

What Is Socialist Feminism?

by Barbara Ehrenreich

This article, which first appeared in *WIN* magazine on June 3, 1976, and is reprinted here with the author's permission, is a classic of socialist feminist thought. After decades of ongoing debate on these issues its importance is, in our view, undiminished.—Eds.

At some level, perhaps not too well articulated, socialist feminism has been around for a long time. You are a woman in a capitalist society. You get pissed off: about the job, the bills, your husband (or ex), about the kids' school, the housework, being pretty, not being pretty, being looked at, not being look at (and either way, not listened to), etc. If you think about all these things and how they fit together and what has to be changed, and then you look around for some words to hold all these thoughts together in abbreviated form, you'd almost have to come up with "socialist feminism."

A lot of us came to socialist feminism in just that kind of way. We were searching for a word/term/phrase which would begin to express all of our concerns, all of our principles, in a way that neither "socialist" nor "feminist" seemed to. I have to admit that most socialist feminists I know are not too happy with the term "socialist feminist" either. On the one hand it is too long (I have no hopes for a hyphenated mass movement); on the other hand it is much too short for what is, after all, really socialist internationalist antiracist, anti-heterosexist feminism.

The trouble with taking a new label of any kind is that it creates an instant aura of sectarianism. "Socialist feminism" becomes a challenge, a mystery, an issue in and of itself. We have speakers, conferences, articles on "socialist feminism"—though we know perfectly well that both "socialism" and "feminism" are too huge and too inclusive to be subjects for any sensible speech, conference, article, etc. People, including avowed socialist feminists, ask themselves anxiously, "What is socialist feminism?" There is a kind of expectation that it is (or is about to be at any moment, maybe in the next speech, conference, or article) a brilliant synthesis of world historical proportions—an evolutionary leap beyond Marx, Freud, and Wollstonecraft. Or that it will turn out to be a nothing, a fad seized on by a few disgruntled feminists and female socialists, a temporary distraction.

I want to try to cut through some of the mystery which has grown up around socialist feminism. A logical way to start is to look at socialism and feminism separately. How does a socialist, more precisely, a Marxist, look at the world? How does a feminist? To begin with, Marxism and feminism have an important thing in common: they are critical ways of looking at the world. Both rip away popular mythology and "common sense" wisdom and force us to look at experience in a new way. Both seek to understand the world—not in terms of static balances, symmetries, etc. (as in conventional social science)—but in terms of antagonisms. They lead to conclusions which are jarring and disturbing at the same time that they are liberating. There is no way to have a Marxist or feminist outlook and remain a spectator. To understand the reality laid bare by these analyses is to move into action to change it.

Marxism addresses itself to the class dynamics of capitalist society. Every social scientist knows that capitalist societies are characterized by more or less severe, systemic inequality. Marxism understands this inequality to arise from processes which are intrinsic to capitalism as an economic system. A minority of people (the capitalist class) own all the factories/energy sources/resources, etc. which everyone else depends on in order to live. The great majority (the working class) must work out of sheer necessity, under conditions set by the capitalists, for the wages the capitalists pay. Since the capitalists make their profits by paying less in wages than the value of what the workers actually produce, the relationship between the two classes is necessarily one of irreconcilable antagonism. The capitalist class owes its very existence to the continued exploitation of the working class. What maintains this system of class rule is, in the last analysis, force. The capitalist class controls (directly or indirectly) the means of organized violence represented by the state—police, jails, etc. Only by waging a revolutionary struggle aimed at the seizure of state power can the working class free itself, and, ultimately, all people.

Feminism addresses itself to another familiar inequality. All human societies are marked by some degree of inequality between the sexes. If we survey human societies at a glance, sweeping through history and across continents, we see that they have commonly been characterized by: the subjugation of women to male authority, both within the family and in the community in general; the objectification of women as a form of property; a sexual division of labor in which women are confined to such activities as child raising, performing personal services for adult males, and specified (usually low prestige) forms of productive labor.

Feminists, struck by the near-universality of these things, have looked for explanations in the biological “givens” which underlie all human social existence. Men are physically stronger than women on the average, especially compared to pregnant women or women who are nursing babies. Furthermore, men have the power to make women pregnant. Thus, the forms that sexual inequality take—however various they may be from culture to culture—rest, in the last analysis, on what is clearly a physical advantage males hold over females. That is to say, they rest ultimately on violence, or the threat of violence.

The ancient, biological root of male supremacy—the fact of male violence—is commonly obscured by the laws and conventions which regulate the relations between the sexes in any particular culture. But it is there, according to a feminist analysis. The possibility of male assault stands as a constant warning to “bad” (rebellious, aggressive) women, and drives “good” women into complicity with male supremacy. The reward for being “good” (“pretty,” submissive) is protection from random male violence and, in some cases, economic security.

Marxism rips away the myths about “democracy” and its “pluralism” to reveal a system of class rule that rests on forcible exploitation. Feminism cuts through myths about “instinct” and romantic love to expose male rule as a rule of force. Both analyses compel us to look at a fundamental injustice. The choice is to reach for the comfort of the myths or, as Marx put it, to work for a social order that does not require myths to sustain it.

It is possible to add up Marxism and feminism and call the sum “socialist feminism.” In fact, this is probably how most socialist feminists see it most of the time—as a kind of hybrid, pushing our feminism in socialist circles, our socialism in feminist circles. One trouble with leaving things like that, though, is that it keeps people wondering “Well, what is she really?” or demanding of us “What is the principal contradiction.” These kinds of questions, which sound so compelling and authoritative, often stop us in our tracks: “Make a choice!” “Be one or another!” But we know that there is a political consistency to socialist feminism. We are not hybrids or fencesitters.

To get to that political consistency we have to differentiate ourselves, as feminists, from other kinds of feminists, and, as Marxists, from other kinds of Marxists. We have to stake out a (pardon the terminology here) socialist feminist kind of feminism and a socialist feminist kind of socialism. Only then is there a possibility that things will “add up” to something more than an uneasy juxtaposition.

I think that most radical feminists and socialist feminists would agree with my capsule characterization of feminism as far as it goes. The trouble with radical feminism, from a socialist feminist point of view, is that it doesn’t go any farther. It remains transfixed with the universality of male supremacy—things have never really changed; all social systems are patriarchies; imperialism, militarism, and capitalism are all simply expressions of innate male aggressiveness. And so on.

The problem with this, from a socialist feminist point of view, is not only that it leaves out men (and the possibility of reconciliation with them on a truly human and egalitarian basis) but that it leaves out an awful lot about women. For example, to discount a socialist country such as China as a “patriarchy”—as I have heard radical feminists do—is to ignore the real struggles and achievements of millions of women. Socialist feminists, while agreeing that there is something timeless and universal about women’s oppression, have insisted that it takes different forms in different settings and that the differences are of vital importance. There is a difference between a society in which sexism is expressed in the form of female infanticide and a society in which sexism takes the form of unequal representation on the Central Committee. And the difference is worth dying for.

One of the historical variations on the theme of sexism which ought to concern all feminists is the set of changes that came with the transition from an agrarian society to industrial capitalism. This is no academic issue. The social system which industrial capitalism replaced was in fact a patriarchal one, and I am using that term now in its original sense, to mean a system in which production is centered in the household and is presided over by the oldest male. The fact is that industrial capitalism came along and tore the rug out from under patriarchy. Production went into the factories and individuals broke off from the family to become “free” wage earners. To say that capitalism disrupted the patriarchal organization of production and family life is not, of course, to say that capitalism abolished male supremacy! But it is to say that the particular forms of sex oppression we experience today are, to a significant degree, recent developments. A huge historical discontinuity lies between us and true patriarchy. If we are to understand our experience as women today, we must move to a consideration of capitalism as a system.

There are obviously other ways I could have gotten to the same point. I could have simply said that, as feminists, we are most interested in the most oppressed women—poor and working-class women, third world women, etc.—and for that reason we are led to a need to comprehend and confront capitalism. I could have said that we need to address ourselves to the class system simply because women are members of classes. But I am trying to bring out something else about our perspective as feminists: there is no way to understand sexism as it acts on our lives without putting it in the historical context of capitalism.

I think most socialist feminists would also agree with the capsule summary of Marxist theory as far as it goes. And the trouble again is that there are a lot of people (I'll call them "mechanical Marxists") who do not go any further. To these people, the only "real" and important things that go on in capitalist society are those things that relate to the productive process or the conventional political sphere. From such a point of view, every other part of experience and social existence—things having to do with education, sexuality, recreation, the family, art, music, housework (you name it)—is peripheral to the central dynamics of social change; it is part of the "superstructure" or "culture."

Socialist feminists are in a very different camp from what I am calling "mechanical Marxists." We (along with many, many Marxists who are not feminists) see capitalism as a social and cultural totality. We understand that, in its search for markets, capitalism is driven to penetrate every nook and cranny of social existence. Especially in the phase of monopoly capitalism, the realm of consumption is every bit as important, just from an economic point of view, as the realm of production. So we cannot understand class struggle as something confined to issues of wages and hours, or confined only to workplace issues. Class struggle occurs in every arena where the interests of classes conflict, and that includes education, health, art, music, etc. We aim to transform not only the ownership of the means of production, but the totality of social existence.

As Marxists, we come to feminism from a completely different place than the mechanical Marxists. Because we see monopoly capitalism as a political/economic/cultural totality, we have room within our Marxist framework for feminist issues which have nothing ostensibly to do with production or "politics," issues that have to do with the family, health care, and "private" life.

Furthermore, in our brand of Marxism, there is no "woman question," because we never compartmentalized women off to the "superstructure" or somewhere else in the first place. Marxists of a mechanical bent continually ponder the issue of the unwaged woman (the housewife): Is she really a member of the working class? That is, does she really produce surplus value? We say, of course housewives are members of the working class—not because we have some elaborate proof that they really do produce surplus value—but because we understand a class as being composed of people, and as having a social existence quite apart from the capitalist-dominated realm of production. When we think of class in this way, then we see that in fact the women who seemed most peripheral, the housewives, are at the very heart of their class—raising children, holding together families, maintaining the cultural and social networks of the community.

We are coming out of a kind of feminism and a kind of Marxism whose interests quite naturally flow together. I think we are in a position now to see why it is that socialist feminism has been so mystified: The idea of socialist feminism is a great mystery or paradox, so long as what you mean by socialism is really what I have called “mechanical Marxism” and what you mean by feminism is an ahistorical kind of radical feminism. These things just don’t add up; they have nothing in common.

But if you put together another kind of socialism and another kind of feminism, as I have tried to define them, you do get some common ground and that is one of the most important things about socialist feminism today. It is a space—free from the constrictions of a truncated kind of feminism and a truncated version of Marxism—in which we can develop the kind of politics that addresses the political/economic/cultural totality of monopoly capitalist society. We could only go so far with the available kinds of feminism, the conventional kind of Marxism, and then we had to break out to something that is not so restrictive and incomplete in its view of the world. We had to take a new name, “socialist feminism,” in order to assert our determination to comprehend the whole of our experience and to forge a politics that reflects the totality of that comprehension.

However, I don’t want to leave socialist feminist theory as a “space” or a common ground. Things are beginning to grow in that “ground.” We are closer to a synthesis in our understanding of sex and class, capitalism and male domination, than we were a few years ago. Here I will indicate only very sketchily one such line of thinking:

1. The Marxist/feminist understanding that class and sex domination rest ultimately on force is correct, and this remains the most devastating critique of sexist/capitalist society. But there is a lot to that “ultimately.” In a day to day sense, most people acquiesce to sex and class domination without being held in line by the threat of violence, and often without even the threat of material deprivation.
2. It is very important, then, to figure out what it is, if not the direct application of force, that keeps things going. In the case of class, a great deal has been written already about why the U.S. working class lacks militant class consciousness. Certainly ethnic divisions, especially the black/white division, are a key part of the answer. But I would argue, in addition to being divided, the working class has been socially atomized. Working-class neighborhoods have been destroyed and are allowed to decay; life has become increasingly privatized and inward-looking; skills once possessed by the working class have been expropriated by the capitalist class; and capitalist controlled “mass culture” has edged out almost all indigenous working-class culture and institutions. Instead of collectivity and self-reliance as a class, there is mutual isolation and collective dependency on the capitalist class.
3. The subjugation of women, in the ways which are characteristic of late capitalist society, has been key to this process of class atomization. To put it another way, the forces which have atomized working-class life and promoted cultural/material dependence on the capitalist class are the same forces which have served to perpetuate the subjugation of women. It is women who are most isolated in what has become an increasingly privatized family existence (even when they work outside the home too). It is, in many key instances, women’s skills (productive skills, healing, midwifery, etc.), which have been discredited or banned to make way for commodities. It is, above all, women who are encouraged to be utterly passive/uncritical/dependent (i.e., “feminine”) in the face of the pervasive capitalist penetration of private life.

Historically, late capitalist penetration of working-class life has singled out women as prime targets of pacification/“feminization”—because women are the culture-bearers of their class.

4. It follows that there is a fundamental interconnection between women’s struggle and what is traditionally conceived as class struggle. Not all women’s struggles have an inherently anticapitalist thrust (particularly not those which seek only to advance the power and wealth of special groups of women), but all those which build collectivity and collective confidence among women are vitally important to the building of class consciousness. Conversely, not all class struggles have an inherently antisexist thrust (especially not those that cling to preindustrial patriarchal values), but all those which seek to build the social and cultural autonomy of the working class are necessarily linked to the struggle for women’s liberation.

4.

This, in very rough outline, is one direction which socialist feminist analysis is taking. No one is expecting a synthesis to emerge which will collapse socialist and feminist struggle into the same thing. The capsule summaries I gave earlier retain their “ultimate” truth: there are crucial aspects of capitalist domination (such as racial oppression) which a purely feminist perspective simply cannot account for or deal with—without bizarre distortions, that is. There are crucial aspects of sex oppression (such as male violence within the family) which socialist thought has little insight into—again, not without a lot of stretching and distortion. Hence the need to continue to be socialists and feminists. But there is enough of a synthesis, both in what we think and what we do for us to begin to have a self-confident identity as socialist feminists.