

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article1924>



Theory

Marxism and Feminism

- Features - Feminism -

Publication date: Monday 27 September 2010

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

The re-emergence of feminism in the 1970s, itself the product of a whole generation of militants imbued with Marxism - at least in Europe - contributed to the development of two types of currents: those advocating a pure and simple rejection of Marxism, others the surpassing of Marxism through some methodology supposed to be better suited to the new subject matter. This paradoxical phenomenon can be explained by factors both internal and external to Marxism.

The desire to analyse the relations between sexes is not a new thing in this century, contrary to widespread belief.. It could even be said that the generalisation of the capitalist mode of production and the ideological revolution of the Enlightenment marked the starting point of a blurring of the real relations between sexes but also opened up the possibility to transcend them. In fact, the observation of ancient slave societies and medieval societies shows a strikingly abundant theoretical or phantasmagorical production justifying women's oppression, far greater than the production aimed at maintaining class divisions. The mythology of Ancient Greece, Confucian China and Vedic India was largely based on conflict between the sexes. The medieval Church erected a massive set of concepts on women's inferiority.

On the other hand, bourgeois ideology remains full of contradictions. Taking the existence of Man as a universal, a-historical and classless subject as its starting point, it finds it more difficult to ascertain some inherent inferiority of any given human group - the same problem arose with colonised peoples whose elite used the official bourgeois values against the colonial power.

Thus, even if over the last two hundred years it has constantly attempted to demonstrate scientifically the inferiority of women - from the size of the brain to modern aptitude tests - bourgeois thinking has chosen to justify the institutions through which oppression is exerted rather than establish the existence of sub-human groups. The fascist doctrine which starts from the supposed inferiority of women represents the exception confirming the rule. Middle Ages clerics described "The Woman" as diabolical whilst bourgeois ideology stated the need for families and the equivalence between femininity and maternity. Moreover, as the class most often under attack (since its inception was paralleled by the emergence of the workers' movement), the bourgeoisie's ideological production concentrated essentially on the defense of its class interests : valorization of labour, of the individual, legitimization of the State ... Women's oppression, so widely used, is hardly mentioned. While it was so highly claimed in other modes of production, it has been virtually erased under capitalism. Women have become a sort of "Black continent". Feminism in the 1970s started by reaffirming the oppression of women and its manifestations. It was a break with the past.

I consider that Marx and Engels remained dependent on the intellectual context of their time when neither relations between men and women nor the global situation of women within the capitalist system and within the different classes they belonged to were analysed. Only the institutions reproducing bourgeois society and in which women were involved came under scrutiny. Thus women happened to be in the subject of the analysis but never represented its starting point; the explanation of their oppression remained partial as no global understanding was aimed at; consequently, it was opened to misinterpretations and fuzzy theories. Women were dubbed "proletariat of the proletariat", "slave", "serf", all striking terms that did not clarify the real function of their oppression in the system.

This explains why, in the last decade, Marxism was rejected as intellectually barren : "Marx did not say anything sensible on the woman question, Engels got it wrong on the origins of oppression..." is often heard together with dualistic statements that Marxism is still useful for class analysis but useless for relations between the sexes. As if a new area of study required a new methodology !

There is no need to precise that this rejection is not purely theoretical. For decades - apart from brief revolutionary periods - the reformist labour movement with its social-democratic or Stalinist traditions has been reciting bourgeois ideology on this question. This did not lend credit to Marxism. Moreover, current feminism found its origin in the United States often relying on psychoanalysis or relating women's oppression to other forms of oppression (national or racial question) which did not encouraged a Marxist approach. Finally, as feminism was posed in terms of a social group suffering from segregation and inscribed in the framework of otherness (the man is the norm, the woman is the other), it could hardly escape the fashionable plague of philosophies of the Difference from the "New Philosophy" to the "New Right" including all sorts of interpretations claiming a psychoanalytical origin.

In this article, I would like to show what I believe to be correct in Marx's and Engels's texts and what is erroneous. I would like to demonstrate the inability to explain women's oppression as a global phenomenon of those theories that claim to reject or surpass Marxism which, despite some statements here and there, remains the only methodological approach for understanding the question.

Marx, Engels and the question of women's oppression

The great merit of Marxism is that it denounced the subjugation of women at a time, in the 19th century, when other "socialists" went as far as advocating its deepening (Proudhon in particular). Marx and Engels continued the tradition of the Saint-Simon and Fourier schools of thought - to which Flora Tristan belonged - which demanded sexual equality and the subversion of the bourgeois family. Going beyond the Utopians who limited themselves to a description of women's inferiority and asked for equality in the name of justice, Marxism started from a fundamental presupposition : that women's oppression is not a permanent feature in history but the result of a certain social formation and that relationships between sexes are not a natural but a social construct. This historical and materialist basis remains nowadays the dividing line from structuralist ethnology (Lévi-Strauss) which takes the exchange of women as the constituent element of human societies or from the psychoanalysts who believe that sexual differentiation is the driving force in the structuring of psyche.

In this field however, Marx derived his historical approach from a postulate, itself a logical outcome of historical materialism, rather than from a belief borne out of accurate studies of the status of women throughout the centuries. Only Engels' last book - 40 years after Flora Tristan's death ! - offered a systematic approach to the question. The *Origins of the Family* distinguished 3 main periods in women's history : classless societies in which women held leading positions (original matriarchy); non-capitalist class societies in which women are devoted to domestic reproduction as "slaves"; capitalism which reintroduced women into the productive sphere thereby providing an objective basis for their emancipation. This highly simplified division in periods is acceptable; what is not acceptable is the analysis of the status of women during some of the periods.

First, it is undisputed that societies without private ownership of the means of production, without state apparatuses, and with kinship social systems, showed examples of women's oppression infinitely more violent than that of 19th century imperialist countries. Many tribes of this type lived almost exclusively on female labour controlled by men; women were exchanged like goods, went and resided in the husband's village where they lost all rights; the ideological and religious production of those societies was intensely misogynist.

Why did Engels get it wrong ? Trapped in the ethnological findings of his time, which were much more limited than today's, Engels mixed two very different types of societies : matrilineal and matriarchal societies. Most of the known primitive or archaic societies undoubtedly operate or operated on the basis of matrilineal descent, but power belonged to maternal uncles and not women. Engels did not understand the importance of the place of residence of the family. Gender relations were totally different whether the husband went to his wife's clan (matrilocality) or the wife went to the husband's (patrilocality). The generalisation of patrilocality was much more significant in the "historic

defeat of the female sex" (this concept is ambiguous for it evokes pitched battles rather than a contradictory process spreading over milleniums inside transitory social formations) than the emergence of slavery, the State, patrilineality or the patriarchal family. Moreover, Engels based the origins of the changes in the status of women on a primitive division of labour with men hunting and women foraging and farming, which enabled men to appropriate the social surplus. I believe that there is no "natural" and universal division of labour. Men did what women did and vice versa, depending on the society they belonged to. Even such archetypically female activities as spinning and weaving are carried out by men in some North African tribes. It is not the nature of the work that matters but social relations.

I do not intend here to discuss the research hypotheses on the status of women in pre-class societies and even less those on the historical "origins" of women's oppression for which there is no widely accepted final answer. But the most productive method derives from the most classic Marxist concepts. Even for societies where relations of production are built on kinship relations, the most useful questions are the following : who produced, who controlled production ? Who benefited from the kinship system ?

I defend the idea that the known pre-class societies, which were almost all patrilocal, whether matrilineal or patrilineal, functioned on the principle of collective appropriation by men of women's labour force. This situation is confirmed by present primitive societies; it can be inferred from the study of archaic social formations, dominated by female slavery and where femininity and slavery were linked as a constant ideological feature. I therefore think that the slavery "revolution" and the private appropriation of the means of production stemmed from lineage societies, representing a break or continuity, as in those societies the collective appropriation of female labour and the devaluation of a human group within a clan supplied a model for later forms of exploitation. Nevertheless, although I believe that the first type of class struggle opposed women to men, I do not deduce from it the primacy of gender struggle for later modes of production. [This idea is defended by Shulamith Firestone in *The Dialectic of Sex*]

Women, however, are not "redistributed" inside the main classes as men are; it is not difficult to allocate women from the exploited layers to a class, though they are never exploited "in the same way" as men; the question is much more delicate for women of the ruling classes in certain historical periods. To which class, for example, should we allocate the wife of an Athenian aristocrat in antiquity, who was married at 12, locked up in the gynaecium, deprived of any control over her wealth and working with the servants ?

Engels characterized the second period in women's history by their exclusion from production. From the emergence of slavery to that of manufacture, women would have been devoted to reproduction in both senses of the word. "The wife became the first domestic servant, pushed out of participation in social production. Only modern large-scale industry again threw open to her - and only to the proletarian woman at that - the avenue to social production." (Friedrich Engeles *Origins of the Family Private Property and the State* Pathfinder Press, p.81) This assertion is still widely adhered to by Marxists. J.-L. Moynot wrote that in history "the male labour force played the main role", women being devoted to child-raising and domestic tasks.

Such a thesis is both anachronistic and unacceptable. It is nachronistic because it implies a marked division between the productive and reproductive spheres which was only introduced by capitalism. Let us take the example of a village community at the height of feudal mode of production. The sexual division of labour was absolute and immutable. But it did not correspond to the productive/reproductive division. Women were involved in some agricultural tasks, the hardest; men did the rest; all produced. Women spun, another activity which, as spun wool was sometimes sold, was as productive as work in the fields essentially for self-consumption. Domestic work ? It was quite limited given the types of habitat and eating habits, and were often left to an elder woman or youngsters. This thesis is also unacceptable because no known social formation in history has ever been able to do without the massive use of female labour for production.

Only a precise study of a given society at a given time can determine the respective roles of male and female labour,

and these vary greatly. So, to assert that women have been excluded from production is a feature of patriarchal ideology that claims the non-existence of women's work. Were the slaves of Asian monarchs or of Mycenae who were textile workers or cultivating the large estates of kings and temples really unproductive? Not productive, the medieval female peasants? On the contrary, the use of female labour was characterized by a combination of the most devalued productive tasks and reproductive ones, the first being often presented as an extension of the latter. In non-capitalist class societies, only the women of the ruling classes were excluded from production. Here again, it is important to differentiate them from men of the exploiting classes insofar as they nearly always worked: they were "the first servant" in the gynaeceum or in the feudal manor whilst their husband was totally "idle", devoting his time to politics, war or hunting, according to the period concerned.

Thus, the distinction between production and reproduction does not enable us to understand the condition of women in slave or feudal modes of production. More interestingly, if we start from the real individual status of women, we then discover that the use of their labour force, whatever the type of work, was never the same as that of men but took place in the context of specific social relations of domination. At the origins of slavery, there were more female slaves; while a numerical equality was later attained, however, the chances of women gaining their freedom were reduced, particularly given the fact that they brought the additional advantage of their children. In medieval societies, the father or husband, by custom the owner of her labour and her body, remained the automatic go-between the peasant woman and her lord. Let us take the example of the villain (free peasant in Western Europe): he owned the "use" of his land, could sell it or leave it; he had to pay numerous taxes but remained a free man. For the female villain, there was no freedom: land did not belong to her as she rarely inherited, nor did the produce of her labour; she could not leave because she depended on her father or husband's authority.

The male and female villains both belonged to the same fundamental class: their interests were the same against that of the lord and their role in the production process was similar. But it is obvious that, within the exploited class, women represented a layer defined both by their class but also by their personal status inside the family, a status not dissimilar to that of slaves. A woman did not belong to herself. Whatever their own oppression, father and husband kept economic power (controlling her labour) and political power (maintaining hierarchy) over her in these societies where authority mattered at all levels of the social structure.

Marx and Engels correctly sensed that capitalism introduced a major break in the condition of women and in the nature of the family. With brilliant intuition at the time of "savage capitalism" when women's situation seemed more appalling than the peasants', they were able to understand the logical evolution of the new mode of production which would create the objective conditions of her emancipation. With its tendency to involve more women in the sphere of social production, with the proletarianisation of an ever increasing number of workers, and by depriving the family of its role in the transmission of property, capitalism (partially) undermined the basis of male domination. Even if this conception now appears too unilateral, even if Marx and Engels made mistakes in the pace, late capitalism partly justifies their analysis. This is convincingly demonstrated by a comparison between the status of women in the imperialist countries and that of women in the third world which - all things being equal - are very similar to the condition of our great grand-mothers. Similarly, the positive role that Engels assigned to the insertion of women in capitalist production (despite some ambiguous formulations) had the merit of providing some legitimacy to the right of women to work at a time when the majority of the labour movement was condemning them for "stealing jobs". Today, this position remains with some nuances (access to wages does not guarantee freedom as the women join the proletariat as women) the dividing line with those who question, in theory or in practice, the need for women to work outside the home. Marx and Engels did not praise domestic labour or motherhood, which is quite remarkable given that the utopian socialists were demanding rights for women in the name of motherhood. "I repeat that the woman is everything in the life of a worker: as a mother, she influences him while a child; it is from her and from her only that he learns the first notions of this vital science which is the science of life...". This quote by Flora Tristan could possibly be understood as an acknowledgement of the reality. But Prosper Enfantin, in the tradition of Saint-Simon, and others following on from Fourier have constantly praised the Mother and her duties, with mystical high-flown language perfectly in line with the current bourgeois ideology that had been developed on that question at the end of the 18th century. Engels was more modern when he wrote: "The modern individual family is based on the open or

disguised domestic enslavement of the woman."(Ibid p. 81)

Nevertheless, as I explained above, neither Marx nor Engels tried to formulate a theory of women's oppression. *Das Kapital* details the conditions of production in the capitalist system but virtually never mentions those of reproduction. This stems from the system itself which, by establishing the most radical separation of history between the sphere of production and that of reproduction, makes it possible to analyse each on their own. In that way, Marx only looked at women as far as their work in manufacturing was concerned and did not understand their condition as a whole. Marx and Engels did have a theory of the family, but the structure they described belonged to the past : they included in the fundamental characteristics of the monogamous family its role in the transmission of inheritance through legitimate children and the increase in wealth brought about by the wife's dowry. "The rule of the man in the family, the procreation of children who could only be his, destined to be heirs of his wealth - these alone were ... the exclusive gains of monogamy." (ibid p. 74)

They were right to consider that this function of the family was condemned to wither away by the spread of capitalism. It is no longer its main function - at least for the vast majority of the population - even though research conducted in France on the creation of wealth showed that, inside the ruling class, inheritance plays a significant role in its transmission. The family however is still thriving and so is women's oppression.

Marxist theory has three major flaws for us: the differentiated use of male and female labour power by capitalism; the emergence of a bourgeois family adapted to the economic and political needs of the system; and the nature of social relations between sexes.

- ▶ Marx and his contemporaries could only see the determining role played by female labour in the accumulation of surplus profits at the origins of industrial capitalism. "When capital got hold of machines, it cried : women's work, children's work". The explanation seemed simple : unlike the members of corporations, women had no skills and could adapt far more easily to new working conditions ; their upbringing and their extremely precarious lives made them docile.

This explanation arose from the economic situation, as it was explained by Marx. But in fact, the overexploitation of women until late capitalism is a structural phenomenon. No one denies that professional inequality, at all levels of the social pyramid, is the rule. The lack of qualification is no longer the cause but a consequence of the need for capital to have at its disposal an overexploited labour force. In France, we have reached the paradoxical situation that because women do better at school they end up less qualified : they take their high school exams whilst boys (given their failure at school) are redirected towards technical training which makes them more suited to the market. In any case, as soon as women enter a profession, even a highly skilled one, it become very rapidly devalued. Moreover, what Marx noticed for the first industrial revolution, has been verified with the present technological changes. New working conditions - computing, bureautics, restructuring of working rythms - are tested on women. This constant shows how superficial any parallel with immigrant labour is. Foreigners have always eventually managed to get "integrated", so that at each new wave of expansion, more immigrants were needed. Women never get "integrated" and raise the question of what enables Capital to maintain the devaluation of their labour force.

The composition of the wage is a major element, and is different for men and women. Marx gave this definition of the wage : "The value of the labour force was determined by the expenses needed for the worker's and his family's upkeep." This composition of the wage has been generally correct, with the exceptions of periods of acute crisis of capitalism, and of the lumpen-proletariat. But it is only true of the male labour force. On the other side, it looks as if the female wage was cut by the part which men receive to maintain their family, on top of themselves. This differentiation in wages operates for all, the system assuming that all are married. The best proof can be seen in the social measures for women in developed capitalist countries as these measures are largely meant to compensate for the absence of a husband : benefits to widows, single mothers or divorcees; pensions that widows receive immediately whilst widowers have to wait until their own retirement (the latter being very recent !), etc. Society prefers to "support" millions of women rather than paying them an equal wage. Contrary to appearances and to bourgeois

legislation, the gap is still widening: women are, proportionately, increasingly numerous as skilled and unskilled workers.

It is obvious that this pin-money wage exists because of the need to accumulate profits; whether it constitutes a structural or conjunctural element remains an abstract question since the realisation of profit always occurs in concrete historical circumstances (and relationships of forces). The fact that this phenomenon survived three industrial revolutions, from the origins of capitalism to today, would indicate its structural nature. The specificity of this overexploitation comes from the fact that it derives its legitimacy from an institution experienced as external to the relations of production, the family, and beyond the family, from the whole civilian society which sets women as an oppressed group.

► Marx and Engels prophesied the short-term disappearance of the bourgeois family. They have been very often blamed for that, some historians and some Marxists concluding the opposite, its reinforcement, as a parallel to the growth of the bourgeois State. Marx' and Engels' prediction has to be explained in their historical context : the frenzied exploitation of "savage capitalism" had split the worker apart from his/her peasant family and upset previous roles. Engels has given a good description of the English situation, though sometimes in an ambiguous manner. "In many cases, the family is not totally destroyed by work, but everything is upside down. It is the woman who feeds the family, the man who stays at home, cleans the house and cooks. This is very frequent. In Manchester only, hundreds of them can be found who are condemned to domestic work. One can easily imagine the legitimate indignation that this de facto castration creates for workers and the sort of upheaval in family life resulting from it, although the other social conditions remain unchanged."

The family thus appeared as a remnant of pre-capitalist social relations, which only retained a useful function for the ruling classes. Marx and Engels were mistaken where they took a structural phenomenon for a conjunctural one. This mistake - which can be explained as I have said by its historical context - prevented them from seeing the need for a theory of the bourgeois family; it also enabled the reformist ideologists of the labour movement to defend the "worker's family" without seeming to break too openly from Marxism. Indeed, after the first phase of savage capitalism, the bourgeoisie felt the need to introduce the model of its family inside a working class that was too mobile and untamed.

Numerous studies published in France in the last ten years which show the new interest of historians for these questions (in parallel with the rise of the feminist movement) reveal how this process was started from 1870-80 with more "decent" dwellings for workers, suited to the nuclear family (mining villages replacing the promiscuous caves), with the ideology of motherhood extended to the female worker. The bourgeoisie's interests were clear : the reproduction of the labour force that capital did not want to socialise was accomplished in a private framework : the worker became more settled and more responsible through the family; women kept on being defined by their role in the family which enabled their overexploitation and use as a reserve army of labour. The bourgeoisie was actively helped by the organised workers' movement, composed essentially - as we know - of skilled male workers. Several explanations can be given : the strength of a "return to the past" Proudhon-style, which praised the merits of the patriarchal family against capitalist immorality; the stabilisation of workers which facilitated their unionisation; and above else, the fight against female competition by keeping the majority of women in the home and by hoping to send the others back home !

So, progressively, the model of the bourgeois family was generalised to the whole of society as a unit devoted to reproduction (and cut from the sphere of production), to the socialisation of children and to the equivalence between femininity and motherhood. Marx and Engels have not stressed that early capitalism was not able to socialise most of the domestic tasks. Their mistake did not come from the fact that they believed it possible, but from their lack of analysis of the concrete conditions, in their time, of reproduction of the species and the labour force. But the status of women derives precisely from the dialectical link between their reproductive work done in the family and their insertion in work for the market, each linked to the other. By limiting the analysis of women to their link with production, one fails to understand what makes them "special". As long as the system cannot transform domestic

tasks into products for the market, it will save an enormous amount of capital by having them performed in a private framework. Marx had not clearly perceived this aspect, stating that the worker found on the market the means to reproduce his labour force. In the classic Marxist theory, housework appeared as non-work, which is in contradiction with Engels's statement on domestic slavery. Domestic tasks are easily described as free, which they are not entirely. The male worker receives a part of his wage to enable his family to live (or survive) on and so, in a certain way, to pay for his wife's domestic work. This is not contradictory to the function of saving capital. The male "surplus-wage" (difference with the female wage) never reaches - by far - the numbers of housework hours even paid at a minimum wage level.

Should we conclude that Marx and Engels were completely wrong and that capitalism provoked a strengthening of the family? The often used word "strengthening" is not accurate. The bourgeoisie did not impose a strengthening of pre-capitalist family bonds, but another type of family. Is it new because of the consolidation of the economic base of this new family which would come from assigning reproduction to a private framework? It is new, as we have seen, because of the geographical and economic separation between production and reproduction. But in non-capitalist societies, the so-called reproductive tasks were also accomplished within the family by women, which the present system used. It could even be said that capitalism has a tendency to socialise more and more of the work previously done in the private framework. From the first industrial revolution onwards, in the towns, the family production of a number of basic food products disappeared (bread, vegetables, meat); clothes progressively became available on markets... As for late capitalism, it demonstrates the ability of the system to spread the reign of merchandises to large sectors of the reproductive sphere: lightning growth of the ready-to-wear market, pre-cooked dishes, laundry... Even consumption is losing (a little) of its family trait to become more individualised. This new stage in capitalism corresponds logically to a new wave of women's entry on the labour market. In France their percentage of the active population has been regularly increasing since 1970. "If the worker's wife, in the past earning no wage, is now joining the mass of producers supplying work in the capitalist industry, she directly increases the production of additional goods and of surplus-value. If a part of the goods thus produced is then consumed by the workers' families replacing domestic services previously accomplished free by the housewife, all this is profitable for capital as it facilitates the realisation of surplus-value, the accumulation of capital and enlarged reproduction."

Two elements of this process are essential: the taking of responsibility for housework by the private sphere is not structurally indispensable to the functioning of the system, but is a necessity over a long period; the status of women takes shape in the link between labour market/family, but in the last analysis the determining factor which can change their condition is the need for accumulation of surplus value, at the very heart of the system.

What then is so specific to the bourgeois family compared to previous types? It is the political, of course! It materialises the split between the private man on the one hand, and the producer and citizen on the other. It embodies efficiently bourgeois individualism (inward-looking nuclear family) whilst guaranteeing the individual a place for a minimum of emotional support. More than ever before, it ensures the socialisation of children despite compulsory schooling. All sociologists stress it: marriage is based on love and not interest, and thus, the Family remains the number 1 value in any opinion poll. This social and political function is efficient enough and independent enough from the economic structures to be integrated without any change by the Eastern Europe countries where it renders similar services to the ruling layers.

Everywhere, the internalisation of this model is very strong and contributes to the alienation of those who, as mothers, are its pillars. But the process is contradictory. In fact, in non-capitalist societies, the family undoubtedly operates as the place of women's oppression; in those social formations with their fundamental inequalities where the State is weaker, authority is spread throughout the different layers of the social body based on hierarchies determined by birth, function, age, gender, and accepted as permanent. Men dominate women because God (or Mother Nature) wanted it as such. The modern State, as the embodiment of Law above classes and groups, had to break those intermediate hierarchies and claim the freedom and equality of the individual in front of it; this change reflects the needs of Capital in a "free" labour force. In this change, the old family which was the place of codified male authority slowly and partially lost this role for objective reasons (the logic of the system) and subjective ones (women's struggles). The participation of women in production for the market, access to studies similar to the men's, the bourgeois discourse on formal equality between all individuals, clashed with the oppressed status of women at

work and in the family. Marx and Engels sensed the phenomenon because it was fundamentally logical for the system, but it manifested itself much more slowly and in a more contradictory fashion than they predicted. This phenomenon has not reached its ultimate form and the conscious intervention of organised women will play a decisive role in shaping it.

- ▶ The third gap in Marxist theory concerns the nature of social gender relations. Marx and Engels used much stronger words than their various epigones who strove to deny women's oppression by men in the name of workers' unity. "The (family) contains in miniature all the antagonisms which later developed in society and its State." (Marx) "(Conjugal marriage) appears as the subjugation of one sex by the other, as the declaration of a conflict between sexes." (Engels)

However, what neither of them really understood, is the foundation, in the capitalist system, for why gender conflicts are still going on.

Some feminists have talked about the oppression of women by men through domestic work. This notion of appropriation of women's labour force for productive and reproductive tasks by men seems correct for pre-class societies; it has to be looked at on its own merits for each individual case for non-capitalist, class social formations. It does not work for capitalism. Exploitation means appropriation of surplus-value within production for the market and absolute separation between the owner of capital and the worker. Nothing like this in domestic work. Its destiny is to be accomplished in a private framework, outside any idea of profitability, and thus cannot be productive in the Marxist sense of the word. One can accept that a husband buys the labour force of his wife with his wage, but their interests are not fundamentally opposed; both are legally equally entitled to the husband's wage, to the objects produced at home, and none has any interest in diminishing the share of the other. Moreover, the spouse expects a service; he is not directly interested in his wife's production : does it matter if ironing is done in one or two hours ? No, as long as it is done; and once it is done, he will not go and get additional ironing from his neighbour, just to keep her busy !

By excluding the concept of exploitation, I do not mean that male dominance is "just backwardness in the mentalities". We have seen how capitalism functions on the basis of the over-exploitation of the female labour force and with savings obtained on the upkeep of the total labour force. It is obvious that this achievement necessitates a devalued status to all women at all levels in civilian society. Extraordinary creative powers were not required for that : it only needed to maintain and adapt an oppression several thousand years old, with the active support of those who clearly benefit materially and morally from it, whatever their class. Men were granted the collective status of oppressors with crumbs of surplus-value (higher wages) and social privileges (not to do housework) and ideological ones. This produces "poor white" type of feelings among the most exploited and represents a major factor in the loss of class consciousness. Obviously men and women belong to different classes in the capitalist system. Within each class, their historical interests are the same (though one could discuss the contradictory interests of bourgeois women). Concretely and conjuncturally, it is another story : competition for jobs, particularly high during periods of crisis; competition for access to high positions; competition in the political or trade union world, which is a male bastion especially well protected... These social relations between men and women do not easily fit in pre-established concepts. Terms of slavery or serfdom do not account for the juridical freedom, the "equality" which women enjoy today. Men are endowed by birth with privileges compared to the women of their own class and in some aspects compared to all women. A partial similarity can be drawn with racial minorities such as in the USA though with a big difference that oppression is not exerted individually with each white having his Black to oppress.

Adding to that the fact that this oppression is so ancient, but also constant in the relations between men and women, and plays a major part in structuring each individual character, one can only conclude that it will survive beyond the capitalist relations of production and even beyond the present family. Sexual conflicts exist, we encounter them every day. It is evident that the internal evolution of capitalism has partially supplied an objective and contradictory basis for overcoming them, and that the destruction of the system will broaden this objective basis. What remains determinant - and which Marx and Engels could not easily see - is the subjective factor of the independent women's struggle.

Can feminism go beyond Marxism ?

Some rejected Marxism as inadapted in the name of women's independent struggle. These new methodological approaches can be broadly classified into two main currents : the first criticising Marxism as "economist" and incapable of explaining gender conflicts; the other wanting to add to Marxism a theory of the patriarchal mode of production that would run parallel to capitalism. It is impossible here to detail the various positions. We will concentrate on those which structure the currents of organised feminists in France.

- ▶ The Psychanalyse et Politique group [Psync et Po] claimed, right from the start, to have developed a new theory with a fusion of Marxism and psychoanalysis. Marxism was supposed to offer a reserve of concepts : exploitation, State power, class struggle, imperialism... and an analysis of men's relations between themselves. Psychoanalysis, reinterpreted and socialised by the group's gurus, was to provide the methodological base for the analysis of gender relations. The approach is the following : Sexual Differentiation induces a different relationship to one's own body, according to one's gender, which in turn induces a relationship to the antagonistic Symbolic. The registered MLF [the Psync et Po group registered "women's liberation movement (MLF)" as their name] believes, along with Lacan, that the domain of Power, of Making and of the Word is male whilst resistance to Power, the inarticulated discourse of the Body and the immediacy of Life are female. This symbolic polarity gives the social sphere its backbone; in order to insure their dominance, men led women to renounce their own identity and to accept the model of patriarchal values (rationality, power, etc). So that present society witnesses two parallel conflicts, though one determines the other: class struggle between men, as an illustration of their immoderate wish to enslave their neighbour; and the symbolic revolution of the most conscious women to rediscover their identity, subvert patriarchal order and, consequently, the capitalist society deriving from it. This struggle can only be accomplished through a radical separation from men, "erotic and political independence".

How is it that this current, now losing momentum for political rather than theoretical reasons, has been able to attract women, particularly amongst the intelligentsia ? Without any doubt, it gives an answer to gaps in Marxist texts : how to justify the depth to which both sexes internalize women's oppression? How to explain the persistency of sexual polarity in symbols and values beyond the modes of production? Marxism lacks, it is true, a theory of the Subject taken as a whole, and of its alienation, not only as an economic agent. Psychoanalysis is the instrument for a study of alienation with its deciphering of individual and collective behaviour. Access to language, the structure of language, the world of symbols ... are deeply marked by sexual dichotomy which plays a significant role in structuring the character. To unearth and analyse this can either act as a critique or a reinforcement of social order. But it is the later possibility that takes place when one draws psychoanalysis towards a Philosophy of Being. The "content" of the unconscious then becomes a permanent feature of the human species instead of the internalization by both the individual and the collectivity of a given situation in history. Jung's school (Jung Man in search of his soul) and his recent epigones who claim to read the universal fantasies of humankind in the myths of archaic and primitive societies, do not fail to postulate the dual structuration of the Unconscious between the Male and the Female (animus-anima). Translated into the field of values, this provides, as one could expect, a collection of patriarchal prejudices. Woman = Passivity, Irrationality, Matter... G. Devereux' recent book *Woman and Myth*, is typical of the kind. In its search for a female identity, Psychanalyse et Politique can only reproduce the same commonplaces and the same reactionary ideology. What can the female identity really be? A different relationship to the body and sexuality from that of the men's? Well, then we cannot forget that the relationship to the body is not immediate but has always been put in a historical context for the human species. From this relationship to the body should we deduce a Difference in the psyche of the individual? To believe this is to fall in the trap of some biological determinism and/or in the old idea that women are nothing but their body. "Tota mulier in utero." "Womb to women" say Psych. et Po.

Marxists cannot but challenge this interpretation of psychoanalysis as they cannot but denounce the Philosophies of the Difference which have been flourishing for the last decade. Among women, the same attempt to rediscover "feminine values" can also be found in the American neo-feminism (Betty Friedan). As far as the "New Right" is

concerned, they start polemics against "monist" philosophies guilty of thinking in universal concepts when earth enjoys diversity (understand inequality) of ethnic groups, regions, sexes, individuals. A diversity which cannot be understood but for specific criteria for each human group. This approach rejects thinking beyond Marxism, but also rejects classical philosophy. For women, it is deadly since, whatever the registered MLF thinks of it, it is the very discourse of the oppressor. It is true that this current does not fully adopt the logic of Difference since it gives to the symbolic world a determining and totalizing function : it is this world which reproduces social relations and determines them. However, to render the historical process dependent on an invariant which fixes two human groups in a radical otherness, is to pose the existence of two fields of thought and above all, two fields of action : symbolic subversion for women, class struggle for men.

The strength of Marxism comes from its methodology which enables a reconstitution of fragments of women's oppression (work, family, values...) into a meaningful whole. It sets women in matters historical and matters social from which patriarchal ideology (and not reality) had rejected them. By doing so, it places them not on the side of classes but at the heart of the class struggle. Not because of some preoccupation with their sordid life, nor because they are the most exploited, oppressed... but because their oppression enable the capitalist mystery to function at all levels and that, once reshaped and regenerated, this oppression can be transmitted to other oppressive societies.

Symbolic subversion ? Who opposes it ? One cannot see how it could operate outside a social framework involving all relations of production and outside the insertion of women into that process. On the content of the symbolic subversion, disagreements are obvious. To standardize male and female values is reactionary, to impose them in the name of a rediscovered Identity reeks of totalitarianism. Men are not women and vice versa? Some are oppressed and some are oppressors : their relationship to the world is different... Would the reduction of differences between the sexes would impoverish humankind as anti-feminist ideologists and some women claim? So what should we think about mutilations imposed on all the individuals forced to accept the sexual norms of their society, of the body-centred attitude to ideas and behaviour? The victim's resentment and the satisfied stupidity of the oppression are automatic consequences of ethnic or sexual 'racism'. One can have serious doubts about their enriching value.

- ▶ The other criticism made to Marxism concerns its allocation of women to classes which erases the unity of their oppression. Some stick to a description : women are all discriminated against, and bourgeois women remain oppressed. "Women as a group objectively exploited by men's society form a separate social category with common characteristics whatever their class" wrote Anne de Pisan and Anne Tristan in *Histoire du MLF* (History of the Women's Liberation Movement). As far as the description is concerned, it is relatively easy to answer that oppression differs slightly between the public housing estates and bourgeois areas.

Others, to create women's unity, put the family as the determining factor for the functioning of capitalism. This thesis is developed in *Being Exploited* produced by an Italian collective, in *Women's Power and the Subversion of the Community* by Maria Rosa Della Costa and Selma James, and in France, in the articles of the journal *Nouvelles questions féministes* (New feminist issues). The idea is the following : the reproduction of the labour force, vital for capitalism, is accomplished by women; the system cannot give it up without destroying itself. The family reproduces the relations of production : "The existence of the world as a market for goods is based on the existence of a mode of domestic reproduction excluded from this market" (*Being exploited*). In this way, women are all defined by this precise function, while men are in classes.

This theory is wrong on two counts :

- ▶ it confers autonomy on the bourgeois family to the point of making it a determining factor in the durability of the system (hence for those women the revolutionary nature of the demand for a domestic wage...). Is capitalism possible without family? It would be absurd to answer in the abstract, outside a historical and geographical context. At certain periods, for certain social layers, the system destroyed the framework of the family, if only to rebuild it later

: dislocation of the working class family at the beginning of capitalism, interdiction to establish a family. Moreover, we have seen that the third industrial revolution tends to socialise domestic tasks.

- ▶ It ignores women working outside the home. To which class do they belong ? What are the links between their paid work and their domestic functions ? It remains a mystery...

Other feminists go even further. Marxism describes one production system when in fact there are two : capitalism relying on the exploitation of man by man (as in male person), and the family mode of production based on the exploitation by men of the free labour of housewives in a relation of slavery. These two systems, according to Christine Durand (old article in *Partisans* Nos 48-49; more recent articles in *Questions féministes*) are "theoretically" independent of each other. There again, we have two major objections :

- ▶ one cannot talk about exploitation for domestic work, at least in the Marxist sense of the term (see above). If the fact of belonging to the "women" class comes from the housework done for a man, then is not it possible for women to free themselves from this condition by remaining single?
- ▶ The coexistence of two modes of production at this stage of capitalism is simply theoretical. One would have to demonstrate that the family is an economic unit operating on its own logic, apart from capitalism. However, everything proves that this structure evolves in close relation to the demands, the evolution and the transformations of the system.

In reality, all theories claiming to surpass Marxism have one common feature : they propose a vision of reality which is unchanging, deprived of historical perspective.. Here is women's oppression as Eternity fixed it...

If, on the women's question "reading Marx" is insufficient, the Marxist methodology - history unfolding in the resolving of successive contradictions - remains an irreplaceable asset.