family so as get access to women's labour.

However, the impediments to real equality for working class women were even greater than those facing American blacks or Ulster Catholics. The system could not face the full cost of socialisation of reproduction even in the 1960s, let alone in the crisis years after the mid 1970s. Limited changes to allow women to become wage slaves were possible (and necessary); an end to their oppression was ruled out by continued dependence on the nuclear family for privatised reproduction.

Capitalism and the crisis of the women's movement

The harsh reality that women's oppression cannot be ended under conditions of capitalist crisis has faced the women's movement with three alternatives:

1. To abandon the goal of liberation in favour of pursuing the very limited reforms that are possible within the present system. Effectively this amounts to demanding individual advancement for a few privileged women, while leaving the conditions of the mass of women completely untouched. This was the path chosen by the bourgeois women involved in the movement and by a very large section of middle class feminists.
2. To try to cut itself off from existing society by creating separatist counter-institutions.
3. To identify with working class challenges to existing society as the way of smashing the structures responsible for women's oppression.

Which of the options gained hegemony within the women's movement depended on concrete circumstances. Where there was an upturn in workers' struggles in the late 1960s and early 1970s (France, Italy, Spain, Britain etc.) there was a tendency for almost all sections of the women's movement to orient at least in part to the working class. Its demands tended to be those which had some immediate appeal to the mass of working class women (equal pay, 24 hour nurseries, abortion rights etc.). But where the working class movement was weak (the US) or where

it went into decline (most other places) the women's movement came to be hegemonised by feminism on the one hand and separatism on the other.

In practice, reformism and separatism reinforced one another. The bourgeois feminist prejudice against the working class helped create a 'common sense' within the movement which treated any talk of women's liberation through working class revolution as 'crude workerism' and 'old fashioned Leninism'. And the separatist objection to collaboration with men meant, in practice, keeping well clear of rank and file workers' struggles – and this in turn, meant rejecting involvement in the only struggles that could gain more than the most marginal things from the system.

The division of labour between separatism and reformism found its ultimate expression in calls for an alliance between bourgeois or reformist politicians, the trade union bureaucracy, 'women' and 'blacks' (the 'broad democratic alliance' of Eurocommunism, the 'rainbow coalition' in the US, the electoralist strategy of people like Benn and Livingstone in Britain).

The tendency towards reformism is not an accident. Under capitalism there is only one force capable of imposing real change – the working class. If you don't base yourself on working class struggle, then you are inevitably driven to compromise with the system. But those who preach separatism are rejecting the notion of effective working class struggle. Even if they try to relate to women workers, they are basing themselves on the belief that one section of the working class can win without the assistance of other (male) sections of the class. They are avoiding the total mobilisation of forces that alone can guarantee victories.

Like the civil rights movements in the US and Northern Ireland, the women's movement of the late 1960s and early

1970s began to mobilise people against oppression created by the system. To that extent it encouraged the beginnings of a struggle against the system. But, again like those movements, it could not carry that struggle forward beyond a certain point. From then on the choice was between a radically different sort of movement, or merely improving the lot of a few fortunate individuals while the mass of people remained as oppressed as ever. [9]

That is why, for us, there can be no talk of recreating the sort of women's movement that existed then. It belongs to a period that is past.

Of course it is possible that the crisis of the system will lead to attacks on women's rights which will, in turn, produce upsurges of protest from women. We have seen such upsurges in Britain every time attempts have been made in recent years to restrict abortion rights. Such struggles have to be supported wholeheartedly; but it also has to be seen that those involved in them will rapidly polarise between supporters of reformism and separatism on the one hand and those who are won to a revolutionary working class perspective on the other.

Wrong theories of women's oppression

The women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s threw up its own theories of women's oppression. It is necessary to look at what was wrong with these, because this enables us to see more clearly what the revolutionary Marxist view is.

The dominant view in what remains of the women's movement in Britain is the theory of patriarchy.

This holds that the oppression of women is a result of male domination and is quite separate from the division of society into economic classes. It sees 'men' as benefiting from the oppression of women in all societies [10] and maintaining that oppression even if socialist revolution takes place. It accuses attempts to explain women's oppression on the basis of the dynamic of class societies as 'reductionist'. From this it draws the conclusion that the struggle for women's liberation is something quite separate from (even if parallel to) the struggle for working class revolution and socialism.

The theory is 'hegemonic' in that few feminists challenge it, and it has been adopted wholesale by sections of the reformist left outside the women's movement. Indeed, although a few figures in the women's movement (for instance, Sheila Rowbotham) used to oppose the use of the term 'patriarchy' [11], today the concept is usually treated as unquestionable.

It has great appeal because, as Lindsey German has noted, 'The joy of patriarchy theory is that it can be all things to all people. It thrives on the vague feelings so beloved by sections of the women's movement, rather than on material analysis...' [12]

Yet its theoretical basis is very flimsy indeed. For, if women have always been oppressed by men, the question must arise as to why? How is it that the male sex has been able to subordinate the female sex in this way?

Unless patriarchy theorists can answer these questions, they cannot explain the oppression of women. Therefore they cannot say how it is to be overcome. They end up, not with a theory of women's liberation, but with a view that rules out any real liberation!

One attempt at an explanation lies in ascribing women's oppression to ideological factors. Now, certainly the fact that

the prevailing ideology regards women as subordinate reinforces their subordination: men grow up to see themselves as the superior sex and many women grow up to accept this. But where does the ideology of women's subordination itself come from?

Adherents of the theory cannot explain this and usually end up abandoning any materialist explanation of anything – saying, for instance, that historical materialism is wrong, that ideologies exist in their own right as 'different modes of discourse'.

Other patriarchy theorists do attempt to explain women's oppression materialistically. But they resort to a materialism which abstracts from class society. All that then remains as the basis of women's oppression is the biological difference between them and men. It is this, it seems, that enables men to conspire successfully to subjugate women. According to one such theorist, Heidi Hartmann, men 'control women's labour and restrict their sexuality'.

Hartmann goes as far as to try to recruit Engels for her position. [13] She quotes a famous passage in the **Origins of the Family** where Engels writes that:

The determining factor in history is ... the production and reproduction of immediate life ... On the one side the production of the means of existence, of food, clothing and shelter and the tools necessary for that production; on the other side the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species. The social organisation under which people of a particular historical epoch live is determined by both kinds of production.

She sees the two 'modes' of production as being of equal importance, and argues there is no necessary connection between changes in one 'mode' and changes in the other.

Engels clearly thought otherwise. For he himself went on to say that as class society develops, it is less and less the case that the two modes of production coexist. A society arises in which ‘family relations are entirely subordinated to property relations.’

In fact, it is absolutely confusing to talk of ‘two modes’. The mode of production in any society is a coupling together of forces of production and relations of production. The first half of the couple is continually exercising pressure for change on the second half. Every increase in the ability of human beings to control nature produces new interrelations between the human beings themselves, and therefore begins to transform the pre-existing relations of production. Either society changes, or the new ways of controlling nature have to be abandoned. There is always a tension, a dynamic in the mode of production which determines the shape of human history.

There is no such tension inbuilt into the ‘mode of reproduction’. Human beings are not continually finding new ways of reproducing themselves (cloning in one epoch, laying eggs in another, live birth in a third); these new ways of reproducing are not continually coming up against the barrier of the existing relations between people.

The way people reproduce themselves is relatively static. [14] If it is seen as shaping human history, then there can be no change to it, no development. If the ‘forces of reproduction’ determine the ‘relations of reproduction’ then women’s oppression is indeed something which must always have existed – and which will always exist.

But ‘relations of reproduction’ – ie family structures – do indeed change. They change, like the rest of human relations, as a result of what takes place in the sphere of material production.

As we have pointed out earlier, when in pre-capitalist societies the most important areas of material production can be carried out by women who are burdened by pregnancy and child rearing, then you find societies in which women have high prestige and equality or even superiority to men.

The relations of reproduction – the family – result from the material conditions of production, not from some ‘mode of reproduction’.

Once you grasp this, you can see how capitalism prepares the ground for the abolition of women’s oppression. It brings about such an immense development of productive forces that, on the one hand, production can be carried out by anyone, however much crude ‘biological realities’ might be an impediment to them; on the other hand it creates, for the first time, the technology to transform human biology (control fertility etc.). But capitalism itself prevents the full realisation of these potentialities.

Patriarchy theory refuses to recognise this. Indeed, it presents us with a picture of present day society as shaped by two quite different things. One is the drive to accumulate capital through exploitation. The other is a conspiracy by men of all classes to hold down women of all classes.

The logic of patriarchy theory is that while the class struggle may be seen playing a certain role, it has nothing to do with women’s oppression. This depends on a second struggle, that of all women against all men. So if you really want to end women’s oppression, in practice you turn your back on the class struggle.

The theory fits in neatly with the needs of both the separatist and the reformist strands within the women’s movement. The separatist trend can see themselves as the consistent applicers of the theory. They are the people who take seriously the view of history as a power struggle

between the sexes. Whether it is a question of blaming all men for sex crimes, of opposing 'male institutions' like the trade unions, of trying to form areas of liberated female sexuality, or of counterposing 'female values' to the macho aggression that is said to cause nuclear wars, they are able to take the offensive against feminists who see collaboration with some men as being important.

But the reformist trend can also use the theory as well. For if there are two distinct terrains of battle, then you can fight on one terrain while compromising on the other. Hence the way that in Britain talk of 'fighting patriarchal values' has been used to justify collaboration between union leaders and a future Labour government to hold down wages with a 'feminist incomes policy'. Hence the way in which women in the trade union bureaucracy can accept the idea of union officials being appointed from above, getting several times the average wage, not being subject to recall, etc. – providing there is an 'adequate career structure for women' within the bureaucracy.

Half way theories

Some socialist feminists have seen the dangers and inconsistencies of the patriarchy theory approach, and have tried to argue against it. But they have often ended up half conceding to its arguments.

Thus Sheila Rowbotham rejects patriarchy theory. But she explains the persistence of the family with a version of the 'two modes of production' argument. In **Women's Consciousness, Men's World**, she argues the family is a pre-capitalist mode of production existing inside the wider capitalist system [15]. But the logic of this position is the

same as that of patriarchy theory – that there are two distinct struggles, which are not necessarily linked up in the here and now.

Even revolutionary socialists who have sought to oppose many of the arguments of the middle class women's movement have made the mistake of accepting many of its theoretical formulations.

A good example of this is to be found in an argument which took place some years ago in the pages of this journal between Joan Smith and Irene Bruegel.

Joan started off the discussion [16] with some very telling and important criticisms of the life style politics which was then becoming prevalent in the women's movement. As against those politics, she insisted women's oppression persists because of the economic importance of the family for capitalism. But she then went on to base her own position on the two modes of production theory elaborated by Sheila Rowbotham, Shulamith Firestone and Heidi Hartmann, complete with the same (truncated) quote from Engels. The result is an argument that is absolutely confused, and confusing.

Joan's view was that the existing family was as much a defining feature of capitalism as the exploitation of workers at the point of production. It was 'part of the base' – not part of the superstructure. She justified this by saying that capitalism depends on 'free labour' and that you could not have free labour unless labour was reproduced in privatised households.

The argument was tortuous in the extreme. What Marx meant by 'free labour' was labour where (1) the worker did not have any control over the means of production, and (2) the worker did not belong to the individual capitalist and so could be discarded the moment his or her labour was no longer needed. It is quite easy to imagine a society in which

such labour was reproduced in state run institutions and then sent out into the wider world to sell itself or starve.

Such a society does not exist at present, as we have explained earlier, because it does not suit the economic needs of capital accumulation – because the economic ‘base’ does not yet need such a transformation of the institutional superstructure. As Kath Ennis pointed out in **International Socialism** ten years ago, ‘In theory capitalism could do without the family ... But in practice, this would require such fundamental changes in society it is hard to imagine them ever being carried out.’

Irene Bruegel took up and elaborated Kath Ennis’s point in her reply to Joan. [17] She showed how capitalism had an economic interest in socialising certain aspects of housework, so enabling women to be exploited through the labour market. Her economic argument was irrefutable. It undercut any claim that the family is essential to capitalism in the same way as exploitation and accumulation.

Once that is accepted the logical thing is to see the family as part of the superstructure – something created by the needs of accumulation at a certain point in capitalist development, which capitalism now begins to undermine, but which it is prevented from abolishing because of its own crisis-prone nature.

Irene herself rushes off in the direction of the analysis of women’s oppression provided by Anne Foreman. This does not start from the economics of capitalist production at all, but from the psychological needs of working class men. The family exists, for Anne Foreman, because ‘men find relief from alienation through their relation with women; for women there is no relief’.

Irene accepts this view in its entirety. Both of them inevitably end up moving away from the revolutionary socialist struggle against the system to the life style politics

of certain middle class feminists. Joan is quite rightly completely scathing about about such a conclusion. She insists:

If we follow an Anne Foreman type analysis, then, it is the 'gender attributes of femininity', the polarity masculine/feminine, that is oppressive of women, rather than these being the ideological manifestations of women's oppression. This is essentially an idealist analysis in which the ideological forms which oppress women are generated within the relationships women have with the men they live with. [18]

But Joan herself is no more capable than Irene of drawing the logical conclusion from the collapse of the view that the family is something which is at all times an economic necessity for capitalism. She drops the two modes of production theory in practice (using phrases like 'the family system of reproducing labour power'). But she cannot drop the view that the family – and women's oppression – is as important for capitalism as exploitation and accumulation. So she clings ever more tenuously to the view that only the family can produce 'free labour'. She even goes so far as to argue this is true for all class societies. 'The essential element of the family remains unchanged in all class societies, because the family is the only way of reproducing society which allows for essential differences in reproduction from class to class and which takes the burden of reproduction from society in general and places it upon individuals or groups in society.' [19]

So Joan, who had previously been so critical of 'patriarchal' talk of the family as invariant, is led to put

forward a view very close to that of patriarchy theory. Indeed, she begins to use the phraseology of patriarchy theory herself when she claims that ‘The essential history of patriarchy and women’s oppression is the history of the family system of reproduction ...’

Joan takes another step beyond her initial starting point at the same time. This is to locate women’s oppression in the state. Again using the terminology of middle class feminist analysis, she writes ‘the patriarchal control of women shifts from the patriarchal household to the patriarchal capitalist state with its infinite battery of laws to control women and to the capitalist market where women are always paid less than men ...’

She even goes so far as to talk of ‘the male state’!

Some of the reasons she has for wanting to stress the role of the state are good ones. She is still trying to attack ideas that locate women’s oppression in the relationships between individual men and women. Nevertheless, the formulation is both mystical and misleading. It is not the state which supplies the system with its dynamic, it is the drive to accumulate. The state is merely one of the mechanisms used by the system in this drive – it is part of the superstructure. The family is another such mechanism: it too is part of the superstructure.

It is simply not true that all the oppression of women comes from the state, or that the state simply oppresses women though keeping intact the existing family. The oppression of women comes, ultimately, from the drive to accumulate. The state helps sustain this drive, and so has to prop up the family. But it also steps in to replace certain family functions as the system’s needs change – supplying (although not on nearly a big enough scale) nurseries and schools, welfare benefits, providing free contraceptives,

legislating for equal pay (although leaving immense loopholes in the legislation), etc.

It is the system that oppresses women, not just the state. And the oppression often takes place in contradictory ways.

These points are important. For Joan is confused. And her confusion has served to direct people away from the revolutionary Marxist analysis of women's oppression towards that put forward by those who reject Marxism. She writes of her work:

My articles in **IS 100** and **IS 104** attempted to bridge the argument over the nature of patriarchy with the concern of the domestic labour school over the relationship of women's oppression to capitalism. It was an attempt to argue the relationship between male domination (the patriarchy) with the capitalist mode of production.

Patriarchy, as we have seen, is the theoretical expression of the reformist and separatist wings of the women's movement. What Joan is attempting to do is to 'bridge the argument' between them and Marxism. It was an attempt which was bound to lead to complete confusion.

There is practical confusion as well. Underlying all the stages of Joan's argument is an attempt to prove that women's oppression, like workers' exploitation, leads to the beginnings of spontaneous rejection of capitalism.

This happens, she argues, because the capitalist system rests on two equally important planks – workers' exploitation and women's oppression. She argues it again when she shifts to putting the blame for all of women's oppression directly on the state.

In both cases, separate women's struggles are seen as automatically coming into conflict with capital and the state.

The struggle against patriarchy then becomes, for Joan, an automatic ally of a separate workers' struggle against capitalism. The basis is laid for an alliance of 'distinct but not separate' struggles.

The women's part of the alliance is made up, for Joan, of all women, although led by revolutionaries. As she puts it [20]

We can argue and recruit women to revolutionary politics on the basis of their oppression as well as their exploitation. Many women have broken with middle class backgrounds, as with working class backgrounds, and as with students it is possible to organise these women around the revolutionary party. But to do this we need an organisation of women wider than the revolutionary party to take up the issues of women's oppression and women's exploitation...It is necessary to build a women's movement with its own paper which can unite all women – public sector women, factory workers, women at home. Because capitalism oppresses all women, the material base for such an organisation exists.

Note Joan refers to 'all women' as being the base of such a movement, not working class women. For in each of the three stages of her analysis, it is all women who are forced, by what she calls 'patriarchy' or the 'male state' to fight back. It is this which enables her to talk about organising 'all women' without reference to their class position (they give up their working class backgrounds as well as their middle class backgrounds!). Yet this movement will somehow be committed to a 'socialist platform' and a 'working class struggle for freedom'.

Joan epitomises the muddle you get in to when you marry together two contradictory views of the roots of women's oppression – that of middle class feminism and that of

revolutionary Marxism. You end up shifting from one position to another, never ending up on the solid ground from which alone it is really possible to fight for women's liberation.

Arguments against the revolutionary marxist position

A number of arguments are used both by outright opponents of the Marxist theory of women's oppression and by those who want to muddle it up with some other theory. Let's look at these one at a time.

'The marxist view effectively denies the reality of women's oppression by reducing everything to a matter of class'.

If you read our first section you can see this contention simply is not true. We don't 'reduce' the issue to one of class. Women of all classes are oppressed, just as ethnic minorities of all classes are oppressed in certain societies. What we do say, however, is that you cannot get rid of this oppression without challenging its roots in class society. There are not two struggles, one against class society, the other against 'patriarchy'. There is one struggle against the cause of all forms of exploitation and oppression.

And there are huge differences in the sorts of oppression women from different classes face. The wife of a slave owner may be oppressed, but her oppression is quite different to that of a slave (even of a male slave). The ruling class woman may protest at her oppression, but the overwhelming majority of them will side with the system that maintains that oppression against any serious revolutionary challenge to it. And so, when the chips are down, they will aid and abet not only exploitation, but oppression of other women. Ruling class women always insist that the women's movement is something separate from, and opposed to, the working class movement.

Working class women, on the other hand, need to view the whole question of separation differently.

The prejudices of male workers have often meant women workers have had little choice, if they are to organise at all, but to organise separately to men. But they have always had to fight against this enforced separation, because it has weakened the struggle of the working class as a whole, so making it easier for the ruling class to maintain their oppression.

Historically, it has been the economically more powerful and less oppressed groups of workers who have stood for separate, sectionalist forms of organisation. Women and ethnically oppressed groups of workers have organised separately (with women's trade unions etc.) merely as a means of getting the strength to batter down the walls of sectionalism.

'The marxist view means that the inferior position women are forced to accept at present is perpetuated, with men leading women. It is not

women's self activity which is seen as ending their oppression, but something men do for them'.

Oppressed people find the confidence to stand up and fight their oppression through struggle. But this does not mean that the only struggle which gives them this confidence is the struggle of the particular oppressed group to which they belong. Struggles against all sorts of aspects of class society can have the same effect.

It has, for example, been the experience of trade union struggles that has given many women the confidence to begin to challenge the traditional roles they have been expected to perform in the family.

Of course, the divisions between different sections of the working class – male/female, black/white, skilled/unskilled, oppressed/less oppressed – mean that simple, homogenous, unified struggles of all workers together often do not occur. So there are struggles which involve mostly male workers or mostly female workers, mostly white workers or mostly black workers, mostly skilled workers or mostly unskilled workers. However, the struggle of any one group of workers always has implications for the struggles of other groups of workers. No oppressed group can separate off its struggles off from the rest of the class.

It is disastrous for it to try to do so.

If a relatively powerful group of workers, like say the miners in Britain or the autoworkers in the US, are successful in struggle, this is a stimulus to the struggles of all other groups of workers – even if the most powerful groups of workers are mostly male and the weaker groups mainly female. At other points it may be the resistance of a previously weak group of workers that are mainly female

that stems an employers' offensive and so inspires other, stronger groups of mainly male workers to struggle.

In fact, the greatest struggles against women's oppression have always taken place during periods of wider, more generalised struggle – during the great French revolution of 1789 – 94, in the period immediately before and after World War One, in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The successes of these struggles have always depended on the successes of the wider struggles. Defeat for these wider struggles spelt defeat for the struggle for women's liberation as well – whether with Thermidor in the 1790s, Stalinism and Nazism in the inter-war years, or the drift to the right in the late 1970s. [21]

It could not be otherwise. Oppression is a product of class society. And the only effective way to challenge class society is through the united struggle of the working class, not through the separate, isolated struggle of this or that particular oppressed group.

This does not at all mean that 'women follow men'. The particular group of workers who are in the forefront of the struggle will sometimes be mainly female, sometimes mainly male and sometimes completely mixed.

What is necessary in either case is that the leading group of workers understand that their own struggle is a struggle on behalf of all workers, despite all the efforts of the ruling class to make them believe otherwise, and that there is an argument with all other groups of workers to back the struggle. This will not happen unless there is a relentless battle by socialists against the tendency of less oppressed workers to identify with the advantages they enjoy over more oppressed workers – and explain to the more oppressed workers that their real enemies are not the less oppressed, but the ruling class that exploits all workers. This it has to be explained to groups of male workers who are in

struggle that they need the backing of female workers, but that they will not get this if they continue to hold the sexist view that women are sex objects whose real place is in the home etc. It has to be pointed out that women who are forced to be passive and dependent on men cannot be real fighters in the struggle of their class against the system.

Oppression enables the ruling class to divide and rule the whole working class – the least oppressed as well as the most oppressed sections. Involvement in any struggle leads people to begin to challenge this oppression – and only by a challenge to this oppression can the struggle enjoy long term success.

To put it another way: to take seriously the claim that women can only follow the lead of other women is to say they have no part to play in many major battles in the class struggle. In fact, of course, some of the most important examples of working class women's struggles have been those in support of male workers – for example, the Women's Emergency Brigade in the Flint sit-down of 1937.

It is because they understood this that none of the greatest women revolutionary socialists saw their job as just organising women. Whether you talk of Eleanor Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, Mother Jones or Elizabeth Gurley Flynn you are talking about fighters who dedicated their energies to intervening in whatever struggles were currently waging, whether of male or female workers. [22]

Even those revolutionaries like Clara Zetkin or Alexandra Kollontai who concentrated on organising women never saw this as their only activity. Alexandra Kollontai was active in the general work of both the Bolshevik and Menshevik Parties, while Clara Zetkin played a key role in all the debates of the German Communist Party between 1919 and 1923. Even Sylvia Pankhurst, who only came to a full revolutionary socialist position in the course of World War

One, drew the conclusion from this that the need was not for a women's paper, the **Women's Dreadnought**, and a women's organisation, The East London Federation of Suffragettes, but for a workers paper, the **Workers Dreadnought**, and a mixed organisation, the Workers Socialist Federation. This of course has not stopped some confused feminists claiming Kollontai, Zetkin and Sylvia Pankhurst for the cause of separatism!

They all adopted this position because they all understood there is not and cannot be any separate road to women's liberation, under whatever name it goes (socialist feminism, revolutionary feminism or whatnot) other than that of revolutionary Marxism. They understood there are not two traditions – one of fighting oppression, the other of fighting for workers' power – that had to be welded together, but a single tradition which tries to build a revolutionary working class movement as 'the tribune of all the oppressed and exploited.'

In such a united movement, the highest aspiration would be for revolutionary women to lead men and for revolutionary men to lead women, depending on the particular section of the class which was in struggle at any-point in time.

'Working class men are involved in maintaining the oppression of women and benefit from it. So they can't be involved in the struggle to end it.'

We have argued earlier that the real cause of women's oppression is not individual men but the needs of capital accumulation. However, it is true that those needs are only fulfilled insofar as they find an agency for enforcing them – people who will oppress others.

Many men are certainly involved in the oppression of women. People like Anna Paczuska and Lin James seem to be making a valid comment when they insist:

It isn't capitalism that beats wives, rapes women, hires prostitutes and degrades women in pornography – it's men. [23]

But they are only right up to a point. Firstly, not all men are involved in the activities they list – unless you accept the radical separatist claim that 'all men are rapists'. Secondly, their list of what constitutes the oppression of women is hopelessly inadequate. If you add other elements of the oppression of women – for instance, the denial of the right of abortion, unequal pay etc. – then you find it is not the men working class women live with who enforce these, but the state or the employer. And when it comes to the socialising of girls to accept subordinate 'feminine' roles, the main agency, as often as not, is not the father but the mother. Some of the biggest campaigns against abortion rights have been led by women. Even in genuinely patriarchal societies, the oppression of younger women is enforced not only by the patriarch himself, but also by the older women!

When working class women begin to challenge their oppression they find themselves not only up against many men, but also many women. This is because capitalism, in its drive for accumulation, has found many agencies for controlling women, whether through coercion or ideological persuasion – not just the wife beater and the rapist.

But it will be argued, men benefit from the oppression of women in a way that other women don't.

In fact, however, the benefits working class men get from the oppression of women are marginal indeed. They do not benefit from the low pay women get – this only serves to exert a downward pressure on their own pay. Nor can it really be argued they gain from the treatment of women's bodies as commodities – the only men who can benefit in this way are the men with the wealth to buy and sell commodities!

The benefits really come down to the question of housework. The question becomes the extent to which working class men benefit from women's unpaid labour.

But in the stereotyped capitalist family this is impossible to measure. As Lindsey German has put it:

The division of labour is, after all, a division of labour where men do different work both in the factory and in the home. But to say that welding is better or worse than housework is to look at things in completely subjective and unmeasurable terms. The same is true of leisure. Men have more rigidly, defined leisure, which tends to be social (the pub, football), just as they have more rigidly defined working hours. But it cannot simply said to be more. It is different.

Housework, by definition, is work which is not subject to the tempo imposed by capitalist exploitation in the factory or office. It does not involve intensive effort for a certain number of hours, followed by a period of recuperation in order to allow the application of another fixed spell of intensive effort. Therefore there is no way the amount of labour that goes into it can be measured against the amount of labour that goes into factory work ...

The great disadvantage that (working class) housewives suffer, is not that they are somehow

exploited by men, but that they are atomised and cut off from participation in the collective action that can give the confidence to fight back against the system ...

In fact, the problem of “benefits” only really arises when there is a departure from the old stereotyped division of labour between the “male worker” and the female “housewife”. As married women are increasingly drawn into the labour force, many women find themselves doing full time paid labour, yet are still expected to run the home. They are left with much less time to recoup their labour power than their husbands as they have to combine work and housework. Yet even in these situations, it is doubtful if the husbands benefit more than marginally. [24]

What the working class male gains directly in terms of labour from his wife can be roughly measured. It is the amount of labour he would have to exert if he had to clean and cook for himself. This could not be more than an hour or two a day – a burden for a woman who has to do this work for two people after a day’s paid labour, but not a huge gain for the male worker.

It is only when the question of the reproduction of the next generation of workers – the raising of children – arises, that the burden to women becomes unbearable, and the apparent gain to the husband immense.

But the labour devoted to bringing up children cannot be treated as something given by the wife to the husband. It is rather, something which the wife provides to the system, satisfying its need to renew the labour force. As Ann Rogers has put it, ‘the working class woman is tied to servicing children, not to servicing men.’ [25]

The main point, however, is that the key to the real liberation of working class women lies in the socialising of both components of housework. And this socialisation is no loss to the working class man. He does not lose out if good, collectively operated canteens begin to provide him with excellent meals. He does not suffer if a 24 hour nursery system takes away from his wife the sustained burden of worrying about the children.

Indeed, insofar as these changes free both women and men from having to live in constrained, often bitter, relationships, they are a gain for men as well as women.

Certainly, when things are looked at in this light, it cannot be said that the working class man has any material stake in the oppression of women. Whatever advantages he might have within the present set up compared with his wife, they are nothing to what he would gain if the set up was revolutionised.

What about the other sort of gain he might be said to have, the 'ideological stake' – the feeling that somehow he has control over the family, so that however insignificant he might be in the world at large, he is master in the home?

This will be a very big factor at times when workers are not challenging the system. Then their minds are full up with all the ideological crap at hand. But once they begin to fight back against the system, then they can begin to see there is an alternative – an alternative in which they exercise control over the whole of their lives, and so don't need the phoney feeling of control that comes from dominance inside the family.

The theorists of patriarchy and the socialist feminists who tail behind them do not see this, because they do not really have any notion of how ideas can be transformed in struggle. They generalise from points of downturn in the struggle, drawing the conclusion that the ideas which prevail now will

always prevail. Just as some people draw the conclusion from the present period that the working class is finished, so patriarchy and socialist feminist theorists draw the conclusion that workers can never challenge privatised reproduction and the oppression of women.

'Experience shows that you can have a workers' revolution which leaves the oppression of women intact.'

This is a central component of all patriarchy theories. It follows from the view that countries like Russia, Cuba, Vietnam and China are somehow socialist. In these societies the oppression of women continues to exist, and so, it is said, socialism can coexist with women's oppression.

Socialist feminists like Sheila Rowbotham cannot argue against this position. For they too believe socialist societies already exist (one of the reasons Sheila left the International Socialists 13 years ago was because we deigned to argue that North Vietnam was not socialist!)

However, those of us who recognise that the rise of Stalinism established state capitalism in Russia, do not need to draw this conclusion at all.

In fact, the experience of the Russian revolution of 1917 proves the opposite of what both the patriarchy theorists and the socialist feminists argue.

The revolution took place in the most difficult of circumstances. It occurred in a country in which the working class was a small minority of the population, where most people were still peasants, organised on a genuinely patriarchal basis, living almost medieval lives and subject to

the deepest superstitions and prejudices. Although there were substantial numbers of women in certain industries and factories, who played an important part in the February revolution, male workers were in the great majority among conscious revolutionaries – only about 10 per cent of the Bolsheviks were women.

Yet the revolution carried through a programme of women's liberation never attempted anywhere else – complete liberation of abortion and divorce laws, equal pay, mass provision of communal child care, socialised canteen facilities and so on.

In fighting to emancipate their class, women workers did begin to challenge the traditions of subordination to men – and the most militant male workers did see the need to support and encourage this challenge.

This was because the revolution *was* a revolution – a massive upheaval in which those at the bottom of society rose up and fought to control their own destinies. They could not do so unless they shook apart every hierarchy and challenged every element of oppression that divided their class and held it down. Of course, there was again and again resistance from many, many male workers to their traditionally dominant role in the family. But what was most impressive was the way in which the advanced workers, organised in the Bolshevik Party, understood the need to break with such divisive, prejudiced behaviour, and how they were able to win the majority of the class to their standpoint.

Hence it was that after the conquest of state power, the Party set up a special department aimed at involving more working class women in the revolutionary process. Inessa Armand was put in charge of this work, and after her death Alexandra Kollontai. But male revolutionaries were also

expected to take part in its work, attending its conferences etc.

The experience of the Russian revolution was quite different, then, to what later happened after the rise of Stalinism – with the reimposition of the stereotyped family, anti-abortion laws, restrictions on divorce, and so on. It was also quite different to what happened when state capitalism was established elsewhere, either by the Russian army or by revolutions carried through by guerrilla armies.

Russia showed what happens with working class revolution. These other cases show what happens without it!

The party, the class and women's liberation

Revolutionary socialists start from what we can learn from the high points in the history of the working class struggle – that the less oppressed sections of workers can join with the more oppressed sections in a joint struggle against all forms of exploitation and oppression. White workers can be won to support for the struggles of black workers, male workers can be won to support for the struggles of female workers, skilled workers can be won to support for the struggles of unskilled workers.

Our central contention – that the working class can emancipate itself and in the process emancipate all of society – flows from what happens in periods of upturn in the struggle, not from what happens as all the ideological crap comes to the fore in periods of downturn.

We do not, however, let things rest at that. We understand there has to be a fight within the working class for the principles of the upturn – for solidarity, for the unity of white workers with black, of male workers with female workers – in the gloomiest periods of downturn. Only in this way can we prepare a minority of the class for the tasks which face the class as a whole. Only then can we ensure that when the upturn comes, a leadership exists within the class which can carry the struggle forward to victory.

We aim, in short, to build the beginnings of a revolutionary party in the downturn.

We cannot do this if we fall into the mistaken belief that there is an easy alternative of leaving it to organisations of the oppressed to fight racism and sexism. The party itself has to struggle against oppression on grounds of race, sex, religion or ethnic origin. This is part of its task of fighting to unite the class as a whole in struggle.

The party members have to be seen as people who argue among white workers and male workers in support of the interests of black workers and female workers. They have to recognise that in a period of downturn this means they will often be in a small minority. But they also have to understand that their situation will change once a period of real struggle begins. They have to learn to operate both as eager participants in the struggles of workers, and as a minority known for their open support for the interests of the most oppressed sections of the class.

However, the argument about the unity of the class is not just an argument that has to be put among white workers and male workers. It also has to be put among the most oppressed sections of the class. So, for instance, it is necessary to argue among white women workers in support of the interests of black workers, and among male black workers in support of the interests of women workers.

Above all there has to be a fight within each oppressed section of workers against bourgeois and petty bourgeois influences which would persuade them there can be no unity with the less oppressed white and male workers.

So every member of the revolutionary organisation has to understand how at high points of class struggle sections of white and male workers have fought in the interests of black and female workers. The aim is to build a party which encapsulates that experience.

The building of such a party is something which is needed even more by the oppressed sections of workers than by the rest. For capitalism cannot be smashed without such a party, and you cannot end oppression without smashing capitalism.

Those who reject the perspective of building such a party on the grounds that it means 'men leading women' and 'whites leading blacks', or that 'it subordinates the fight against oppression to the fight against exploitation' are, in fact, abandoning any perspective of destroying the roots of oppression. At best they are talking about protest movements against oppression that can never bring it to an end.

Reformism, Stalinism and the party

Every time the question of the party is raised, we face a problem. People who have had experience of non-revolutionary parties easily draw the conclusion that all parties are wrong. So it was in the first two decades of the present century: anarchism got a boost from the

bureaucratic gradualism of social democracy; in the 1940s and 1950s

people who had been manipulated by pro-Russian Stalinism often acted by turning against any sort of socialist politics; in the 1970s the experience of Maoist Stalinism gave a boost to all sorts of 'autonomist' and separatist currents.

But our response to such experiences cannot and must not be to abandon our own fight for a revolutionary party. It has to be to explain that these experiences are what happens when you do not have a genuine revolutionary Marxist organisation fighting the influence of social democracy and Stalinism.

Whenever revolutionary socialists put forward the argument about the party our opponents always argue, 'but you forget about self activity being a precondition for socialism'. Eighty years ago this was the argument used by trade union activists (the 'economists') opposed to the building of a centralised party in Russia. Today it is often used by black activists or feminists opposed to the building of a unified revolutionary organisation. Lenin replied to the 'economists':

'Use fewer platitudes about the development of the independent activity of the workers – the workers display no end of independent revolutionary activity you don't notice – but see, rather, that you don't demoralise underdeveloped workers by your own tailism'.

That has to be our attitude today. It is not a question of whether self activity exists or not. It is rather, whether we try to develop this into self conscious self activity, to make people aware of the need to generalise their struggle if they are to win. This means

telling women and black workers in struggle not only that they have to fight their own oppression – they usually know that once they are in struggle – but how they are to fight it, how to win. And you can't do that without putting the argument about unity with male workers or white workers.

All sorts of struggles arise 'independently' of the revolutionary organisation. But it does not help the struggles at all for revolutionaries to say 'these struggles are independent of us, therefore we must not argue with those involved in them what they need to do to win'. It is our duty at all times to put such arguments. For, if such struggles are not influenced by our ideas, they will be influenced by the prevailing ideas in any society – the ideas of the ruling class.

Independent' struggles are always arising. But there are no such things as 'independent' ideas. There are ideas which are in support of existing society, and ideas which are for its revolutionary overthrow. Ideas which exist between these two polar positions are not 'independent' but, simply, a muddle.

The downturn and the danger of movementism

We noted earlier that the downturn in the class struggle since the 1970s has led many activists in the women's movement to turn away from a working class orientation towards reformism and separatism. The downturn has also had an effect on the attitudes of

activist within revolutionary organisations in many countries.

They have seen sudden upsurges in one issue movements while the mass of workers have continued to retreat in the face of capitalist offensives. This was the case with the riots of the '*marginali*' in Italy in 1977, the growth of the anti-nuclear power movements in France and Germany in the late 1970s, the anti-racist struggle in Britain in 1977 and 1978, the peace movement of the early 1980s. It has been easy to draw the conclusion that you can forget about the working class and just concentrate on these movements.

These movements have drawn into political activity new layers of people. But because the working class as a whole has not been fighting, winning these people to a revolutionary Marxist perspectives has been very difficult.

Often, instead of the revolutionary left winning new people from these movements the reverse has happened – these movements have won members of the revolutionary left to their non-working class approach. Revolutionaries have begun to make concessions to the idea that the movements' goals can be achieved without working class action.

The situation has been made worse by the inevitable pattern of such movements. They can rise very quickly, precisely because their participants are not rooted in production. But the same lack of roots means they do not have real power. And so the movements begin to go into terminal decline the moment they have reached their peak. They rise like a rocket and drop like a stick.

Revolutionary socialists who put their faith in such movements receive an initial boost, only then to suffer all the demoralisation that comes with the decline.

Then all the pressure is on the movements' activists to move to the right. They make concessions to existing society because they find they cannot achieve their goals by fighting it. Revolutionaries who have made concessions to the arguments of the movements get drawn along by this rightward pull.

It is bad enough dissolving your politics into a movement that is dynamic, enthusiastic and growing. It is even worse doing so in a movement that is tired, demoralised and increasingly inward looking.

This explains the connection between 'movementism' and what we in the SWP call the 'swamp' – the milieu of ex-leftists who have drifted to the right as they adapt to reformism, the trade union bureaucracy and the mysticism of feminist separatism.

You cannot resist the pressures driving former activists to the right unless you start off with a very clear understanding of the limitations of all one issue movements, however vital the issues they try to fight over. You have to be insistent that they cannot win their demands unless they connect with the struggles of the mass of workers. And that means arguing loudly and clearly for a revolutionary socialist organisation that makes such connections, in theory and in practice.

Theories that separate off any struggle, whether for peace, against women's oppression or against racism, from the wider class struggle, prevent these connections being made.

That is why the ideas of people like E.P. Thompson impede the struggle against nuclear war. That is why the arguments of patriarchy and socialist feminist theorists impede the struggle for women's liberation. That is why black nationalist and separatist ideas impede the struggle for black liberation.

Those propagating such ideas may well play an important role, for a period, in encouraging people to fight back against aspects of the system. But their ideas, if not challenged, will lead the struggle into a blind alley sooner or later.

Revolutionary socialists have to be very hard politically so that we can stop activists being led, blindfolded, into the swamp. Of course, we are on the side of the peace movement against the military establishment; but this does not mean we drop our very hard criticism of the ideas of E.P. Thompson. In the same way, we are on the side of all women who challenge their oppression, but we don't hold back from relentless struggle against the mistaken ideas of middle class feminism.

Nothing is more dangerous than to put forward verbal formulations that hide the difference between revolutionary Marxists and such people.

It is here that we in the British SWP disagree profoundly with revolutionaries who have put forward organisational formulae which, in our view, are designed to bridge the unbridgeable – the idea of a unified revolutionary party on the one hand and the separatist notions of much of the women's movement.

They speak of 'an independent women's movement' which 'must be part of the overall working class movement', of a movement which is distinct but not separate' from the revolutionary party, so that 'we organise independently but are part of the wider socialist movement'. [26]

Such formulations are extremely obscure. Does 'independence' mean independence from capitalist society, from reformism or from the ideas of revolutionary Marxism? If it doesn't mean independence from Marxist ideas, is the revolutionary party then allowed to intervene inside the 'independent movement'? If not, how does it fight

the influence on women's struggles of bourgeois and reformist ideas?

Does the formulation mean that revolutionary socialists have to organise working class *women* separately from working class men? If so, it is extremely dangerous indeed. For it means organising them separately from the main struggles of the working class – struggles which usually involve both women and men (although in different proportions in different industries).

You end up organising working class women in the places where they are least likely to experience the power of collective action and to gain the confidence to challenge the system and its ideas, including the ideas that they have to be subordinate to men. You focus on the home or the community, the places where women tend to be most atomised and isolated, not on the factory or office where they begin to discover collective, class strength.

At best you involve yourselves in movements that are on the up but then find yourself trapped inside them without any other arena for struggle, when they are on the down. You drift into the view that this is the 'independent women's movement', that has to be sustained as a question of principle, regardless of the number of people it really mobilises. In the process you demoralise both yourself and any women contacts.

Revolutionaries who attempt to operate such a perspective can hardly avoid being infected by the attitudes which prevail in what remains of the women's movement – attitudes which see ideas changing through consciousness raising not through struggle, which substitute personal politics for fighting the system, and which lead to greater and greater passivity.

Social being does determine consciousness. If you cut yourself off from major areas of class struggle by insisting on

‘separate’ women’s organisation, inevitably you get drawn away from ideas which flow from the class struggle. Despite yourself you end up wandering into the swamp.

Far from it being the case that the existence of separate organisation leads female revolutionary socialists to develop the confidence to lead in struggle, it has the opposite effect. It means they cut themselves off from leading in those struggles – the great majority that involve men as well as women.

Our experience

For the SWP these are not just ideas that have come to us on the basis of theoretical discussion (although that has been immensely important). They fit in with our own experience as an organisation. For more than ten years we tried to produce a separate women’s **Women’s Voice**, and for a period we also tried to build a separate organisation, the Women’s Voice Organisation. At the end of the day, the overwhelming majority of women involved in the attempt decided it was misconceived.

They found they were all the time being forced to concentrate on issues which stressed women’s weakness and not the strength which working class women can discover in the course of the class struggle of all workers. When working class women began to move as workers, we found a women-only organisation was not at all suited to intervening. Because in any strike it is necessary to get solidarity and blacking strikes cannot be approached as a women-only issue. So Women’s Voice Organisation was only ever able to

organise around community issues (hospital closures, abortion, etc.)

Of course, these can sometimes be important to building a revolutionary organisation, but only if they are linked to the struggle of organised workers. A separate organisation actually makes this link impossible. Instead of teaching them to lead, our women comrades decided, the experience of **Women's Voice** was merely leaving them to lag behind the main course of the struggle. Our best women members came to see they were being forced into the ghetto of women-only community politics, and that this had serious consequences for our party. It separated the struggle for women's liberation off from the rest of our political work.

The party as a whole rarely discussed or worked around issues on which women were moving. These were left to the Women's Voice groups. And women comrades were not being trained or encouraged to take a leading role in the party. Instead, they were sent off to build Women's Voice. So we produced a whole generation of women who were unable to argue total socialist politics and were never trained to run branches, intervene in disputes – in short, to lead. Women's Voice tended to produce a male dominated SWP!

Building in the downturn

A further danger arises with any form of movementism. It is that you move from seeing the one issue movements as something which can make a contribution to the wider class struggle, to seeing them as ends in themselves.

A stress on the need for 'independent' women's or black movements can easily lead you into a sort of stages theory –

a theory that holds that talk of working class struggle can be postponed indefinitely while other sorts of struggle are built. In the United States, in particular, it leads people to say that since the majority of the working class are black, hispanic or female, then movements of these oppressed groups have to precede any revival of general working class struggle.

But this is to transform a possible scenario for bringing the downturn to an end into a necessary one.

It may be that the revival of struggle in the US will, as in the 1960s, start away from the core of the working class that is in factories and offices. But it is just as possible that the revival will come, as it did before World War One and in the inter-war years, from struggle involving white as well as black workers, male and well as female workers.

What is more, wherever it starts, it will not be able to go forward beyond a certain point unless there exists at least the embryo of revolutionary organisation that points to the need for the whole of the class, white as well as black, male as well as female, to be drawn into the struggle.

We have to try and create this embryo now, while the downturn persists. We cannot do so if we work as if the upturn had already started, and had started in one way rather than another. ‘

In the here and now there are a small minority of people who are prepared to listen to revolutionary ideas. The horrors caused by world wide crisis means that in every locality, in every workplace, in every college, there are a few individuals who are receptive to what revolutionary socialists have to say.

The key to building the embryo of a revolutionary organisation is locating these ones and twos and arguing general politics with them.

Partly, you find these individuals through the general propaganda activity of an organisation – selling the paper, organising open meetings and so on.

Partly you find them when genuine movements arise, which involve new, young people in activity for the first time (such movements have to be distinguished from those which merely regroup the ‘living dead’, the washed out remainder of the generation of the 1960s).

Sometimes you find them in the strikes which still take place, despite the downturn. In these black workers and white workers, female workers and male workers, do stand alongside each other on picket lines, do begin to get a very small glimmer of the possibilities which class struggle and solidarity open up.

Movementism stops revolutionaries building in any of these ways. It means you give contacts the impression that the future lies with ‘movements’, not with the building of an organisation that relates to working class struggle. It means you run away from the arguments that have to be put in the period like the present. The worst thing about it is that it inevitably demoralises people.

They put all their efforts into trying to build through grandiose schemes which do not fit the present period at all – and then end up suffering from the deepest pessimism.

There is a very heavy price to be paid for any failure to understand the relation between the struggle against oppression and that against exploitation, between the building of movements and the building of the party. It is that you throw away the chances that do exist to begin to build a revolutionary organisation.

We can in any town, city or college win a few individuals to the task of building such an organisation. But only if we ourselves are very clear about the possibilities of workers’

power, and do not make concessions to those who have lost faith in it.

Notes

This article is an amended version of one that originally appeared as a contribution to discussion in our fraternal organisation in the United States, the International Socialist Organization.

1. This assertion caused more argument among people to whom I showed the first draft of this article than virtually any other. It was suggested to me that anthropology had, in fact, shown that male supremacy and women's oppression exists in all societies. People like Godelier were quoted, to the effect that 'however meagre our historical and anthropological sources...it seems at the moment reasonable to suppose that men have so far dominated power in the last analysis ... In all societies, including the most egalitarian, there is a power hierarchy, with the top places occupied by men.'

Such assertions have been very much the established wisdom in academic anthropology for the last half century and more, and because anthropology, like its related discipline of sociology, claims the status of a 'science' even many Marxists have accepted them. But in fact anthropology is little more than the collation of the observations of visitors from advanced capitalist societies to various pre-capitalist societies. And these observations cannot be taken at face value as providing information about what society was like before the development of classes for two reasons.

(i) The anthropologists who made these observations almost all shared the prejudices of the capitalist societies from which they came. They viewed the 'primitive' peoples through these stereotypes, interpreting their behaviour in terms which would be used to explain behaviour under capitalism. (For an excellent account of the prejudices of anthropologists like Malinowski, Evans Pritchard and Levi Strauss, see Karen Sacks, **Sisters and Wives**, pp.1-67).

Thus anthropologists have seen the nuclear family as an invariant feature of all societies where couples produce children – even

though the role the man-woman relationship plays in, say, hunter-gather societies is markedly different to that played in modern Britain. Again, Levi Strauss and his followers refer to 'exchange of women' in societies where women from one kin lineage marry into another kin lineage which they go and live with. But the term 'exchange' can only be used in its normal sense when you are talking about what goes on commodity producing societies. Giving and taking has a quite different significance in non-commodity producing societies. The point is proved by existence of societies where the men have to marry out of their own kin lineage and to live with their wives' families; does this amount to 'exchange of men'? But Levi Strauss virtually ignores these. As Eleanor Leacock has pointed out, of the 400 or so pages of his **Elementary Structures of Kinship**, only one and a half pages deal with such 'matrilineal-matrilocal' societies – and these pages contain four basic factual errors!

These crudities have not stopped people like Godelier accepting Levi Strauss's arguments at their face value. But then this former colleague of Althusser's believes that he himself disproved the labour theory of value by showing it did not apply in a pre-capitalist society, the Baruya of New Guinea (see *Salt currency and the circulation of commodities among the Baruya of New Guinea*, in **Studies in Economic Anthropology**, 1971; for a feminist critique of Godelier, see Barbara Bradby, *Male Rationality in Economies*, in **Critique of Anthropology**, double issue 9-10, 1977).

(ii) Present day 'primitive' societies cannot be simply equated with the societies all human beings lived in until the growth of class societies about 6,000 years ago. They have all changed themselves over the years since, in part due to the impact of the class societies they have come into contact with. Some at least of them are 'pseudo-archaic' – they were once at a higher stage of social development, and were caused by circumstance to regress, for instance from being agricultural societies to gathering and hunting. (For examples, see Levi Strauss, *The concept of Archaism in Anthropology*, in **Structural Anthropology**, p.101 *et seq.*)

You cannot see existing hunter-gatherer societies as identical with the societies of the old stone age. As Rayna Rapp Reiter has noted:

‘We cannot literally interpret the lives of existing foraging peoples – such as the !Kung bushmen of the Kalahari, the Eskimos, the Australian Aborigines – as exhibits and replications of processes we speculate to have occurred in the Paeolithic. Neither can we assume that the decimated, marginalised existence of peoples pushed to the edges of their environment by thousands of years of penetration will exhibit original characteristics’. (*The search for origins*, in **Critique of Anthropology**, **op. cit.**).

The expansion of capitalism into a world system has reshaped all the pre capitalist societies it has come in contact with. Pre-class gatherer-hunter and horticultural societies today are involved to a greater or lesser degree in transactions with the wider capitalist world (buying and selling goods, supplying labour and so on). These have produced fundamental changes in their internal organisation. And at the same time outside agencies (governments, churches, school systems) have attempted to impose on them ‘civilised’ norms of conduct (like capitalist property laws, capitalist forms of marriage, and so on). It is not surprising under such circumstances if many features of the oppression of women to be found in ‘advanced’ societies are also found in surviving ‘primitive’ societies.

The way the impact of capitalism has distorted the features of these societies; makes it all the easier for anthropologists to apply social categories from our society (like ‘hierarchy’, ‘subordination’, ‘power’ and ‘the nuclear family’) to them. Eleanor Leacock has attempted to show how this has happened in two significant cases, that of the Montagnais-Naskapi and Iroquois Indians of North America. (See *Women’s Status in Egalitarian Societies*, **Current Anthropology**, vol.10 no.2, June 1978, and **Myths of Male Dominance**, New York 1981).

These obscuring influences have been so great as to make some authorities doubt whether we can know anything about what the situation of women was like before the rise of class societies (see the comments of Judith K. Brown on Leacock’s argument in *Women’s Status etc.*, **op. cit.**).

But we can learn something: that there have been societies in which women's position *vis-à-vis* men is so different to that in our own (or any other class society) as to rule out any talk the oppression of women in these societies. Thus in hunter-gatherer societies like the Montagnais-Naskapi, the !Kung and the Mbuti, women participated in all the major decision making until fairly recently, controlled their own sexuality, and led an existence based upon mutual cooperation with other women and men. (See Leacock, **op. cit.**).

There is much debate about other hunter-gatherer societies. While Eleanor Leacock will argue women once had a high status in all such societies, others like Ernestine Friedl differentiate between hunter-gatherer societies dependent upon gathering (mainly done by women) for the great bulk of their food and those, like the Eskimos and Australian Aborigines, in which hunting (mainly done by men) is important. In the latter, she says, men tend to be more highly esteemed than women. (**Women and Men, An Anthropologist's View**, New York 1975).

Yet Friedl also points out that even in those hunter gatherer societies where men's activities are evaluated more highly than women's, nothing exists comparable to the systematic oppression of women you get in class societies. Women always play some part in major decision making and are free to leave husbands they cannot abide any more.

'Individual decisions are possible for both men and women with respect to their daily routines ... Men and women alike are free to decide how they will spend each day: whether to go hunting or gathering, and with whom ...'

What applies to hunter-gatherer societies also applies to some 'horticultural' societies ie societies where crops are cultivated using the hoe and digging stick rather than the plough. Although almost all these are today integrated into the world capitalist system, producing crops for sale, in the recent past women played a role in them quite at variance with that in class societies.

The most famous case is that of the Iroquois. From the time of Morgan (whose **Ancient Society** inspired Engels to write the

Origins of the Family) observers have been struck by the influence women exercised over decision making.

Women seem to have a relatively high standing in all 'matrilineal-matrilocal' societies (i.e. societies where kinship is reckoned along the female line, and men go to live with their wives' kin). It is wrong to describe these societies as 'matriarchies' (the point is that neither sex exercises the same sort of dominance in them as men do in patriarchal societies), but they do stand in sharp contrast to societies where power is monopolised by a minority of males.

Archaeologists like Gordon Childe (see **Man Makes Himself** and **What Happened in History**) have argued, following Engels, that all societies were like this at the beginnings of the period of 'barbarism' (the term used by Morgan, Engels and Childe for the early horticultural societies). Karen Sacks has distinguished between a lower stage of these societies where 'communal production' prevailed, and a higher stage in which control was in the hands of 'kin corporations'. Here leadership was with 'big men', who would increase their control by marrying several women and getting control of their labour. But even at this stage, Sacks argues, women themselves gained as they got older, becoming 'controllers of labour and productive means, as sisters who control their brothers' children's lineage affairs and as mothers who control their own children and their children's productive means...' And women themselves could, on occasion become the 'big men', even entering into marriage as 'husbands' to other women so as to get control of their labour (**op. cit.**, pp.117-121).

So even in these societies, women's position was quite different from complete subordination you find once you get the division into classes.

Eleanor Leacock cannot be faulted when she writes:

'Such patrilineal elements as might have existed in horticultural society would be altogether different from patrilineality as it developed in societies with class structures, private property and political organisation... The patriarchal family, in which the individual male could have complete

control over household of wives, children and servants or slaves, has no parallel in the pre- political world.’

(For further discussion on these issues see: Carolyn Fluer-Lobban, *A Marxist Reappraisal of Matriarchy*, in **Current Anthropology**, June 1979; Ala Singer, *Marriage Payments and the Exchange of People*, **Man** 8:80-92, 1971; Martin K. White, *The Status of Women in Pre-Industrial Society*, **Critique of Anthropology**, special issue 8-9, 1977. Evelyn Reed’s **Women’s Evolution** is better known than these sources. But despite the fact that she is very good at tearing apart the way anthropologists have imposed capitalist categories on pre-class societies, she ruins her case by wild speculation based upon a jumbling together of misunderstood data from a range of widely differing societies. For a full critique of her, see Eleanor Leacock’s review in **Myths of Male Dominance**, *op. cit.*).

2. See Engels, **The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State**. For attempts to update Engels, see Leacock, *op. cit.*, Sacks *op. cit.*, Fluer-Lobban, *op. cit.*

3. This is essentially the argument of Engels which was taken up by Gordon Childe, *op. cit.* Some recent anthropological evidence tends to back this view. Thus Aberle notes that:

‘In general matriliney is associated with horticulture, in the absence of major activities carried on and coordinated by males, of the type of cattle raising or extensive public works. It tends to disappear with plough culture, and vanish with industrialisation.’ (David F. Aberle, *Matrilineal Descent in Cross Cultural Perspective*, in David Schneider and Kathleen Gough (eds), **Matrilineal Kinship**.)

Although matriliney cannot be identified with matriarchy, it does tend to exist in societies where women have a relatively high standing.

The same view is implicit in Sacks’ work. She stresses the way the subordination of women coincides with the ‘subversion’ of ‘kin corporations’ by the rise of classes and the state.

Leacock emphasises the development of commodity production as undermining kin lineages which give influence to women. This explains what happens in some cases – but not in others, where

classes develop through the differentiation out of a layer of state officials or a priestly ruling group, without the development of commodity production.

4. This was true of medieval Europe, see, for example, Susan Cahn, *Patriarchal Ideology and the Rise of Capitalism*, **IS 2:5**.

5. Where women control trade, as in some West African societies, they have a very high status. And the same has, from time to time, been true of parts of Europe. Walter Scott noted the high status of women (which he called 'gyneocracy') in some Scottish fishing villages, where they sold the fish and controlled the family incomes because their husbands were mostly at sea. (*Them that sell the goods guide the purse, them that guide the purse rule the house*, **The Antiquary**, London 1907, p.304.) Feminist anthropologists have more recently noticed similar phenomenon in some villages in Galicia in North West Spain.

6. For the working class family in the mid 19th century, see Ivy Pinchbeck, **Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution**, and Janet Humphries, *The Persistence of the Working Class Family*.

7. See Ruth Milkman, *Women's work and economic crisis: Some lessons of the Great Depression*, **Review of Radical Political Economy**, 1976.

8. See the section, *Labour Power in the Long Boom*, in my book **Explaining the Crisis**, London 1984.

9. For an excellent account of the women's movements in Britain and the US, see Tony Cliff, **Class Struggle and Women's Liberation**, London 1984.

10. As Karen Sacks has noted, these feminists share the presuppositions of male supremacists who see the subordination as an 'innate' feature of all societies:

'Much feminist thought has been shaped by ... an innatist approach ... Accepting the innatist world view, but altering it to accommodate equal rights for women by exempting women from blameworthy traits ... underlies some contemporary radical feminism.' (Sacks, **op. cit.**, p.25).

11. See her article in **New Statesman**, January 1980, reprinted in the collection, **No Turning Back**.
12. Lindsey German, *Theories of Patriarchy*, **IS 2:12**.
13. Heidi Hartmann, *The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism*, **Capital and Class**, no.8, Summer 1979.
14. I use the word 'reproduce' in the narrowest sense here, meaning the physical reproduction of the individual members of the species. There is a wider sense, of course, meaning the reproduction of the fully socialised adult, capable of carrying through necessary social tasks. There are certainly changes from society to society in the way this is accomplished. But that does not alter the fundamental argument. For these changes are a result of other social factors, and do not develop according to a dynamic of their own. The same applies to the way in which in certain societies women control their own fertility through periods of sexual abstinence etc. For a discussion on these matters, see Friedl, **op. cit.**, p.8.
15. **Women's Consciousness, Men's World**, Harmondsworth 1973, pp.59-66. Despite its misplaced theory, this book is far better than almost anything produced by the remnants of the women's movement today (including the present writings of Sheila Rowbotham).
16. **IS 1:100**.
17. **IS 1:68**.
18. **IS 2:1**.
19. **IS 2:3**.
20. **IS 1:104**.
21. For an account of the effects of these defeats on the women's movement, see Cliff, **op. cit.**
22. The great mistake of revolutionary socialists in the early 1970s was not to understand this, and to assume that, regardless of the state of the class struggle, women revolutionaries could only organise women workers. This was the error Kath Ennis slipped into her excellent 1973 article, and it was repeated in my own piece in the Socialist Workers Party **Internal Bulletin** in February 1979, **Women's Voice**, *Some of the Issues at Stake*.

We should have paid more attention to the experience of the great women revolutionaries!

23. *Socialism needs feminism*, **IS 2:14**.

24. Lindsey German, **op. cit.**

25. Review of *Brothers* in **Socialist Review**, no.61.

26. The formulae quoted here are from Barbara Winslow's pamphlet, **Revolutionary Feminism**, and from Joan Smith's various articles. But they weren't the only attempts to square the circle in the 1970s – see the discussion over the issue of **Women's Voice** in the IS and Socialist Workers Party **Internal Bulletins** of 1977-82.

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