

INTRODUCTION

Women and the Subversion of the Community is a contribution to *the* question posed by the existence of a growing international movement of women: What is the relation of women to capital and what kind of struggle can we effectively wage to destroy it? We must hastily add that this is not the same as asking: What concessions can we wring from the enemy?—though this is related. To pose the first question is to assume we'll win; to pose the second is to calculate what we can salvage from the wreck of defeat. But in struggling to *win*, plenty can be gained along the way.

Up to now, the women's movement has had to define itself unaided by any serious heritage of Marxist critique of women's relation to the capitalist plan of development and underdevelopment. Quite the opposite. We inherited a distorted and reformist concept of capital itself as a series of *things* which we struggle to plan, control or manage, rather than as a *social relation* which we struggle to destroy.¹ Bypassing that heritage or lack of it, our movement explored the female experience, beginning with what we personally knew it to be. This is how we have been able for the first time on a mass scale to describe with profound insight and cutting precision the degradation of women and the shaping of our personality by forces which intended that we accept this degradation, accept to be quiet and powerless victims. On the basis of these discoveries, two distinct political tendencies have emerged, apparently opposite extremes of the political spectrum within the women's movement.

Among those who have insisted that *caste* and not class was fundamental, some women have asserted that what they call an "economic analysis" could not encompass, nor could a political struggle end, the physical and psychological oppression of women. They reject revolutionary political struggle. Capital is immoral, needs reforms and should be left behind, they say (thereby implying that the reforms are a moral obligation which are themselves a negotiated and above all non-violent transition to "socialism"), but it is not the only enemy. We must change men and/or ourselves first. So that not only political struggle is rejected; so is liberation for the mass of women who are too busy working and seeing after others to look for a personal solution.

The possible future directions of these politics vary, mainly because this point of view takes a number of forms depending on the stratum of women who hold it. An elite club of this type can remain introverted and isolated—harmless except as it discredits the movement generally. Or it can be a source of those managerial types in every field which the class in charge is looking for to perform for it ruling functions over rebellious women and, god bless equality, over rebellious men too.² Integral to this participation in the marginal aspects of ruling, by the way, is an ambition and rivalry up to now primarily identified with men.

But history, past and future, is not simple. We have to note that some of the most incisive discoveries of the movement and in fact its autonomy have come from women who began by basing themselves on a repudiation of class and class struggle. The task of the

¹ "Wakefield discovered that in the Colonies, property in money, means of subsistence, machines and other means of production does not as yet stamp a man as a capitalist if there be wanting the correlative—the wage worker the other man who is compelled to sell himself of his own free will. He discovered that *capital is not a thing but a social relation between persons established by the instrumentality of things*. Mr. Peel, he moans, took with him from England to Swan River, West Australia, means of subsistence and of production to the amount of £50,000. Mr. Peel had the foresight to bring with him, besides, 3,000 persons of the working class, men, women and children. Once arrived at his destination, 'Mr. Peel was left without a servant to make his bed or fetch him water from the river.' Unhappy Mr. Peel who provided for everything except the export of English modes of production to Swan River!" Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. I (Moscow: 1958), 766. (Emphasis ours.)

² The *Financial Times* of March 9, 1971, suggests that many capitalists are missing the opportunity to "use" women in positions of middle management; being "grateful outsiders," women would not only lower the pay structure, "at least in the first instance," but be a "source of renewed energy and vitality" with which to manage the rest of us.

movement now is to develop a political strategy on the foundations of these discoveries and on the basis of this autonomy.

Most of those who have insisted from the beginning that *class* and not caste was fundamental have been less able to translate our psychological insights into autonomous and revolutionary political action. Beginning with a male definition of class, the liberation of women is reduced to equal pay and a “fairer” and more efficient welfare State.³ For these women capital is the main enemy but because it is *backward*, not because it *exists*. They don’t aim to destroy the capitalist social relation but only to organize it more rationally. (The extra-parliamentary Left in Italy would call this a “socialist” as distinct from a revolutionary position.) What a rationalized capital—equal pay, more and better nurseries, more and better jobs, etc.—can’t fix, they call “oppression” which, like Topsy, the orphaned slave child who never knew her parents, “just grewed.” Oppression disconnected from material relations is a problem of “consciousness”—in this case, psychology masquerading in political jargon. And so the “class analysis” has been used to limit the breadth of the movement’s attack and even undermine the movement’s autonomy.

The essentially similar liberal nature of these two tendencies, wanting to rationally manage “society” to eliminate “oppression,” is not usually apparent until we see the “political” women and these “non-political” women join together on concrete demands or, more often, against revolutionary actions. Most of us in the movement belong to neither of these tendencies and have had a hard time charting a course between them. Both ask us: “Are you a feminist or are you political?”

The “political” women who talk of class are easy to identify. They are the women’s liberationists whose first allegiance is not to the women’s movement but to organizations of the male-dominated Left. Once strategy and action originate from a source outside of women, women’s struggle is measured by how it is presumed to affect men, otherwise known as “the workers,” and women’s consciousness by whether the forms of struggle they adopt are the forms men have traditionally used.

The “political” women see the rest of us as non-political and this has tended to drive us together in self-protection, obscuring or playing down real political differences among us. These now are beginning to make themselves felt. Groups that call themselves Psychology Groups (I’m not talking here about consciousness raising groups) tend to express the politics of caste most coherently.⁴ But whichever quarter they come from, viewing women as a caste

³ If this seems an extreme statement, look at the demands we in England marched for in 1971: equal pay, free twenty-four-hour childcare, equal educational opportunity and free birth control and abortion on demand. Incorporated into a wider struggle, some of these are vital. As they stand, they accept that we not have the children we can’t afford; that the State facilities keep the children we can afford for as long as twenty-four hours a day; and that these children have equal chance to be conditioned and trained to sell themselves competitively with each other on the labor market for equal pay. By themselves these are not just co-optable demands. They are capitalist planning. Most of us in the movement never felt these demands expressed where we wanted the movement to go, but in the absence of an independent feminist political framework, we lost by default. The prime architects of these demands were women with a “class analysis.”

⁴ Psychology itself *by its nature* is a prime weapon of manipulation, i.e. social control, of men, women and children. It does not acquire another nature when wielded by women in a movement for liberation. Quite the reverse. To the degree that we permit, it manipulates the movement and changes the nature of that to suit its needs. And not only psychology. “Women’s liberation needs:

- to destroy sociology as the ideology of the social services which bases itself on the proposition that this society is “the norm”; if you are a person in rebellion, you are a deviant.
- to destroy psychology and psychiatry which spend their time convincing us that our “problems” are personal hang-ups and that we must adjust to a lunatic world. These so-called “disciplines” and “sciences” will increasingly incorporate our demands in order more efficiently to redirect our forces into safe channels under their stewardship. Unless we deal with them, they will deal with us.
- to discredit once and for all social workers, progressive educators, marriage guidance counselors, and the whole army of experts whose function is to keep men, women and children functioning within the social framework, each by their own special brand of social frontal lobotomy.” From “The American Family: Decay and Rebirth,” by Selma James, reprinted in *From Feminism to Liberation*, collected by Edith Hoshino Altbach, Schenkman (Cambridge, MA: 1971), 197-8.

and only a caste is a distinct political line, which is increasingly finding political and organizational expression in every discussion of what to do. In the coming period of intense working class activity, as we are forced to create our own political framework, casting away second-hand theories of male-dominated socialist movements, the pre-eminence of caste will be posed as the alternative and will have to be confronted and rejected as well. On this basis alone can the new politics inherent in autonomy find its tongue and its muscle.

This process of development is not unique to the women's movement. The Black movement in the U.S. (and elsewhere) also began by adopting what appeared to be only a caste position in opposition to the racism of white male-dominated groups. Intellectuals in Harlem and Malcolm X, that great revolutionary, were both nationalists, both appeared to place color above class when the white Left were still chanting variations of "Black and white unite and fight," or "Negroes and Labor must join together." The Black working class was able through this nationalism to *redefine class*: overwhelmingly Black and Labor were synonymous (with no other group was Labor as synonymous—except perhaps with women), the demands of Black people and the forms of struggle created by Black people were the most comprehensive *working class* demands and the most advanced *working class* struggle. This struggle was able to attract to itself the best elements among the intellectuals who saw their own persecution as Black people—as a caste—grounded in the exploitation of Black workers. These intellectuals who got caught in the moment of nationalism after the class had moved beyond it saw race in increasingly individual terms and made up that pool from which the State Department could hook the fish of tokenism—appointing a Black as special presidential advisor on slum clearance, for example—and the personnel of a new, more integrated technocracy.

In the same way women for whom caste is the fundamental issue will make the transition to revolutionary feminism based on a redefinition of class or invite integration into the white male power structure.

But "'Marxist' women," as a woman from the movement in New Orleans says, "are just 'Marxist' men in drag." The struggle as they see it is not qualitatively different from the one the organized labor movement *under masculine management* has always commended to women, except that now, appended to the "general struggle," is something called "women's liberation" or "women's struggle" voiced by women themselves.

This "general struggle" I take to mean the class struggle. But there is nothing in capitalism that is not capitalistic, that is, not part of the class struggle. The questions are (a) Are women except when they are waged workers auxiliary to capitalism (as has been assumed) and therefore auxiliary to a more basic, more general struggle against capitalism; and (b) Can anything ever have been "general" which has excluded so many women for so long?

Rejecting on the one hand class subordinated to feminism and on the other feminism subordinated to class, **we (original: Mariarosa Dalla Costa)** confronted what (to our shame) has passed for Marxism with the female experience that we have been exploring and struggling to articulate. The result has been a translation of our psychological insights into a critique of the political economy of the exploitation of women, the theoretical basis for a revolutionary and autonomous women's struggle. Based on what we know of *how* we are degraded, we move into the question of *why*, in a depth as far as I know not reached before.

One great achievement of Marx was to show that the specific social relations between people in the production of the necessities of life, relations which spring up without their conscious planning, "behind the backs of *people*" (*Menschen*—previously translated as *men*), distinguish one society from another. That is, in class society, the form of the relation between people through which the ruling class robs the exploited of their labor is unique in each historic epoch, and all other social relations in the society, beginning with the family and including every other institution, reflect that form.

For Marx history was a process of struggle of the exploited, who continually provoke over long periods and in sudden revolutionary leaps changes in the basic social relations of production and in all the institutions which are an expression of these relations. The family, then, was the basic biological unit differing in form from one society to another, directly related to the way people produce. According to him, the family, even before class society, had the subordinated woman as its pivot; class society itself was an extension of the relations between men on the one hand and women and children on the other, an extension, that is, of the man's command over the labor of his woman and his children.

The women's movement has gone into greater detail about the capitalist family. After describing how women are conditioned to be subordinate to men, it has described the family as that institution where the young are repressed from birth to accept the discipline of capitalist relations—which in Marxist terms begins with the discipline of capitalist work. Other women have identified the family as the centre of consumption, and yet others have shown that housewives make up a hidden reserve work force: “unemployed” women *work* behind closed doors at home, to be called out when capital needs them elsewhere.

Women and the Subversion of the Community (original: The Dalla Costa article) affirms all the above, but places them on another basis: the family under capitalism is a center of conditioning, of consumption and of reserve labor, but a centre essentially of *social production*. When previously so-called Marxists said that the capitalist family did not produce for capitalism, was not part of social production, it followed that they repudiated women's potential *social power*.⁵ Or rather, presuming that women in the home could not have social power, they could not see that women in the home produced. If your production is vital for capitalism, refusing to produce, refusing to *work*, is a fundamental lever of social power.

Marx's analysis of capitalist production was not a meditation on how the society “ticked.” It was a tool to find the way to overthrow it, to find the social forces which, exploited by capital, were subversive to it. Yet it was because he was looking for the forces that would inevitably overthrow capital that he could describe capital's social relations, which are pregnant with working class subversion. It is because *we* (original: Mariarosa Dalla Costa) were looking for *women's* lever of social power among those forces that we were able to uncover that even when women do not work out of their homes, they are vital producers.

The commodity they produce, unlike all other commodities, is unique to capitalism: the living human being—“the laborer himself.”

Capital's special way of robbing labor is by paying the worker a wage that is enough to live on (more or less) and to reproduce other workers. But the worker must produce more in the way of commodities than what his wage is worth. The unpaid surplus labor is what the capitalist is in business to accumulate and what gives him increasing power over more and more workers: he pays for some labor to get the rest free so he can command more labor and get even more free, ad infinitum—until we stop him. He buys with wages the right to use the only “thing” the worker has to sell, his or her ability to work. The specific social relation, which is capital, then, is the wage relation. And this wage relation can exist only when the ability to work becomes a saleable commodity. Marx calls this commodity *labor power*.

⁵ Marx himself does not seem to have said anywhere that it was. Why this is so requires more space than is available here and more reading of the man at the expense of his interpreters. Suffice it to say that, first, he is singular in seeing personal consumption as a phase of production: “It is the production and reproduction of that means of production so indispensable to the capitalist: the laborer himself.” (*Capital* 1: 572.) Second, he alone has given us the tools to make our own analysis. And finally, he never was guilty of the nonsense with which Engels, despite his many contributions, has saddled us and which, from the Bolsheviks to Castro, has given a “Marxist” authority to backward and often reactionary policies towards women of revolutionary governments

This is a strange commodity for it is not a thing. The ability to labor resides only in a human being whose life is consumed in the process of producing. First it must be nine months in the womb, must be fed, clothed and trained; then when it works its bed must be made, its floor swept, its lunchbox prepared, its sexuality not gratified but quietened, its dinner ready when it gets home, even if this is eight in the morning from the night shift. This is how labor power is produced and reproduced when it is daily consumed in the factory or the office. *To describe its basic production and reproduction is to describe women's work.*

The community therefore is not an area of freedom and leisure auxiliary to the factory, where by chance there happen to be women who are degraded as the personal servants of men. The community is the other half of capitalist organization, the other area of hidden capitalist exploitation, *the other, hidden, source of surplus labor*.⁶ It becomes increasingly regimented like a factory, what **we (original Mariarosa)** call a social factory, where the costs and nature of transport, housing, medical care, education, police, are all points of struggle.⁷ And this social factory has as its pivot the woman in the home producing labor power as a commodity, *and her struggle not to.*

The demands of the women's movement, then, take on a new and more subversive significance. When we say, for example, that we want control of our own bodies, we are challenging the domination of capital which has transformed our reproductive organs as much as our arms and legs into instruments of accumulation of surplus labor; transformed our relations with men, with our children and our very creation of them, into *work productive to this accumulation.*

⁶ I said earlier that Women and the Subversion of the Community moves into the question of why women are degraded "in a depth as far as I know not reached before." Three previous attempts stand out (and can all be found in From Feminism to Liberation.) "The Political Economy of Women's Liberation" by Margaret Benston attempts to answer the same question. It fails, in my view, because it bases itself not on Marx but on Ernest Mandel. Even the few paragraphs of Mandel, which Benston quotes are enough to expose the theoretical basis of modern Trotskyist liberalism. We must restrict ourselves here to what he says about women's work in the home, which Benston accepts. "The second group of products in capitalist society which are not commodities but remain simple use-value consists of all things produced in the home. Despite the fact that considerable human labor goes into this type of household production, it still remains a production of use-values and not of commodities. Every time a soup is made or a button sewn on a garment it constitutes production, but it is not production for the market." This is quoted from An Introduction to Marxist Economic Theory (Merit, NY: 1967), 10-11. Even the title betrays the falsity of the content: there is no such thing as "Marxist economic theory" or "Marxist political economy" or for that matter "Marxist sociology." Marx negated political economy in theory and the working class negates it in practice. For economics fragments the qualitative relations between people into a compartmentalized and quantified relation between things. When, as under capitalism, our labor power becomes a commodity, we become factors in production, objects, sexual and in every way, which the economists, the sociologists and the rest of the vampires of capitalist science then examine, plan for and try to control). Juliet Mitchell ("Women—The Longest Revolution") also believes that although women "are fundamental to the human condition, yet in their economic, social and political roles they are marginal (93). The error of her method, in my view, is that once again an interpreter of Marx, this time Althusser, is her guide. Here separation of economic, social and political roles is conscious policy. Labor power is a commodity produced by women in the home. It is this commodity that turns *wealth* into *capital*. The buying and selling of this commodity turns the market into a *capitalist* market. Women are not marginal in the home, in the factory, in the hospital, in the office. We are fundamental to the reproduction of capital and fundamental to its destruction.

Peggy Morton of Toronto in a splendid article, "A Woman's Work Is Never Done," points out that the family is the "unit whose function is the *maintenance of and reproduction of labor power* i.e. . . . the structure of the family is determined by the needs of the economic system, at any given time, for a certain *kind* of labor power" (214). Benston calls, after Engels, for the capitalist industrialization of household jobs as "preconditions" for "true equality in job opportunity and the industrialization of housework is unlikely unless women are leaving the home for jobs" (207). That is, if we get jobs capital will industrialize the areas where, according to her, we only produce use-values and not capital; this wins us the right to be exploited equally with men. With victories like that, we don't need defeats. On the other hand, Morton is not looking for what concessions we can wring from the enemy but how to destroy him. "All too often we forget why we are organizing women; the purpose of building a mass movement is not to build a mass movement, but to make revolution." Benston, she says, "does not provide any basis on which strategy for a women's movement can be based." The absence of this motive for analysis in the movement generally "encourages a real liberalism among us" (212). Right on.

⁷ For those who believe the struggle in the social factory is not political, let them note that here, more than in the factory, is the State directly the organizer of the life of the worker, especially if she is a woman, and so here the worker confronts the State more directly, without the intervention of individual capitalists and the mediation of trade unions.

A Woman's Place, originally published as a pamphlet, was written in 1952 at the height of the Cold War, in Los Angeles, where the immigration of young working men and women had assumed Biblical dimensions.⁸ Though it bears my name, I was merely a vehicle for expressing what women, housewives and factory workers, felt and knew as immigrants to the Golden West from the South and East.

It was already clear even then that working outside the home did not make drudgery at home any more appealing, nor liberate us from the responsibility for housework even when it was “shared.” It was equally clear that to think of spending our lives packing chocolates, or winding transformers, or wiring televisions was more than we could bear. We rejected both and fought against both. For example, in those days a man’s friends would still laugh if they saw him wearing an apron and washing up. We changed that.

There is no doubt that the courage to fight for these changes sprang directly from that paycheck which we so hated to work for. But though we hated the work, for most of us it provided the first opportunity for an independent social experience outside the isolation of the home, and *seemed the only alternative to that isolation*. After the mass entry of women into industry during World War II, and our brutal expulsion between 1945 and 1947, from 1947 when they wanted us again we came back and, with the Korean War (1949), in increasing numbers. For all the reasons outlined in the pamphlet, we wanted money and saw no alternative to demanding jobs.

That we were immigrants from industrial, farming or coal-mining areas made us more dependent on that paycheck, since we had only ourselves to fall back on. But it gave us an advantage too. In the new aircraft and electronics industries of L.A., in addition to the standard jobs for women, for example in food and clothing, we—more white women than Black, who were in those days largely denied jobs with higher (subsistence) pay—we managed to achieve new freedom of action. We were unrestrained by fathers and mothers who stayed “back East” or “down South.” Trade unions, formed in the East years before by bitter struggle, by the time they were imported West were negotiators for a 10-cents-a-year rise, and were part of the disciplinary apparatus which confronted us on the assembly line and which we paid for in high dues taken out before we ever saw our money. Other traditional forms of “political” organization were either non-existent or irrelevant and most of us ignored them. In short, we made a clean break with the past.

In the women’s movement of the late ‘60s, the energy of those who refused the old forms of “protection,” or who never knew them, finally found massive articulation. Yet twenty years before, in the baldness of our confrontation with capital (directly and via men) we were making our way through what has become increasingly an international experience. This experience taught us: the second job outside of the home is another boss superimposed on the first; a woman’s first job is to reproduce other people’s labor power, and her second is to reproduce *and sell* her own. So that her struggle in the family and in the factory, the joint organizers of her labor, of her husband’s labor and of the future labor of her children, is one whole. The very unity in one person of the two divided aspects of capitalist production presupposes not only a new scope of struggle but an entirely new evaluation of the weight and cruciality of women in that struggle.

These are the themes *of Women and the Subversion of the Community* (original: of the Dalla Costa article). What was posed by the struggle of so-called “reactionary” or “backward” or at best “non-political” housewives and factory wives in the United States twenty years ago

⁸ Southern California had experienced a huge wave of immigration during the war. Between 1940-46, the population of San Diego (home of shipyards and naval base) had increased by 61 percent, that of L.A. by 29 percent (*Business Week*, December 20, 1947, 72).

is the starting point for a restatement of Marxist theory and a reorientation of struggle. This theoretical development parallels and expresses and is needed for an entirely new level of struggle which women internationally are in the process of waging.

We've come a long way, baby . . .

Power to the sisters and therefore to the class.

Padova, July 27, 1972

The following pages from 10 to 13 of the original '72 edition, where Dalla Costa was named other 6 times for important passages, have been cancelled. The pag. 10 was beginning with "It is no accident that the Dalla Costa article has come from Italy."