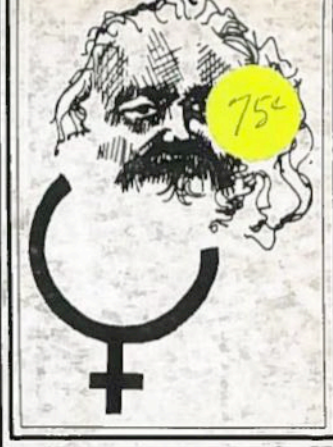


FEMINISM & MARXISM



A PLACE TO BEGIN
A WAY TO GO

DOROTHY E. SMITH

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FEMINISM
AND MARXISM—
A Place To Begin
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Dorothy E. Smith

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INTRODUCTION

Dorothy Smith, like many others in the women's movement, has come to see the liberation of women and all oppressed people as dependent on socialism. Many in the women's movement are feminists who are committed to socialism and who have worked long and hard as socialists and feminists. Though we are committed to working for women's liberation and for socialism, there still exist bitter disagreements about how to work and what in fact to work for. Many people want socialism, but there are essential differences both in strategy and in our final goals.

One position is that of social democracy. It is opposed to a revolutionary Marxist position on the issue of how capitalism will be transformed into socialism and what socialism is. This position is taken by those who recognize the ills of capitalism and that it needs to be done away with. According to social democrats, socialism can be built by reforming capitalism. The political aims of this movement are perfectly at home within the electoral system. Capitalism, according to social democracy, will be transformed by a progressive series of reforms. This position reduces socialism to a reformed and pleasanter form of capitalism. It is a position which in effect works on the side of the capitalist class in the class struggle. It opposes working class struggles to build a state which works for socialism and against capitalism—for the working class and against the capitalist class.

Social democrats take the view that the state is independent and capable of working on the side of the oppressed and exploited. It does not recognize the state in capitalist society as the political means by which the ruling class controls the society in its interests. By putting forward the view that the state is neutral and independent of particular classes, social democrats assume that it can be used by people to remedy injustices. This way of working in the movement at first produced some results—day care facilities were expanded, abortion law reforms seemed possible, the Equal Rights Amendment in the U.S. was ratified in many states. But now these possibilities of reform and gains already made, are being cut back. Women's oppression is intensified as a result of economic crisis and the relief and support that the state could make available isn't forthcoming. The state itself undermines the illusion that it is on our side.

In addition, there have been in the women's movement for many years, positions like those held by the Trotskyist groups or the Wages For Housework perspective, which do propose a revolutionary socialist alternative. In many ways these approaches couldn't seem further apart but they have in this in common—they leave us without a concrete way to get from our immediate struggles to our and their long term goal, socialism without the oppression of women. Lacking a revolutionary analysis and strategy, their actions leave us once again locked into immediate struggles against (but at the same time depending on) the state. A position that aims at the destruction of capitalist social relations and at establishing socialism must at the same time be

able to propose a practical way of replacing the state which acts against the interests of the working class with a state which acts for socialism and for the interests of the working class and all oppressed people. Without such a direction, women are left once again with short term gains that are constantly being taken away and which must be fought for again and again.

In struggling over how to work in a revolutionary way as Marxists and feminists, Dorothy Smith's paper has provided us with a crucial starting point. We are making it available so that others can study and use it. In working to build a revolutionary movement and party, based firmly on a genuine unity of the working class, we must see that we cannot build our unity on oppression. We must have unity built firmly on the basis on the struggle against oppression.

March 8th Group,
Vancouver.

Note

The text on which this is based was transcribed from a tape recording of a talk given during Women's Week at the University of British Columbia in the spring of 1977. In preparing it for publication, I have not changed the style which addresses the reader as if she were part of the audience present that evening.

I wanted to keep the traces of their presence in the text, because what is here came about right there in that room and with the audience. I spoke from notes only and I spoke to the people there as a way of working through some of the problems I'd been having and which, as we discovered, were also their concerns. This text emerged in relation to the group of people gathered there.

In editing the text for publication, I have made some changes. I have tidied up the sentences, and switched one section around with another so that it comes into proper sequence. I have added material in three places—the passages on sisterhood have been extended because the original was ambiguous and left people thinking that I was putting forward sisterhood as a basis for political unity in the women's movement. I have presented very briefly Marx's analysis of the central contradiction in capitalism and the dynamic at work in the capitalist mode of production. This was in my notes but seemed too heavy or long to discuss at the time. But it is essential to the discussion of class struggle. Finally I have added some material and some historical back-up to what I said very briefly at the time about the collaboration of state, capitalists and unions in restricting the participation of women in the labour force. This view of the role of unions is particularly controversial and so I have given a list of some sources at the end of the text so that others can track it down.

FEMINISM AND MARXISM—

A Place To Begin A Way To Go

I want to dissociate myself from any notion that what I'm doing here is a performance. This is partly because I'd like to treat it as part of a political work and partly because preparing for this has been, for me, a process of trying to work through some of the difficulties I've experienced as a Marxist feminist, both in relation to Marxists and in relation to feminists . . . and feminism. I needed to try and locate for myself, and hopefully for other feminists, a base in Marxism, which has been difficult to establish. This is what I'm doing here. It is a work in progress.

Therefore as an introduction, I want to talk about my personal experience in becoming a feminist. It has been for me an important basis for my own political commitment as a Marxist. Earlier in my life when I lived in England, when I was a young woman, I worked as a socialist. I've realized since then that I had no idea what that meant. I certainly had no understanding

of Marxism. I had very little idea of what I was doing, and indeed I think that few people with whom I worked at that particular time had either. Since then I've done a great deal of work, thought a great deal and worked in various ways within the women's movement, and I feel that I have some better grounding for a political position, some better basis for working. This began for me with discovering what feminism meant. So that has been very personal for me as it is indeed for all women—the discovery of what oppression means. It is the discovery that many aspects of my life which I had seen privately—perhaps better, experienced privately as guilt, or as pathology, or that I'd learned to view as aspects of my biological inferiority—that all these things could be seen as aspects of an objective organization of a society—as features that were external to me, as they were external to other women. This is the discovery that the inner experiences which also involved our exercise of oppression against ourselves were ones that had their location in the society outside and originated there. Insofar as we co-operated in our oppression, we co-operated as people who did not know what we were doing. We were convinced by our own belief in the defectiveness of womanhood. The experience of this change—the discovery of these as objective aspects of the society and of the world—was also the discovery of sisterhood.

Sisterhood has become something that is decried increasingly both in the women's movement and elsewhere. Yet it is a very important basis for feminists, because it is in sisterhood that we discover the objectivity of our oppression. That discovery is made in the relation

to other women, in our discussion with other women, in exploring with other women the dimensions of the oppression. For we discover oppression in learning to speak of it as such, not as something which is peculiar to yourself, not as something which is an inner weakness, nor as estrangement from yourself, but as something which is indeed imposed upon you by the society and which is experienced in common with others. Whatever else sisterhood means, it means this opportunity. But what it also means is the discovery of women as your own people . . . as my people . . . as the people I stand with . . . as the people whose part I take.

Being a Marxist has for me developed in large part, though not entirely, out of this experience of discovering feminism. It has come to stand for me as an emblematic moment in my life that when I moved here to the University of British Columbia I moved into an office vacated by Lionel Tiger. For many years I couldn't bring myself to read his book *Men in Groups* because I was afraid he might be right. Part of the work I've done in learning how to be a Marxist, originated because I wanted to understand how the society could be put together so that the relations among men and among women and between men and women could be fictionalized into Lionel Tiger's account of men in groups. I was very happy when I finally came to read Lionel Tiger's book because by that time I had the beginnings of an understanding of women's oppression under capitalism and because I saw that it was, among other things, a trivial and insignificant piece of work, and totally inadequate as any kind of account of either men's experience of contemporary capitalism or of women's.

And if men like to dwell on their likeness to baboons, they are welcome to.

So becoming a Marxist has been an enterprise in trying to discover and trying to understand, the objective social, economic and political relations which shape and determine women's oppression in this kind of society. What has shaped this experience of mine as a woman? What has shaped the experience of other women? What are the social and economic determinations of this? These questions led me almost imperceptibly into an attempt to work with a Marxist framework as a way of understanding how society is put together. This was not a wilful choice nor an accidental one. It was made on the basis of a sense that the kind of understanding Marx and Engels offered tells you something about how the determinations of your particular space could be seen as arising as aspects of a social and economic process, of social relations outside it. I think that Marxism is the only method of understanding the world which allows you to do this. That was my first reason, rather than its political relevance in other ways, for working to grasp Marxism.

But trying to become engaged politically in other ways on the "left" and in relation to Marxists has been an extremely painful and difficult experience. What you generally find among Marxists is a rejection of feminism. It is exactly the same rejection we experience in almost every other encounter that we have outside the women's movement. How Marxists, whether Social Democrats or Marxist-Leninists, responded to us as feminists does not differ from how we are responded to by the ruling class—the "upstairs" people. This difficulty is of course

a very serious one if you have become committed as a Marxist because it does not enable you to locate your work with those who are basing their work on a similar analysis, a similar approach, a similar understanding. This has been a really serious difficulty for the women's movement in Canada and I assume the women's movement in the United States as well—although it might be worth recognizing that in Britain, for example, this kind of difficulty does not appear to exist in the same way. There the women's movement appears to be more deeply anchored in the various Marxist groups than it is almost anywhere else, as well as having substantial roots in the working class. So these difficulties seem not to be fundamental to the relationship between Marxism and feminism, but are presumably structured by historically special features of contemporary capitalism in North America as we know it.

I'd like now to try to define what I see as distinctive about a feminist position. I want to do this in a way that doesn't commit me to any particular feminist theory because it must be clear to you that I would reject many of the theoretical positions identified as feminist. Yet I want to say that I am a feminist and I want to say what I think that to be, in ways that don't commit me to a determinate political position underlying the ideological formulations. I see perhaps three things here. One is that a feminist takes the standpoint of women. That is, we begin from this place and it is the place where we are. This is something that is very distinctive about feminism as a place to begin from politically—that we begin with ourselves, with our sense of what we are, our own experience. The second thing is that we oppose women's

oppression. That is, we struggle against the oppression of women. And the third thing is the recognition of sisterhood. That is something that I find difficult to describe. It is difficult if you make it merely a sentimental basis for relations among women because it doesn't work for very long. It doesn't work if you treat sisterhood as something that organizes a political basis across class, across time, because you can't unite with all women politically. It certainly doesn't make sense to Marxists, and it has proved in our experience of working in the women's movement not to make sense in practice. Nevertheless sisterhood is that understanding of your relation to other women which comes prior to taking up a political position. Before the women's movement we did not see ourselves as women politically at all. We did not organize or speak as women and for women. Sisterhood is that first moment of discovery on which everything else depends. It is the discovery that women's experience matters to us, that women are people we are concerned to work with as women and that that is how we also work for ourselves as women. We did not have that before. When we worked politically or otherwise organized or were active outside the little domestic space into which we were meant to squash our lives, we were neutered, we did not act as women, we worked in relation to and in, enterprises organized by men. We did not "identify" as women. We did not have a sisterhood.

Sisterhood is the change from being an outsider in, say, reading books, seeing movies and images, or hearing tell of, what has happened in the past or is happening in the world to women in their struggles and

suffering, to locating yourself on their side and in their position. Sisterhood means a different understanding of women as they have experienced slavery and struggled against it, as they have been persecuted for speaking as women and for working politically as women for women, as they have struggled for the survival of their children in many different ways, as they have been oppressed as women by imperialist wars and have fought as the women of Vietnam fought against U.S. imperialism. Sisterhood is a relocation. You take up a different place in the world. It is one in which the character and form of the oppression and the oppressor begin to take shape. As it takes shape, it becomes clearer whose side you are on. There's a difference then in hearing women tell of their oppression when you are detached from that and do not understand how you are related to their experience, and acknowledging sisterhood and finding yourself on their side and opposed to what oppresses them. The experience of sisterhood is a very powerful experience—a very great change in our experience of the world. It forces us to grasp our identity with those who are also oppressed and also more savagely oppressed, not as an altruistic and disinterested concern but because the basis of their oppression is or was their sex and you share that with them.

This is the fundamental experience of being a feminist. It is a political moment simply because without first a basis in sisterhood we can't understand the divergences and differences among women or the things we share, nor see with whom we can work and with whom we are fundamentally in conflict. Far from sisterhood proving a basis of spurious agreement in the

women's movement, the discovery of sisterhood and the first experimental efforts to unify politically on that basis alone was precisely the context in which we learned about our differences. We could not see these until we first saw women as those we had to learn these things from and with. Shifts in the women's movement came about in part as women from other spaces than those originating the movement began to be heard and to be listened to—housewives, for example, who refused to be despised, women who had children or wanted children and could not accept the negation of motherhood that was important in the early stages. Sisterhood forced women in the movement to be open to other women and their experience. Issues and analyses had to shift and deepen accordingly. The narrow original focus—such as seeing the key to women's oppression in the control of their bodies and hence making abortion-law reform the central objective of struggle—came to be seen as only one aspect of a more general and grosser oppression. As other women made themselves heard and became part of the circle of authoritative voices, new experiences sought political voice. Political alignments changed. Modes of organizing changed. New forms were innovated, sometimes discarding, sometimes incorporating the old. We had to shift from the simple and rather magical thinking of our first struggles and to take up aspects of women's experience which hadn't counted for us before. We had no choice—though we often tried to work as if we had. (I think this is what we were doing when we trashed or were trashed.) Women had to be relevant to us, they *had* to matter, they *had* to be those whose experience counted for us. Once sisterhood was our basis, once we

took the standpoint of women, once we were feminists, we had to deal with that. This then is what sisterhood means—not well or clearly defined, I realize, but described as I understand it as an actual experience, as *my* actual experience.

When we come to feminism in its varieties as a political theory, we run into difficulties of a different kind. One of the problems is exactly that we do begin from the personal inner understanding, from this personal experience which is distinctive to women's experience of oppression. We begin from the ways in which oppression is not just an external constraint but part of our personal lives, part of our inter-personal relations, part of our sexuality, part of how we relate to men as individuals as well as in institutional contexts. In feminism as a political theory, the problem is that the political formulations are transposed by a metaphorical procedure from these personal locations, to the world as a way to talk about it. These personal locations are the bounded, powerless and domesticated positions from which women begin and their political formulations as radical feminism preserve this structure. Our personal experience of oppression becomes the analogue of a political theory. We talk about patriarchy as a political relation by going directly from personal situations of oppression and direct personal relations with men to treating that as a political form. In this way we are prevented from seeing that patriarchy is and must be located in a political and economic process. The formulation of oppression as patriarchal simply skips over this because our experience as women skips over it. We talk about the domination of men and of how men

oppress women, as if the personal experience of oppression could be seen as the general and dominant mode in which the society is organized. And then we talk about a golden age of matriarchy in compensation. It is a means of restoring to us some sense of our power—a power women are supposed to have had some two thousand years ago, who knows when? It is a magical way of giving ourselves a sense that we as women truly have the possibility of overcoming our oppression. What was once, can be again. We need only to dip into that deep source, to draw on it, to take up our power, to act and we shall overcome. But then we do not see that power cannot exist apart from actual individuals organizing and working concertedly and hence that the power oppressing us is an actual organization of the work and energies of actual people, both women and men and that our power to struggle depends also upon working together with others confronting the same bases of oppression. When we call on the magic of a distant matriarchy as a source of power, we depend upon a mythology, a mythology rather than an analysis of actual relations, a mythology rather than an attempt to grasp the actual character of the social and economic relations of the society oppressing us now. We must grasp the oppression of women in *this* society, the oppression of women elsewhere in the world *today*. Our oppression is now and this is what concerns us now. It must not be seen as something that you could spread like butter over the bread of time by using the term "patriarchy"; and treating it as something which has always been there ever since the departure of the golden time. We have to see what's happening to us as what's happening to us

now. It's happening to us here. It's part of what's happening to other women—other people—elsewhere in the world. And here and now for sure is the only place to begin. So we have to start to try to see what in hell is going on now. Why is it happening to us as it does happen? This is the only way we can begin to know how to act, how to organize, how to work, how to struggle against oppression.

WOMEN ARE LOSING GROUND

Women are confronting a difficult time now. The women's movement is confronting a difficult time. So I wanted to say something at this point about the achievements of the women's movement. I want to say something about the work women have done here in British Columbia, the work that has been done moving outwards from women's understanding of their experience as oppression in this society to attempt to make issues and to make changes. These have been first very straightforwardly related to doing something about women's oppression. Many of you here in this room have been part of efforts to make changes, to change the abortion laws, to establish adequate child care for women of all classes in B.C., to struggle against the ways in which the professions have oppressed women by establishing a health collective, by working in relation to the law, both attempting to secure legal changes in marriage laws and also trying to make legal help available to women in a form which is not just a further means of oppression. Women have established organiza-

tions such as Transition House which provides a refuge for women who are beaten by their husbands. (Because Transition House exists, we have learned how much more of this type of support for women is needed.) Women have done immense organizational work, in establishing women's studies courses throughout the province, in setting up feminist publishing collectives publishing magazines and books and other feminist literature. Women have created a feminist media in film and television. We have created political organization and political networks throughout the province. The organizing of unions for clerical and service workers which the established unions would never actively take up has been taken up by feminists. We have done an incredible amount of work in the last six years in this province as well as elsewhere in Canada. It has been an enormous and often exhausting effort. It has had many failures as well as successes. But the greatest gain has been what women have learned about themselves and their capacities to work politically and how to do that. We have learned a great deal about how to organize, how to work, how to work outside the establishment, outside the recognized institutions of the society. This kind of learning is very important and must be seen as a major gain by feminists. It is particularly important because it is hard to see other kinds of consolidated and lasting gain. It is hard to see how we have made gains in terms of the kinds of changes we aimed to bring about, at least as permanent and lasting changes in women's situation. We would like to see equality in pay. We would like to see equality of access of women to employment of all kinds. We would like to see

the widespread introduction of child care. We would like to see repeal of anti-abortion laws. We would like to see changes in the matrimonial property laws. We would like to see many changes of this kind and we do not see them. But what women have done, what women's organizations have developed, and the progress we have made in doing this is something that has to be remembered because this is an achievement and this is the basis on which it is possible for us to go forward, to work. I want to put this before you as something that must be seen as a background to what I believe to be otherwise a gloomy picture, and that is that as times are hard in general, they are specially difficult for women and difficult for the women's movement. There is a crisis in capitalism and changes are taking place which, as you look at them, can be seen as women being put back into the places that we were trying to escape from. That "we" is not just this group here, but women in general in this society.

When the media begins to lay the death penalty on the women's movement one can treat this as a sign off, not of the women's movement but of media interest in the women's movement. The media are closing down on the women's movement. It is not news any more—in so far as it ever was. There is a pervasive change in the women's pages. I don't know whether you look at the kinds of dressmaking patterns that are presented but they've gone back from pant suits to being dress patterns again. The styles are changing, make-up is coming back, red painted fingernails, brilliantly painted lips, and the frontiers of the deodorant continue to advance. "Feminine" styles of being a woman that the women's magazines had laid on us are coming back. The media

has worked over the women's movement so that its revolutionary implications are transposed into a particular "feminine" style—careerism, the new marriage, couples without children. What remains of the fundamental critique is the style of the new woman. And the women's movement is over. It's had its day. It was a fad. Sexist advertising can be slipped back in if it ever in fact disappeared. Now we can get down to the kind of society we had before.

We can see the kind of retreat that is taking place if we look at the unemployment figures among women. If you do so, you will find that the unemployment rates among women in this province have gone up and that they are substantially higher than rates among men. When you look at the welfare crunch you see also how that is placed on women, remembering that the majority of single parent families are women and that the majority of single parent families fall below the so-called "poverty line" in income. If you begin to think through the implications of the withdrawal of funds not only from child care, which has a clear and direct impact, but in general from services to the handicapped, to the old—to all those who depend directly on others for their subsistence and daily care—these are all things that tend to fall back on women's work in the home. Look at the implications of the decline in real wages in terms of what that means for women's work in the home. There women's work must take up the slack that is created by the depreciation of the value of wages and the irregularity and uncertainty of income from wages when rates of unemployment are high. At the same time as

married women must often try to get work because the family needs her wage, the difficulties of doing so are increased, and the burdens of work in the home are increased. When money is short, women's work in the home substitutes for labour embodied in goods bought at the store. There is a very straightforward relation here. You put more time in. You do more darning. You do more mending. You make more of your own clothes. You do more processing of food if you can't afford to buy that labour embodied in commodities. All these things are happening.

In addition there are those things that directly affect the women's movement in terms of women's ability to put forward the position of women and their oppression so that others can understand it and organize in struggle against it. Funds supporting women's magazines and media ventures are drying up. Funds supporting the organization of women for equality in all areas are getting harder to find. Financing for women's health care, for rape relief, is increasingly difficult to find. Women's studies courses in community colleges and universities are under pressure because of budgetary cuts. It's hard to maintain women's studies in the University of British Columbia. Though Simon Fraser University will have a women's studies program by virtue of the lucky accident of having a woman president, nevertheless even there budgetary cuts are experienced. And in many community colleges the established courses are under continual pressure. In all these areas, many of the concrete gains that we made are in the process of being eroded. This is the situation we are confronted with. As for the

successes of International Women's Year, it's nice to know that they've changed some of the nomenclature of government forms and documents.

THE STATE IS NOT NEUTRAL

One of the things we see if we begin our analysis as Marxist feminists—that is as feminists who are also Marxists and as Marxists who are also feminists—is that the institutions of domination, the institutions by which the ruling class dominates the society and maintains its domination of the society are precisely those that we have fought against in the women's movement. They are those that we see most visibly as oppressing us. But there is a difficulty here that I want to try and identify. It is that in our work we have had a double relationship to these institutions. In almost every dimension of social relations that we have attacked so dramatically and energetically in our work in the women's movement, in almost all the ways in which we've struggled and those ways in which we've formulated our oppression as specific issues in the form of political pressures and demands—almost every one of these has depended in one way or another on these same institutions. The work that we have done in opposing the oppression of women by these same institutions which are part of how the ruling class maintains its domination and how men of the ruling class and men in general have maintained their domination over women, are also the institutions on which we have depended in our work. This is the contradiction that feminists now face in the women's

movement. That becomes clear to us in this situation of crackdown. It becomes clear to us that the state is not on our side, that the state is not evenhanded with respect to women any more than it is evenhanded with respect to the demands of the working class. It is clear that the media are not evenhanded with respect to women. They do not treat us equally and are not willing to make those kinds of changes which would allow us an equal voice. We see that schools do not change. Our arguments have been made. Many of our demands are simple and minimal, such as the demands for changes in textbooks in schools, and for the introduction of women's studies into highschools. But these things have not happened. We have made our demands of these institutions, our work has been organized around them. These are the institutions which we can begin to see now most clearly as those that do oppress us and enforce the oppression which is part of the economic process and economic relations of the society. I am going to give a concrete example of that later on, but now what I want to bring out are the ways in which we've organized our struggle and formulated our objectives. What we have done is to go to the state and those other institutions. We have made our political moves in this way. We've laid our organizational bases on the basis of money from the state. I'm not talking about cooptation, I don't think we are contaminated by the money that we might get from OFY or LIP or any of those places. I don't think our work is necessarily contaminated in those ways. The problem is rather in the way in which we work, in what we have appealed to in our work. The basis of our appeal has been the assumption that in some way or other, these

institutions were just and evenhanded, that they were in fact democratic, that they were open to persuasion, to pressure to the demands that we might make. What we are finding now is that this is not so. They are not open, and indeed it is part of our discovery that they never were truly open because their treatment of interventions from the women's movement has always been highly selective. They have always chosen what they should support and what not to support on the basis of what would have the least impact and make the least real change—at least so far as I can see, and if anyone wants to give instances which are contrary to that picture, I should be happy to hear of it—but I don't know any.

THE CLASS STRUGGLE

Feminism as a political analysis doesn't give us yet the means to understand the processes at work in what I've been describing. If we want to understand what's happening now, we have to return to the conception that women's oppression is an integral part of capitalism. We have to begin to understand our position in terms of the way in which this particular mode of production works. This is our now and where we have to begin. So that's fairly obvious, right? We can begin with that. Now from there we have to go on to understand that any real changes that can take place for women must involve some more substantial change in the organization of the society than those we had worked for before. Society can't just be tinkered with, if as soon as there is an "economic" crisis, everything clamps back down on us

again. This is the lesson of our practical experience in working in the women's movement. There must be some more fundamental change in the economic and social relations of the society, if there is to be a change in the position of women—a real change.

Reach out your hand now and touch almost any part of anything in your woman- and man-made environment—chair, rug, the walls of the room—and you touch the product of an extraordinarily complex division of labour. In what you touch the work of countless people is implicated—in the material it is made from, in the processes of producing it, in the processes of producing the machines involved in its production, in the transportation systems which brought it here and which themselves also involve a complex of productive processes, in the processes which brought us here dressed in the particular ways in which we are, having eaten our evening meal the components of which are also a product of just these same processes. If we heard through this ordinary environment to those who are present in it in the embodied form of their labour, their voices would be multitudinous. This complex organization of production was described by Marx as a social division of labour which capitalism develops, organizes, expands and refines. People no longer work in household groupings directly producing from the land what they need to subsist. Instead the work of each individual in the society is organized in a division of labour which is society-wide and indeed extends beyond any one society. The social division of labour produces a social wealth out of which the subsistence of members of the society must be provided. But under capitalism as a mode of

production, not all the wealth which is produced by this social division of labour is returned in one form or another to those who produce it. Capitalism builds in a fundamental contradiction. The social wealth produced provides the means of producing wealth and the means of producing wealth are not socially owned, they are privately appropriated. This is the contradiction central to capitalism—between a social division of labour and private ownership of that portion of the wealth thus produced which provides the means of further production. This contradiction creates a fundamental division in the society between those appropriating and controlling the means of production and those other and vastly more numerous members of the society who do not, who cannot therefore produce for themselves, and must earn what they need to live by selling their labour power to those who do.

Change comes about within capitalism as a mode of production because of developments within capitalism itself. These developments originate in the work of people but they take place through forms of social relations which appear as relations between things, commodities and money exchanged in the market. When we are looking at what we talk about as economic processes, we are looking at relations between people, producing and consuming, which appear as exchanges between money and commodities. The dynamic processes of change within capitalism are the outcome of people's productive labour. Capitalist social relations transform that labour into capital and in so doing slowly transform capitalism. The social division of labour developed under capitalism, which we see in the large

scale corporate enterprises of our society as well as in smaller enterprises produces wealth which is accumulated and appropriated by these same corporations as means of production which cannot be made fully productive in this form. The accumulation of socially produced wealth in the form of capital (the means of production privately owned) brings about recurrent and often devastating crises in "the normal course of business".

It's very misleading to present—as sociologists often do—societies as unchanging and stable except through conflict, through social movements, through class struggle, revolutions, etc. It's very misleading to view the society as unchanging except for the ways in which people directly, actively and purposefully try to change it. It is misleading to imagine that the society would be stable if only people didn't mess around with it and make trouble. In fact, this kind of society is in a constant process of change. It is capitalism itself which is in a process of change and has been in a process of change from its very outset, and continues to change and change at an ever more rapid rate. The contradiction which is fundamental to capitalism is an active historical process and the crises which are critical moments in the process of change are an essential feature of capitalism. In almost every case the burden of these crises is born by the working class and is born most especially by people such as women who are not in a position and do not have the organizations to defend themselves against the workings of the state and the workings of the economy.

In addition to this sort of change and arising out of it is the kind of change which people take into their own hands. This is class struggle. As we have seen,

capitalism establishes a division of society into two major classes. Those two classes have been described above as those who appropriate and control the means of production, and those who must sell their labour power to those who appropriate and control the means of production. Two classes don't provide a comprehensive description of the class structure of the society, because in any particular society there are complex processes at work and also because the processes of development within capitalism itself reforms and modifies the bases of classes over the historical period in which capitalism exists. But these two classes provide the basis on which the struggle to change the society goes on actively. It's important not to see these classes as static groups. When you look at class struggle from a Marxist perspective you don't go and try to make a map and locate people in it. That's not how it is done. Class struggle is itself in reality, a dynamic process that emerges increasingly as two parties to the struggle become distinctly opposed to one another as two sides in a conflict. In the processes that you can see taking place today you can see the emergence of that struggle as an actual process. In particular we can see the way in which the state and the other institutions which are agencies of the ruling class—namely the professions, the media, the educational institutions, etc., are all part of the way in which the ruling class maintains its hegemony over the society. These are now actively involved in the process of maintaining that domination. That is part of a class struggle. The state cannot be seen as a settled, impersonally organized and evenhanded part of the society. Rather it is part of an active work of control. The

class struggle on the other hand as it develops among the working class has scarcely yet begun to take on an organized character as such. Nevertheless we can see that the struggle is taking place in the many ways which people fight against increased exploitation in the workplace, against wage and price controls and in many ways that we do not easily recognize as part of a class struggle because they are still very isolated—but they are there. Organization of the working class in active struggle to bring about socialism depends on establishing a party capable of the necessary leadership, but struggle and emerging forms of class consciousness begin to develop out of the working class's experience of capitalism and particularly of capitalism in crisis.

In the issue then of where women stand in the class struggle or rather where feminists stand, as those who stand for women, it is important not to be misled by the mapping method of talking about class and class struggle. Don't be misled by the notion that you can't be part of that struggle because you are middle class or that you are necessarily on the other side because you are petty bourgeois. As a struggle of this kind—class struggle—develops and as it takes on the distinct form of actual conflict, the question becomes: Whose side do you take? Because as that struggle emerges, it ceases to be a question of being able to stand aside from it. There will cease to be a position outside these two sides to the conflict. It is a question rather of where do you stand? Whose side are you on?

In the Chinese context, Mao-Tsetung analyzed this polarization between the "people" and the "enemy" thus:

"We are confronted by two types of social contradictions—those between ourselves and the enemy and those among the people themselves. The two are totally different in their nature.

"To understand these two different types of contradictions correctly, we must first be clear on what is meant by "the people" and what is meant by "the enemy". The concept "the people" varies in the content in different countries and in different periods of history in the same country. Take our own country for example. During the War of Resistance against Japan, all those classes, strata and social groups opposing Japanese aggression came within the category of the people, while the Japanese imperialists, the Chinese traitors and the pro-Japanese elements were all enemies of the people. During the War of Liberation, the U.S. imperialists and their running dogs—the bureaucrat-capitalists the landlords and the Kuomintang reactionaries who represented these two classes—were enemies of the people, while the other classes, strata and social groups, which opposed these enemies, all came within the category of the people. At the present stage, the period of building socialism, the classes, strata and social groups which favour, support and work for the cause of socialist construction all come within the category of the people, while the social forces and groups which resist the socialist revolution and are hostile to or sabotage socialist construction are all enemies of the people.

"The contradictions between ourselves and the enemy are antagonistic contradictions. Within the

ranks of the people, the contradictions among the working people are non-antagonistic, while those between the exploited and the exploiting classes have a non-antagonistic aspect in addition to an antagonistic aspect. There have always been contradictions among the people, but their content differs in each period of the revolution and in the period of socialist construction."⁽¹⁾

THE TRAP

What I want to do now is to address some of the bases on which Marxists have rejected feminism. I'm not going to go into them in any great detail—most of them are pretty obvious and familiar. Indeed one of the marked aspects of Marxist rejection of feminism is that on the whole it's been peculiarly lacking in analysis. There are some exceptions to this, but by and large there has been very little effort to understand feminism and very little attempt even to analyse and understand women's oppression in society—let alone any recognition of there being a distinct basis for women's oppression. So on the whole the issues are not posed at that level. Indeed much of what we encounter is the ordinary way in which we are trashed as bourgeois feminists irrespective of the political position we take. The issues that we have to take seriously are those concerned with the significance for the Marxist movement of the divisiveness of feminism.

1. Mao Tsetung "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People" in *Selected Readings from the Works of Mao Tsetung*, Foreign Languages Press, Peking 1971: 432-479.

One of the very obvious effects of becoming a feminist is that you become very angry and that you become angry with men. So that indeed feminism is in that sense divisive. It is a division which provides a basis for divisiveness both within the organizations of the movement and also in undermining the basis of unity that Marxist organizations seek to establish among the working class.

For Marxists these are serious issues and as Marxist feminists we have to take them seriously. In treating them seriously I want to introduce as part of what we take into account, the kinds of things that are said by Marxists with respect to working class women and have, by leading Marxists, such as Lenin, been said of women's concern with issues such as marriage and sexuality. Working class women are often spoken of as "backward". They are represented as hanging back in the struggle of their men. This is sometimes analysed in terms of the isolation of women in the home and their seclusion from active participation in political and economic processes outside the home. Sometimes it remains unanalysed as based in an unmentionable but tacitly assumed incompetence of women. The counterpart of this view represents women as heroic figures in the struggle—the "salt of the earth" type picture—which shows women assuming leading roles in the struggle of men or actively supporting them on the picket lines, in demonstrations and marches and the like. Both these are polar positions along a single dimension. It is that which understands women's struggles in the class only in relation to the struggles of men. In practice, both in the organizational work which Marxists do and in terms of

how they think about the working class and what they focus upon, workers are men and the working class are men. The concept of the class is narrowed to the class defined by the relation to the workplace outside the home (for remember feminists define the home as a workplace). Marxists do not address questions of backwardness in the struggle to those many many cases where women have struggled in the workplace outside the home and have not been supported by their men. Marxists begin from the position of men in the society just as do the political and economic ideologists of the bourgeoisie. In whatever other ways they stand opposed, in this they are united.

I am arguing that in this representation of working class women Marxists perpetuate exactly those male chauvinist positions that as feminists we come as a reflex (a gut feeling) to attend to as serious political issues. Embedded in the political work done by Marxists and embedded in the analysis (when there is an analysis) are exactly the same styles of thinking, the same assumptions that characterize the institutions by which the ruling class dominates the society and in which Marxists themselves have been trained and learned to think. For these institutions include the educational institutions as well as the pervasive media. I remind you of these because I want to keep in mind that the sources of these positions are indeed not in men as individuals or in women as individuals, and further that when we talk about Marxists holding these positions, remember we are talking about both men and women. In their own experience of working through the forms of oppression from these sources, feminists are particularly conscious

of the difference which comes about as they divest themselves from what they have learned and how they have learned to be as women. The basis of a method of thinking about things that begins from the positions of men in the society is in the education system and in the media as well as in how the society is organized. They are in a variety of other bases of people's experiences of the world, for example, the ordinary experience that women simply have less money than men—a whole range of experience derives from this very simple beginning—some very basic, very ordinary aspects of the world that are all taken for granted.

In this context, the context which provides the concrete conditions of our work, the claim on feminists who are Marxists to think first of the unity necessary for struggle, the unity of organization, can be seen as something that covers over a fundamental division. It covers it over because that division involves the subordination and dependency of women. It involves their silence. It depends on the long years at work in the making of these as an aspect of the processes of how women learn to practice and live within these subordinations in personal relations, in the home, in the workplace outside the home, and it depends on the long years at work in the making of these as an aspect of how men learn to practice and live their superordinate position over women in personal relations, in the home and in the workplace. The unity that is required from women and men as Marxists is one that is based on and takes for granted the oppression of women. It is a unity that is based upon division.

It is a unity that is based on division in very much the

way in which Marx analysed how the political ideology of equality worked in concrete conditions of capitalism differently for the bourgeoisie than it did for the working class. Equality for the bourgeoisie meant that they were in a position to maintain their advantage on a free labour market in which every person who participates comes as an individual buyer or seller and is equal on the market. That conception of equality is one that legitimates and helps to confirm the inequality of those who own the means of production and come to the market to buy the labour power of those who have only that to sell. In an analogous way, insisting on the principle of unity whether within Marxist organizations or within the working class, as a basis for organization, builds into the movement at the outset the domination of men simply because that is never examined. The division that exists between women and men, the way in which capitalism institutionalizes the oppression of women by men in the working class as well as in the middle class, is not examined as a division which is concretely present and which the claim for unity legitimates and confirms.

I want to take an example and begin to look at this problem more closely. I want to take a particular example of what happens to women in this society. I want to look at that to bring out how that division is structured concretely because it seems to me that if in fact there is to be unity, then we must understand the nature of the division. This is where you begin as a feminist who is a Marxist. If you begin anywhere else, you may begin as a Marxist but implicitly and until this work is completed in the movement, you begin also from the standpoint of men in the society and not merely from the standpoint of

working class men. You begin from the standpoint of men—across class—men who are in a tacit alliance with the institutions by which the ruling class maintains its domination of the society. So when you look at this question from a feminist viewpoint, when you look at this from the standpoint of women, that division emerges and then you can see that there is indeed a division. Thus a call for unity enunciated without any analysis or attempt to deal in practice with that division means building upon that division and basing the unity of the movement upon that relation of oppression.

I want to take an example to see what this tacit alliance among men which unites them across class lines looks like concretely. I am not now concerned specifically with the question of the organization of the Marxist movement. I am concerned rather with identifying the alliance in a concrete instance. What I want to talk about is "battered wives". I want to give an example of how their situation is organized by the economic relations of this society in conjunction with the state. I want to talk about the bases of women's personal dependency on men in the family, although it is very important to remember that women work in other places besides the family—indeed this will be part of the analysis I want to make.

What I want to focus on is what I take as the problem central to considering the situation of "battered wives", namely the ways in which women depend on men, the ways in which women are powerless in the family situation, the ways in which they are relatively subordinate, the ways in which they may be confined

within the family relation as in a trap. I want to say first that this relation of dependency, the family as a trap, isn't necessarily a natural feature of the organization of the family or a natural feature of relations between women and men. It is a set up. It is something that has developed over time within capitalism, within capitalism at specific periods and as a result of definite organizational changes which have been made to accommodate the situation of the working class to capitalism, which have been enforced by the state in a variety of ways as well as by other agencies of ruling class control within the society (for example the professions—psychiatry, social work, etc.). The ways in which the family and marriage can be a trap for women is not a natural and inevitable product of women and men living together and having children. It may seem so sometimes, but I don't see that it is. (Not that I would insist on people living in that way, you understand.) But I think we've got to see this dependency as something which is enforceable in the society.

I want to describe to you very briefly the situation of one woman who was beaten up by her husband. This is from the book by Erin Pizzey called *Scream Quietly or the Neighbours Will Hear*. This book is English, but it has the advantage over others that the material is given to us very much as women themselves tell of their experience and it hasn't been worked over intensively by psychologists or sociologists.

Erin Pizzey founded houses of refuge for women who had been beaten by their husbands. She helped to establish a number of these in England and indeed I believe provided the model for many others including our

Transition House here in Vancouver. She describes one woman's situation in this way:

One woman who wrote to me had endured a nightmare marriage for 30 years. Time and again she had tried to break out. She often went to her mother's but her husband had broken in there and taken her back. The police never did anything to stop him because it was a marital quarrel. Nobody else wanted to be involved. After all, she did have a roof over her head, didn't she? He always kept her short of money. She took a job once but had to work 12 hours to earn overtime to make her salary equal to a man's and that meant leaving the children alone in the evening. After six months of that she gave it up. Each time she and her children went back to her husband, he got her pregnant again. Each time they were treated worse because he knew they could not choose but take it. He used to taunt her with "where can you go? What can you do?"⁽²⁾

It's very easy to look at these instances as special, as pathologies, as matters that should be treated by special sorts of counselling or psychotherapy or something of that kind. As the women's movement has made an issue of women beaten by their husbands, the professionals have begun to take this up as a problem within their jurisdiction. The professional perspective provides the problem with a name and the name identifies what is

happening as a type of case. It is called "the battered wife". The naming represents its incorporation into the professional system of controls. This method isolates what is happening here and treats it as something special and apart from normal marriages. But in fact violence against women in marriage when we begin to look more closely is only a particular development of normal family relations under capitalism. Of course being beaten as such is not normal, though it is obviously not at all uncommon, but the situations in which this direct physical oppression occurs are normal to marriage and normal to the family under capitalism. They exist across classes. They are not pathological.

What is the nature of this trap? What you see in the example above, is that women cannot earn enough to support themselves and their children outside the marriage relationship, and *particularly* that they cannot earn enough to support their children, because that is where the trap closes for women in marriage. When they have children, they cannot leave because all the institutional organization of society is at work to put them back into that relationship. They cannot earn enough to live independently. If they can earn enough to live independently, they will have a hard time finding anywhere to live. They will have a hard time finding an apartment and dealing with the practical problems of being a single parent when there are no adequate child care facilities. When they are subject to the physical abuse of their husbands, they can get no help. The police do not intervene in family quarrels. If you looked at other cases than the one described above, you'd find that the welfare workers will not help. No one will help women to

2. Erin Pizzey, *Scream Quietly Or The Neighbours Will Hear*, Penguin Books, 1975.

find another place to live. Psychiatrists will not support her. Physicians will not help. Ministers of the church will give no help on the grounds that the family is sacred and should be supported. The society that surrounds women in this situation is the trap. The state and other agencies of the ruling class enforce it. It is not native to the living together of women and men that this should happen. It is the society that creates this dependency, particularly when women have children because of the ways in which the segregation of the labour market works to locate them in lower paid jobs under uncertain conditions of employment; the ways in which women are trained in their schooling to be incompetent; the ways in which they are not paid what they should be paid for the work they do and the skills they have which are largely unrecognized as skills; the ways in which there is no adequate provision of child care for women who are looking for work; the ways in which you have to have a job before you can get child care and so on and so forth; and the multiple traps that lie in wait for you once you get involved in the welfare system. These are ways of keeping women in a dependent relation to men in the family in order that the wage of the man should serve to keep both his wife and his children.

WOMEN AS BACKWARDS?

This organization of the family arises in a historical process. It didn't just grow like a flower. In fact it is organized by the social and economic relations of the stage of capitalism of which it is part. Women depend on

men in the family because women in general can't earn a wage that will contribute significantly to the family economy, let alone be adequate to support herself and her children independently. In her autobiographical novel, *Daughter of Earth*, Agnes Smedley describes the irony of her mother and her mother's sister's status in the household. Her mother does not work outside the home. She brings no money into the home and she is everyone's slave. Her sister is a prostitute. Yet, she counts for more in the household simply because she earns her own money and contributes to the household as an independent woman. This situation as it is generalized is not a natural and inevitable feature of family relations. It is the outcome of changes in capitalism and the way in which the state, the bourgeoisie and the trade unions—representing mainly a relatively privileged section of the working class—have responded to problems created for them by those changes. The ideology of their solution for the working class is to define women's role in the family as an exclusively domestic role of service to the husband and children in which he plays the role of "breadwinner" and she does not, indeed should not, go out to work. The ideology is given administrative force in regulations of government agencies affecting pensions, welfare, unemployment, as well as in other ways. Women as a "leisure class" originated as an upper- and middle-class ideal. For working class women it became an ideology, sweetening and moralizing and concealing the realities of unemployment.

The conditions for this family organization were created by a problem which has become endemic to

advancing capitalism—the problem of a surplus labour population, of too many people for too few jobs. During periods of crisis this problem becomes acute and its burden is of course born by the working class. The competition among workers for jobs intensifies.

In the great crises following World War I, employers were able to use this competitive relation to cut wages and erode gains in working conditions and hours. Lower-paid sections of the working class, women, blacks and immigrant workers, were seen as a threat to the previously relatively privileged sections of the working class. *They take our jobs away.* The state, the trade unions, and some of the larger trusts cooperated in measures aimed to reduce the problem of unemployment by eliminating or markedly reducing the participation of women in the labour market. Women could be forced into dependence on men. This came to be the common strategy. For example, in Germany when men were released from the army after the war and sought jobs in an economy already severely disrupted, government and trade union action was directed against women in the labour force in general—not just those who had taken jobs which had been men's before the war. A government directive of 1919 ordered the dismissal of anyone not wholly dependent on their wage. Somehow these turned out to be women regardless of their actual status. People were to be dismissed in the following order—first women whose husbands had a job, then single women, then women looking after only one or two people and finally all other women (see Werner Thonnessen, *The Emancipation of Women: The Rise and Decline of the Women's Movement in German Social*

Democracy 1863-1933). According to Thonnessen, the hostility of working class men towards women they saw as competing for their jobs was intense. He describes how trade union councils at the factory level became "instruments for organized hostility to women, and through influence or force frequently had women dismissed, even against the wishes of the employers."

In the United States during the depression, the employment of women in work outside the home, particularly of married women was attacked by the state, the media and the trade unions. The American Federation of Labour had always been fearful of competition from women workers and had discouraged and restricted union organizing among women. They had a tacit agreement with the larger trusts sheltering the craft unions of white male skilled workers in exchange for *not* organizing women and blacks. During the depression the AFL actively opposed the presence of married women in the work force. Leading and influential women in the Roosevelt administration pressed the view that women's place was in the home. Many of the feminist gains preceding and accompanying the achievement of suffrage—particularly the very great gains in organizing women in the work force—were lost. The state adopted administrative practices which forced women to depend upon the earnings of men or become parasitic upon them (as for example by prostitution), in part simply by not providing for them in the many measures designed to expand the numbers of jobs. In fact women did not work outside the home less during the depression in the U.S. Employers were too concerned to decrease their labour costs to eliminate their lower

paid workers. Women's relative level of participation in the labour force may even have risen—the wages to support the family had to come from somewhere. But the pressures restricting their participation were on and the institutions which stabilized low rates of participation by women in the labour force made marked advances.

A sex segregated labour force defines certain jobs as women's and others as men's. In practice women's jobs are inferior in pay, in union protection and in all that follows from that. The segregated labour force we find today has been the result of collaborative action by the state, capitalists and unions. It works to exclude large sections of the potential labour force, who happen to be women, from the labour market. Failure to organize some types of occupations has been one measure successfully dividing occupations which are poorly paid and reserved for women or other segregated groups from other sections of the labour market. Other measures have involved building separate categories of jobs into labour laws and union contracts. For example, if the labour laws and union contract prescribe a single pay rate for all sweepers, a special category of "assistant sweeper" can be set up, paid at a lower rate and reserved for an identifiable type of worker—women, blacks or immigrants. These types of jobs, the lower rates of pay (and what that means in terms of status in ordinary relations), the lower level of skill, the lack of opportunity for advancement, the likelihood of being laid off without the ordinary protections provided by the union—all these become treated as the character of the person identified by sex, skin colour or manner of speaking English. A secondary class of people is created.

They are incompetent. They never learn anything. They don't stay in their jobs. They're passive. They have no interest in getting ahead. They're dumb. They're only good for these kinds of jobs.

The consequences of this for women and their relation to men in the family doesn't stop there. Women's dependence is enforced by financial and legal disabilities connected with the fact that they can't earn in the same way and at the same level as a man. Landlords don't like to rent to a woman *with* children and *without* a man because they are afraid (probably on the basis of experience) that she won't be able to keep paying. For the same reason, she can't get a loan, take out a mortgage on a house, or easily make purchases on credit. The state has an interest in making one wage do for two, so welfare regulations ensure that her dependence on the man's wage comes first. If there's a man around the house, then she's dependent on him by definition. Women's dependence in marriage on the man's wage is organized by such interlocking institutions—the restricted participation of women in the labour force, state and ideological enforcement of the home as married women's sole legitimate sphere, and the enforcement of the family as the unit supported by the man's wage (legislated in Canada in the 1920s by laws which for the first time made men's responsibility for supporting his wife and children legally enforceable).

This is how the trap has been put together for women. Where can she go? What can she do?

Of course these same institutions make up a different kind of trap for men, the trap that fixes them to jobs they hate but must hang on to when they have a wife and children to support. We can see in this how their wives' can come to stand for everything that traps them into a hateful life. But we are not concerned here with a calculus of suffering under capitalism and we are not concerned with totting up the score to see whose pain is greater. Rather we are trying to learn something of the social relations which oppress women under capitalism and how this form of oppression divides the working class. It is this division that is located when Marxists talk about women in the working class as backward, but they come at it ass backwards. They begin in just that place that feminists don't, namely from the standpoint of men in the society. In appraising where women are in their work in the home they take for granted everything that constitutes the difference and the relation between men and women. They take for granted all the ways in which men can earn money and women cannot. They do not see women's dependence on men but they take it for granted. They take for granted the services she supplies, the meals that turn up inexplicably on the table, the bed that is made, the rooms that are swept, the toilet that doesn't smell. They take for granted everything that is ordinarily at men's disposal including the women themselves and they do not even see that as a work or as a discipline women undertake. They don't see that it makes a difference, that it is indeed *his* wage and not the family's wage and that it

goes on being his wage even if as an individual he works out with his wife an arrangement to treat it as belonging to both. He may be a good man or a bad man but capitalism says it's his wage and she depends on him for what she needs to do her work, to undertake her responsibilities, to keep the family going, to care for and protect the children. Here's how Pierre Vallières saw his mother's "backwardness". We can see how it looks from the point of view of a man and we can perhaps begin to then understand how it might look differently, approached from the standpoint of women. Of his mother he writes:

My mother in particular lived in a constant state of insecurity. And her anxiety shut her off from the outside world. My father could free himself at the factory, with his comrades on the job. My brothers and I could free ourselves by playing with our friends or going to school. Then we escaped from the family hell. But my mother never went out. She could have made real friends among her neighbours but refused to do so. It was as if the only thing she lived for was to calculate income and expenditures, wax the floors, wash the windows, cook and do laundry—as if she were forbidden to leave the house. Nothing roused her interest. Nothing appealed to her . . . except her Sacred Duty, which in her mind, was the obligation to be continually on guard against any "accident". That was why she did not want my father to get involved in politics,

why my brothers and I were not allowed beyond the immediate vicinity of the house . . . (3)

Vallières' contempt for his mother and her situation makes this passage hard reading for a feminist, but we have something to learn from it. Mme. Vallières' anxiety is represented as causeless. But we have begun to see cause. A married woman's security, her livelihood, the means for her production of home and security for her children, her husband and herself, depend only indirectly on the economy. Rather they depend on a relation to the economy mediated by her relation to a particular individual. If he chooses to drink his wage with his buddies after work, it may jeopardize everything she's trying to keep going, but it's his wage. If he makes a down payment on a car they can't afford, or buys into a power boat with his friends, it may throw off all her careful calculations for next winter's clothing, but it's his wage. If his union calls a strike, she's going to pick up the tab in work she has to put in to make up what she can't use money to buy at the store, but it's his job and his wage and it's not her business. It is not her business if his politics get him first fired and then blacklisted even if everything she's worked for, the kid's security, the household furnishing she's built up bit by bit go down the drain. This is a relation organized by capitalism. It is a relation in which women serve men in the home in exchange for their security, their children's security, for the means to care for and provide for themselves and

3. Pierre Vallières, *The White Niggers of America*, McLelland and Stewart, 1971.

their children, and in which they have no right to participate in the decisions which are consequential for their lives—though they may do so. Because when she comes right down to it, it is his work, his wage and she must depend on him. If women sometimes stand back in this relation from the risks of political participation, from the arduous discipline that strikes entail for them, it's because standing back is their only control over what is happening to them—at least so long as the division within the working class goes unrecognized. What is described by Marxists as backwardness is the only defense women in the home have had against that aspect of the capitalist oppression of women which directly penetrates the home and divides women from men in the working class.

NO FALSE UNITY

Now when we look again at the basis on which the unity of the working class is established and at the claim for unity within the movement which is placed on feminists by Marxists, we can counterpose some understanding of this fundamental division. When we examine it from a feminist viewpoint, what begins to emerge is a built-in complicity within Marxist thinking and within the working class itself with the insitutions by which the ruling class dominates the society. It is an alliance across class and among men against women. It is something that is implicit but it is present. In the analysis presented here, it is not represented as the

product of an extra-historical patriarchal relation of male dominance over women. It is represented as the outcome of a definite historical process, which has established the forms under which women are oppressed now. There is this division then. It is a division which in fact aligns men in this respect on the other side in the class struggle, that is, on the side of the ruling class. This division remains invisible so long as women are silent, so long as women who are Marxist feminists, feminists who are Marxists, find that the only ground on which they may speak as Marxists requires them to renounce their basis in feminism and hence to cross over and to take the standpoint of male domination in society which is the standpoint of the ruling class. So long as we do this we also are complicit in this alliance. This is what we have to cease to do. We have to begin to find a place to stand on as Marxists and feminists, Marxists who are feminists. We have to begin to see that place as one which shows how the existing basis of Marxist struggle builds in some part that belongs to the other side. And it is with this that we have to struggle.

FOR FURTHER READING:

You may be interested in following up some of the historical material relevant to the section on women's participation in the labour force. Here is a list of some of the sources I used.

Philip S. Foner, **History of the Labour Movement in the United States**, (New World Paperbacks, New York, 1945).

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Dorothy Smith is a feminist and Marxist who has been active in the Women’s Movement in Canada for several years. She is a professor of sociology at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Toronto Ontario.