



FAMILIES



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Comune di Padova
Sistema Bibliotecario

ALF - SLD

Sez. 6
Sottosez.
Serie 8
Sottos.
Unità 173 *posto 19a*

PUV 55

published by
New England Free Press
791 Tremont St.
Boston, Mass. 02118

SL06 49.173

Comune di Pavia
Biblioteca

Cod. Bib. PVV 55

BID L011200750

IMP 1058670

Maniaco DC

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One of the institutions of this society that the women's liberation movement has been particularly vocal in condemning is the nuclear family.* Unfortunately, in some women's liberation propaganda, and in most of the media's distorted reporting on the women's liberation movement, this "attack" on the family is not fully explained. For that reason we want to discuss here as concretely as possible why we think that families are bad for women, men, and children; and why we think they are a crucial part of the oppressive economic and social system we live under.

For many women there is no need to explain how the nuclear family has damaged them -- they can talk personally and concretely about their feelings of entrapment in the nuclear family, whether as daughter, sister, wife, mother, or even grandmother. But too many such women often believe that those feelings they had or have are personal and neurotic. We think they are universal, normal and political, because we think that the nuclear family is one of the key institutions of political control in this society. The women's liberation attack on the family has been surprising to some people, who view their families as refuges from the competitive, dehumanizing,

*"Nuclear family" is anthropologists' jargon for the basic family unit of our society: mother, father and children. It is opposed to the "extended family," which prevailed for most of history, and which included many related nuclear families and single relatives -- cousins, uncles, aunts, half-brothers, half-sisters, grandparents and great-grandparents -- under one roof.

impersonal world of modern capitalist technology. To some extent it is precisely that "escape" quality that makes us suspicious of families, for we think it is an escapism that can keep people from fighting to change and humanize the society.

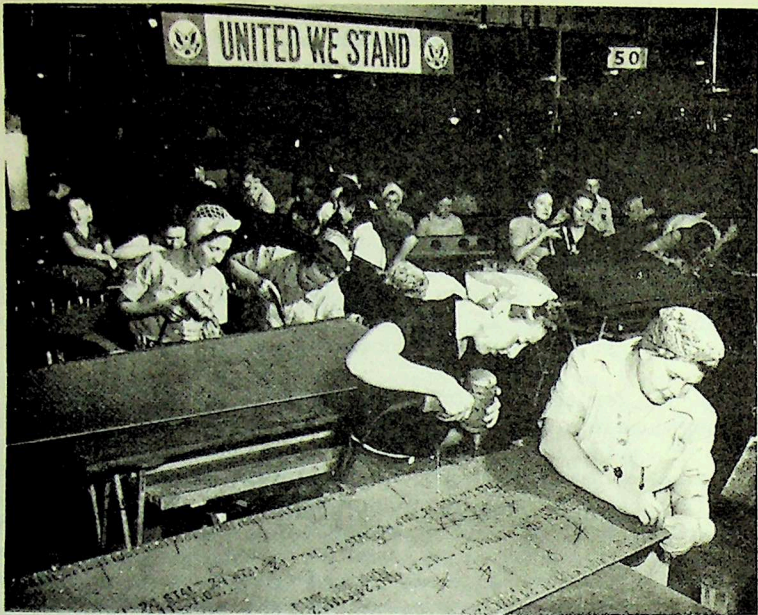
At the same time, we must be careful not to oversimplify the issue, to suggest that women should simply remove themselves from family scenes in order to achieve salvation. It is difficult and often impossible for women to do that, for the family system has sometimes given women responsibilities to beloved husbands and children, and has usually provided a form of economic and emotional security that cannot just be shrugged off. To some extent, of course, families gain their strength -- where they have any -- from habit, or tradition. But America has not historically been a country or a culture particularly respectful of tradition, and we think that the family is one traditional structure that might have dissolved long ago if it were not also useful to the total system that surrounds it. To understand why it has remained, we must spell out exactly what services it provides to the system. We must also understand that the family will never disappear until we find alternative ways of providing people with the security, love, and acceptance which they today may find in families. For this short pamphlet we have time only to list some of the particular functions of typical families in our society, to suggest some of the social consequences of these functions, and to point to a few alternatives.



Families have harnessed women to keep house and raise children in the most inefficient and tedious way imaginable -- each woman with one man's house and children. The most basic human problem with this arrangement is that child care on this scale is destructive to both adults and children. It keeps women and children isolated from the rest of the world, deprives children of the company of men and men of the company of children most of the time, and deprives women of the company of adults (which is enough to turn an adult mind into mush -- if you're not a mother and don't believe it, try spending just 48 hours with children only).

But just for the sake of this argument, let us forget this human consideration and confine our thinking to the typical considerations of capitalism -- efficiency in production. Housework and child care remain among the few areas of work in advanced industrial society that have not been socially reorganized, into larger production units, along with being mechanized. Any housewife affluent enough to own housecleaning machines -- dishwashers, dryers, vacuum cleaners, electric mixers, electric can openers, etc. -- will confirm the findings of efficiency studies, which show that these machines make housework easier but not much quicker. This should not be surprising: we know that all mechanization saves time only if combined with expansion of the scale of production. In this case that expansion would be of the amount of stuff or space to be cleaned. For example, dishwashers save a lot of time if 25 people eat together. For example, child care absorbs many fewer hours of adult labor if three to five children are cared for together.

Why has our society, so masterfully efficient in industry, been so backward about "modernizing" the occupations of the home? One clue to this apparently contradictory situation can be found in the business cycles of capitalism. All capitalist economies seem to function only with periods of high unemployment (and these periods are getting longer and longer until now we mainly have occasional periods of low unemployment!). In modern times, periodic crises -- such as the Second World War -- will boost production to the point that not only is the unemployment of men lowered, but women in the thousands are enticed by relatively well-paying jobs into industry and out of their homes. When those crises end, however, as in the late 1940's, the official unemployment figures systematically distort the truth about our economy because they do not count as among the unemployed those women who return to "homemaking," even if they do unwillingly (that is, they are fired). Or, to choose an example



Riveters, Douglas Aircraft Plant, Santa Monica, California. Women made up 90 percent of the workers in this tail cone assembly department at one period during World War II. (Brown Brothers)

from another historical vantage-point, in England in the early 19th century rapid industrialization made it the nearly universal pattern for all working class women -- and children, from the age of 6 on up -- to work in factories. Then in the second half of the 19th century, when industrial growth slowed, more and more working class women were propagandized by the middle class ideology that a good wife and mother should stay home -- thus convincing women not to resist increasing lay-offs in the factories.

What this all adds up to is that women represent a vast, flexible labor pool to help absorb the economic jolts and inequities in the system. At the present time, for example, women have lost ground in their advance into professional jobs. In 1940 women held 45% of all professional and technical jobs; in 1967, 37%. Another way in which the system hides its unemployment problems is through the readiness of many women -- in part due again to false ideology

about the importance of being homebodies -- to take part-time work. The effect of the retirement of many women from full-time to part-time work can be seen in the fact that the median income of women workers decreased from 59.1% of men's in 1939 to 44.1% in 1951 to 30% in 1961. (The use of part-time labor is, additionally, profitable to businessmen because it saves them from having to pay for costly fringe benefits won by unions for full-time workers, not to mention that the hourly wage is typically less for part-time workers.)



There is still another level in which the ideology of the family has been used by the capitalist system to maximize their profits off of women. Characteristically, and historically, women have been "super-exploited" on the job market by being paid less than men for the same work. In one of the earliest forms of wage-labor that women and men both performed -- work as domestic servants for the European aristocracy and rich bourgeoisie -- women servants always received less pay for equal work, with less opportunity for "advancement" than men. In the U.S. today, only 10% of women work in jobs where they receive equal pay for equal work and are guaranteed equal opportunity with men.

Obviously, one of the reasons employers can get away with this kind of discrimination is because of the strength of the prevailing ideology of women's inferiority as workers. We have been told we are weaker, less intelligent, less reliable. In modern U.S. business one of the favorite myths is that women are unreliable because we are sick more often, and quit permanently when we get married. Both are false. Women don't get sick more than men, but they do have a higher job absentee rate. Do employers ever consider that a lot of it might be because of the lack of day care facilities? And the fact that working women often do another full-time job after hours as cook, housekeeper, and general servant? Most women don't quit when they get married; 64% of women in the work force are married, and over 78% are married, widowed, or divorced.

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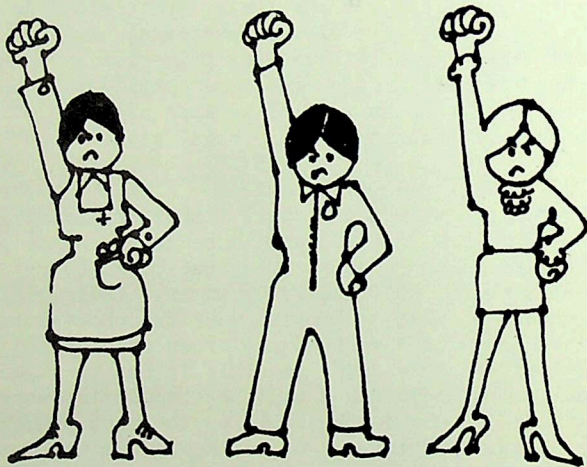


It is true, furthermore, that women have a lesser record of labor militancy than men. In some ways the historical behavior of women in the industrial labor force has resembled that of other oppressed peoples -- the record of the Irish in England, the blacks in the American middle west, the Mexican-Americans in the far West -- several decades ago: we gained for ourselves the reputation of "scabs" because we accepted less pay and thus sometimes helped employers to break or head off union organizing campaigns. Though we should hardly be proud of this record, we should understand the reasons why. For those of us women who, like males of the minority groups, had to earn a living for ourselves and families, we usually had no choice in the matter, but took what work we could get. But there were also some special reasons for the work behavior of women: many of us were not exclusively responsible for the support of a family and often looked upon our income as supplementary. Or others of us went to work in crisis situations, temporarily, but remained convinced that our true vocation was at home, as wife and mother. In both middle and working classes, women have characteristically had much less identification with their work than men: middle class women are less likely to see their "profession" as the top priority in their lives, as their husbands are; working class women are less likely to see themselves primarily as workers than their husbands. To make things even more complicated, consider how many "middle class" women in fact do working class jobs, but take their class identification and their social style from their husbands.

The mirror image of women's "scab" labor in industry was the devaluation of the work traditionally done in the home. Until the industrial revolution the home was the seat of industry; most manufacture was done there, and usually by women. Industrialism saw the steady removal of most productive work from home to factory, so that housewives today rarely even make bread or clothing, let alone butter or pottery, as they used to. This is not to suggest that we should go back to making by hand all the commodities we consume. Indeed, most women should be thankful for the mass production of a lot of necessities. But instead of replacing our tedious hand manufacture with creative and more demanding work, most housewives are now essentially janitors and babysitters. We should not let euphemisms like "homemaker" delude us so that we fail to see that, like professional janitors in our society, housewives have little social prestige. It is hardly surprising that when a woman, accustomed to occupying herself, or seeing other women occupy themselves, with such low-prestige occupations in the home, goes out to get a job, she does not consider her time or skills particularly valuable. This phenomenon is equally apparent among middle class and bourgeois

women who choose not to work. Since they realize they do not need to earn more money than their husbands already bring home, they often plan to use their time for non-profit but beneficial activity -- and then end up entertaining themselves as volunteers addressing envelopes for insignificant charities or serving as chauffeurs for their children. Despite their capitalist values about the rest of their lives, measuring everything in terms of money, they do not think that their time is worth money.

To fight this exploitation we need equal pay and equal opportunity laws. It is also important, however, to show women who at this time prefer to be, or have to be, full-time housewives and mothers that their work is dignified and skilled and important to the society. To criticize women who do not attempt to compete for jobs outside their homes would be to perpetuate the capitalist value system for different kinds of work. It is this understanding that has recently led many women's liberation groups to demand that women receive salaries for their housework, to be paid by the husband's employer or by the state.



Families and Social Control

Historically, the nuclear family arose along with the bourgeois class, and was associated with the rise of individualism and individual freedom. Certainly, the winning of the right of young people to marry for love, rather than as a part of economic or political mergers negotiated by their fathers, was a progressive step. The nuclear family also meant that wives suffered less humiliation and exploitation: one master in the form of one husband is usually preferable to many elder relatives acting as masters, as in a typical extended family. It is also likely that both husbands and wives escaped something of the conservative influence of their elders when they began to establish households of their own rather than staying in the original home of parents. But today, in the declining years of bourgeois society, what was once progressive has become reactionary and retarding.

The individualism that was a justified rejection of feudal traditionalism has today become a superficial and even hypocritical ideology. Superficial because individualism is now, by and large, popularly linked with private property and a private home which functions as an escape, a shelter, away from the larger community. Superficial because more and more we are forced to achieve individual identity through slight eccentricities of dress, hobby, or humor. Hypocritical because at all deeper levels the society and the family promote the most ruthless conformity in accepting the basic social premises about what is and isn't "done," and in limiting the roles that one must choose from in defining one's own personality. Above all today's individualism is destructive because it is particularly associated with competition, and the notion that all people outside immediate relatives (and sometimes including them) are potential rivals for success, love, or prosperity, rather than potential comrades. In this way the nuclear family renders ideological services to the capitalist system as important as the economic ones described above.

The nuclear family helps to stabilize all other forms of oppression in the society by separating people into small, isolated units whose loyalty to family members is usually balanced by distrustfulness and stinginess towards outsiders. This distrust, particularly prevalent in large industrial cities, is one of the forces making it difficult for people to join together to act politically. More, families tend to hide the very existence of common interests by training people to consider that many of their worries are personal and private, when they are in fact social and political.

Being programmed to turn all their affection towards spouse and children, people lose the consciousness of the possibility of warmth and loyalty among a larger community. Even close relationships are damaged because their exclusiveness requires that all one's frustration and hostility be directed towards one of a very small number of people, who in turn are programmed to "forgive" these outbreaks. The expression of anger towards the world outside the family becomes difficult if not taboo, and insecurity and anxiety in relation to all strangers becomes constant and intense.

The fears of the judgement of the outside world, and anxiety over our inadequacy in fulfilling the social models held up before us as desirable, are possibly even more severe for women than for men. While many women may gain from being spared the necessity that is inescapable for men of competing for wealth and success, they often lose from being isolated at home for long hours while men enjoy the camaraderie of fellow workers. That isolation makes people particularly manipulable. In the loneliness of waxing floors women become the vulnerable targets of television and magazines that sell them beauty, happiness and a just society in an aerosol can.

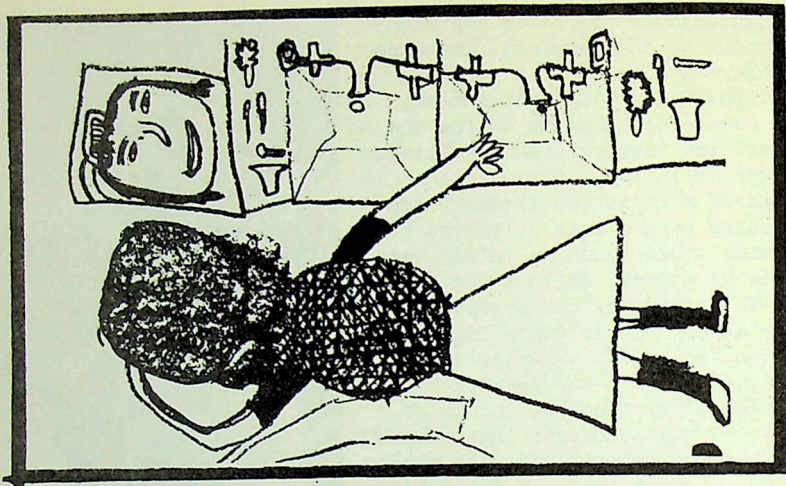
To understand all this in terms of the economic system, consider simply that the modern capitalist economy depends as much on its ability to control and enforce consumption through the sophisticated techniques of the advertising industry as it does on its ability to exploit workers in places of production. In essence, contemporary advertising no longer attempts to sell products by convincing potential customers of their efficiency or even their beauty. Now commodities -- from cigarettes to rock music to cars to vaginal douches -- are sold by making promises, explicitly or subliminally, that the commodities will transform you into the groovy, happy, affluent and sexually desirable model that is pictured.



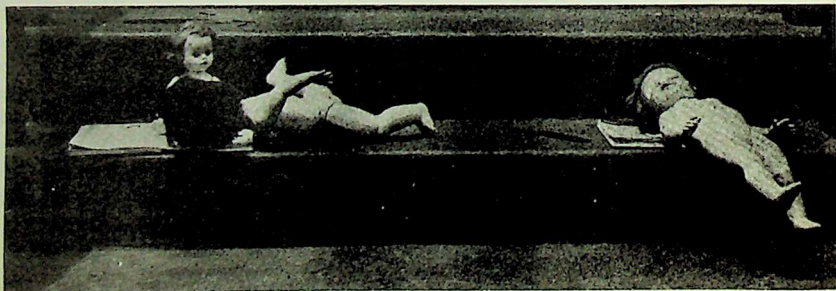
To be able to resist the blandishments of such appeals, one must be able to conceive of a kind of fulfillment, or even contentment, that does not depend on having the commodities in question. Families, however, help to stifle even the dreams of alternative lives by conditioning people into roles and then defining those roles as fulfillment. A role is a part, as in a drama, that is assumed by the person, as by an actor. It is quite different from an "identity" -- which is a personality or an ego created by the individual for himself, though of course through constant intercourse with the environment and with other people. A role is not a function; one can tend to someone's wounds without adopting all the style of the stereotyped nurse, without becoming in one's mind, "nurse." Similarly one could clean a house without becoming "housewife;" one could express sexual feelings without becoming the Cosmopolitan girl.

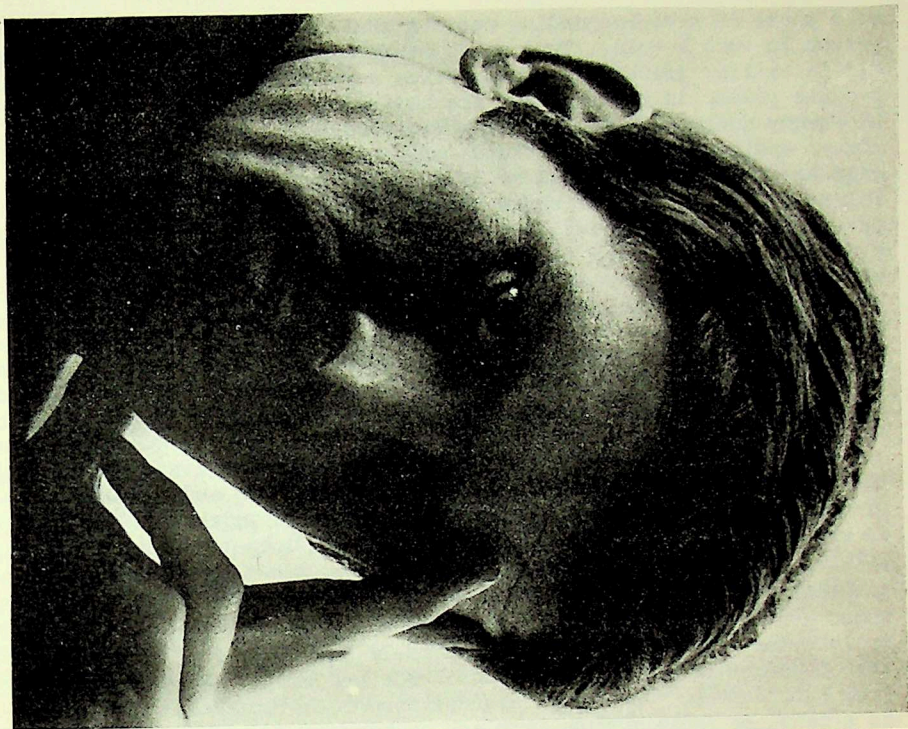


But the divisions of labor supported by the family are so rigid that they must have roles which surround them as their defenses. From her earliest years, a child observes that work in a typical nuclear family is sexually divided. There is women's work -- housework, cooking, sewing, knitting, making social arrangements -- and there is work that women do not do -- mowing the lawn, building shelves, fixing and washing the car, etc. Of course families differ somewhat, and the lines are fuzzy, but at the core of our culture there are kinds of work that are exclusively marked as feminine or masculine. More subtle but equally significant for the child is the division of the emotional roles played within the family. Mother is inclined to be more openly loving, supportive, fundamentally indecisive, and self-denying than father. Even an exceptional, non-conformist family which defies these divisions cannot easily compete, in forming a child's personal expectations, with a society in which the typical nuclear family is the only acceptable norm.



The girl child not only learns from her mother and the mothers of her friends a series of roles which she must play, but these roles become deeply imbedded into her very ego, until it is only from playing the roles well that the girl can gain any self-esteem. When she has a child in turn, for example, she comes to think of herself as "mother" and to approach the whole world as "mother." She accepts and makes self-fulfilling the conventional expectations of what mothers are like -- warm, selfless, ordinary, routine, comforting, etc. Unmarried women are equally forced into roles: career woman, loose woman, man-hater, gay divorcee. The unpleasant connotations of these phrases show again that it is usually just as difficult for a woman to forge an identity outside a family as in one. Society has enforced roles on women to the extent of requiring, not only that she change her name at marriage, but that the way in which she is addressed (Miss or Mrs.) lets even a stranger know her social situation.





Men, too, adopt roles: aggressive go-getter, rambunctious youth, gross, brave, lady-killer, misunderstood artist, and so on. All roles are limiting, of course, but some of men's are not so oppressive as those forced on women. To be aggressive, for example, often means just approaching the world and the people in it self-confidently and curiously, as women are trained not to do. There is no doubt that many men have more freedom to do what they want with their lives than women, and although they play roles too, many men can operate with fewer of them. For a woman to be housewife, mother, lover, and also professional worker, friend to other women, or (God help us) boss over other workers is an ego-shredding experience. Most men have much greater continuity between the ways in which they behave in their different activities than women.

The rejection of roles by individuals is usually extremely threatening to others (as well as dangerous to themselves) because it forces others to deal with the person as an individual. For every

role there is a corresponding pattern that defines how one treats a person in such a role. Thus roles often take the place that caste did in earlier societies: both define a person's social rank. Just because people in this society are not ranked in a simple, linear hierarchy does not mean that we have no rules of status. We do not always evaluate the social status of a person we are talking to, but only because we are trained well enough to treat people in different roles differently even without thinking. If this were not true particularly of sex roles, why is it that the first question about every new baby is, what is its sex? Or, even more significantly, why does it upset so many people so much that new "freaky" dress and hair styles sometimes make it difficult to distinguish men from women at first glance? It should, after all, be possible to deal with a person as an individual without knowing immediately what sex it is -- and notice that our language does not even have a pronoun to refer to "person" without a gender.

If our roles have somewhat the same social function as caste, they have the same political function as well: the ancient wisdom of the ruling classes, divide and rule. We have understood the ways in which the black slave was used as a sop to help keep down the white small farmer, himself oppressed by "Bourbon" rule in the American south. We must understand equally clearly the use of woman -- wife, servant, mistress -- as a sop to the male peasant or proletarian or even professional, himself deprived of all real political power by a small ruling class. Nor are women themselves exempt from such dupery: the first acquisition of the bourgeois housewife is a maid, in America usually black or brown. The perpetuation of the hierarchy through domestic servants is perfectly in keeping with the overall ideological function of the family: the building of an elitist system so that everyone except those at the very bottom of the heap have someone to lord it over and thus dull their consciousness about the real nature of the imprisonment in the society.



Families and the Oppression of Women

In all the above functions the family serves to reinforce the economic system and maximize profits only at a tremendous human cost -- the crushing of human potential in some areas and the limiting of it in many more. The family system is bad for men but worse for women and children.*

For example, families create an oppressive situation for many men, placing on them the near certainty of having to be responsible all their lives not just for their own livelihood but for that of one or more others. (In the law of many states of the U.S., for example, no marriage "contract" that envisages the women to be the chief provider is permissible.) A preference for non-lucrative activity, such as painting or writing or philosophizing, endangers a man's family or deprives him of the possibility of having a woman and children to live with. Even prior to this, and destructive not just to the individual man but to the whole society, the constant social expectation that each man must become a life-long wage-earner deprives men of even the possibility of forming a preference for non-profit activity in the first place. Perhaps I should point out that this is not inevitable: that if groups of people larger than the nuclear family lived together fewer people could work full-time or many people could work part-time to provide for the community. This way more people could have more free time to do useful things that are non-profit -- study, teach, grow up, sculpt, play. Lacking such arrangements, the family in capitalist society helps to deprive us of cultural activity that cannot be made to produce a profit -- or worse, distorts cultural activity to make it produce a profit.

Any benefits housewives might reap from being exempt from money-making responsibilities are usually undercut by housework and child-raising responsibilities. But even should she have leisure time to spend on voluntary activity, the social value of that activity is diminished by her own low social status. There is a vicious circle here: in capitalist society a person's social importance tends to be related to his capacity to earn money, whether or not the person is exercising that capacity. Since most women are not seen as having that capacity, nothing they produce is likely to be treated with the

*It is probably worst of all for children, and we will try to point out how and where when possible, but to discuss the effects of the family on children properly would require an entire separate study.

respect that a man's work might engender. The low social esteem of women's work is, naturally, internalized by many women: the results are that most women who try to express themselves in writing, painting or politics tend to suffer from their low prior self-esteem; and that for most women, that self-esteem is so low that they never try at all.

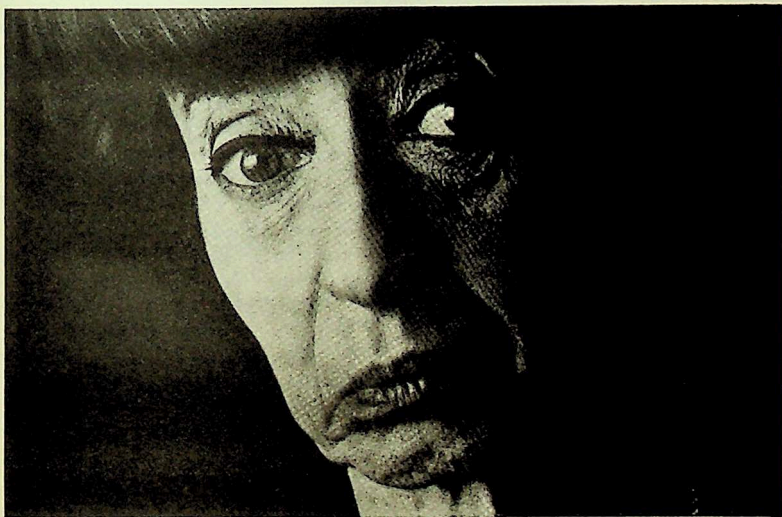
In terms of the devaluation of women, families are both cause and effect -- this is another vicious circle. The division of labor in the nuclear family is a result of women's low status, and also helps to perpetuate it. It is reasonable, in capitalist society, that the family member who earns the money should assume the largest share of decision-making power. Thus in many young families, beginning with high resolutions about equality between husband and wife, the fact that the husband is the sole or chief breadwinner makes that equality difficult or impossible to realize. This is particularly true since many of the key decisions within families are taken without knowing it. The family moves where the man's job takes it, for example. As the wife becomes increasingly bogged down in administering details of cooking, cleaning, diapers, and children's squabbles she becomes in fact less interesting and important in the eyes of her husband. A typical middle class example is that of a brilliant college student passionately involved in philosophy, math, or medieval history -- and who ten years later believes herself, and is believed by others, to be incapable of any serious intellectual endeavor. It is everywhere the story of tough, spirited women who are broken and become terrified but infinitely forgiving when their selfish and chauvinist husbands desert them time after time for other women, "the boys," drunkenness, fishing, golf, the office.

As women's minds and spirits can be destroyed by life on the inside of a nuclear family, our sexuality is almost universally repressed and distorted by the nuclear family, whether or not we choose to enter into one. Historically, families help to repress and control sexuality so that it would interfere as little as possible with production while allowing for continued reproduction. For most of history, in most of the world, this was accomplished by imposing strict sexual fidelity on women.* With the birth of capitalism, when

*Sexual fidelity was probably originally imposed upon women by men when the system of private property made the ruling sex anxious to ensure that inherited property remained in his family. Earlier sexual fidelity was unnecessary because succession and inheritance was probably matrilineal, and it was always evident who the mother of the child was; since it is not always certain who the father is, patrilineal succession made necessary the strict enforcement of monogamy for women.

harder work for the accumulation of capital was valued, a special ethic -- Puritanism -- strengthened the sexual repression still further, and made monogamy the mutual obligation of husband and wife.

Despite the weakening of that ethic today, women still carry its burden. Women in families are trained to see themselves primarily as mothers and reproducers, not as enjoyers of sex; while women outside families are pressured to see themselves primarily as sex objects -- in order to catch a man and enter a family and "relax" into motherhood. Thus the family structure limits the alternatives of most women even before they marry. The fear of not finding a mate, translated as the necessity of being always desirable, conditions a woman's whole world from the age of puberty, and sometimes earlier: the need to be always beautiful and sweet-smelling; to avoid competing with, or outstripping men, or just being too skilled at anything not specifically considered the feminine province; above all the fear of appearing too aggressive. Women who have attempted to fight the family's sexual repression individually, by becoming "promiscuous", or even by remaining celibate, suffer both from social castigation and from the inner necessity of adopting the social definition as their own identity -- by becoming the "loose woman," the "tease," or the prudish spinster. The fact is that there is no acceptable way for a woman to have a sex life after age 25 except in marriage, and that to choose therefore not to have a sex life is to condemn oneself to not having a satisfying social life.





Within marriage, the family system in the past has tended to chain women to their reproductive function by implying, first, that sex is inevitably connected with reproduction, and second, that biological motherhood is inevitably connected with the responsibility for raising the child. The first connection is now rapidly being broken down with birth control and an accelerating nation-wide attack on restrictive abortion laws. Breaking down the second connection is still far away. It is interesting that we already have a rhetoric about collective responsibility for children: politicians are always telling us that youth are the future of our society. The women's liberation movement is beginning to call them on that rhetoric now, and it seems likely that the state, big businesses, schools and all public institutions will increasingly be called upon to provide free child care facilities. If women are really to be freed from the special burdens of child-raising, we will have to see to it that no woman is denied any opportunity open to anyone else in the society because of special responsibilities to children. This will mean, for example, that instead of demanding of employers special

provisions to make women's jobs compatible with their child-care responsibilities, we need to start thinking of demanding that men's jobs be made compatible with their assuming a full half of all responsibilities for children.

But a child-raising system based on the nuclear family supplemented by child care centers, no matter how equal the distribution of labor, is not good enough because it is not good for children. Children need much more than babysitting. They need a great deal of love and attention from a small number of people who are especially devoted to and committed to just a few children. The nuclear family provides this, but it is damaging to children in other ways. To put it most bluntly, families have oppressed children by making private property of them. Most children today are raised in an atmosphere of possessiveness, rivalry with siblings for the love of two parents, and the sense that they must earn that love by behaving and achieving well. To insist that children should not be the property of their parents is not to deny what we have just argued -- that children benefit from the special love of some adults who cherish those children above others. Indeed, the fact that parental love is often confused with parental proprietorship demonstrates how much love itself has become a commodity -- something to be owned or possessed exclusively. Love is not ownership. Property in human beings is slavery.

In early industrial and agricultural societies, children are valuable because they can be put to work to help provide for the family; in these societies children are property in a sense close to our conventional understanding of property, like cars and women in harems. In affluent bourgeois society the services that children perform for their masters are often psychological: they are to be what the parents always dreamed of being, or they are to maintain the family name and tradition; frustrated parents, especially mothers, must pour their creative energy into hopes and nagging directed at the child.



R.D. Laing's analysis of how schizophrenia is induced in children (particularly girls in his case studies, incidentally) by parents who are not capable of accepting the child as a separate being, as a subject, is exactly relevant here. To make children the property of a commune, or of the state, would be no improvement. Thus it seems that the liberation of children could not occur until the liberation of adults made them no longer need to use children as the carriers of their own aspirations.



Overview

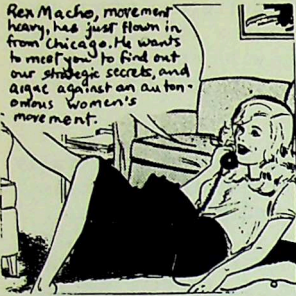
One could try to summarize this rough sketch of the political functions of the family by saying that families provide a means of mobilizing and pacifying the population in the interests of production, consumption and the stability of the system. Through the family, manpower is mobilized into the labor force as cheaply as possible by using womanpower as free or underpaid labor. Sex is prevented from becoming free or playful, for real play subverts. Consumption is maximized by drawing people into competition with each other and never-ending emulation of television ideals. Children are cared for at the expense of women's lives, creating conditions of greatest

repression for the children. The nuclear family minimizes the dangers of children rejecting the absurd lives of adults who never do anything really interesting or useful, and maximizes the likelihood that their youthful rebellion against authority will end in their reproducing the same hierarchies in their lives for want of a viable alternative.

Thus not only does the family seem to be shoring up a generally exploitative system, but it is also -- to the extent that it dominates as the only acceptable living unit -- markedly oppressive towards women and children. It ought therefore to be destroyed, or transformed into some larger community. Furthermore that transformation must precede as well as follow a socialist revolution, for unless some brave souls develop new living patterns now the pressures towards retrenchment that seem to follow most revolutions may stifle our advance.

We have been convinced of the urgency of this transformation partly by our observations of the socialist revolutions that have already occurred. Most of the world's "socialist" countries appear to be still strongly male-supremacist. We are not condemning these revolutions; on the contrary, everyone devoted to the cause of women's liberation should be glad they occurred, for they have done much to improve the quality of life for their people. Nevertheless, the promise they held out to women was much greater than their achievement.

Part of the reason for that disappointment was the inadequacy of socialist theory up until now. The early socialist theorists tended to argue that bringing adult women out of the homes and their exclusive occupations as wives and mothers and into the labor force, combined with the abolition of private ownership of the means of production, would inevitably liberate women. Some of them perceived that the family was in itself an institution of women's oppression, but believed that it would wither away naturally, since it would be unable to compete with women's natural desire to get out and work. As Juliet Mitchell pointed out, "The liberation of women remains an adjunct to socialist theory, not structurally integrated into it."* More, the socialist theorists did not foresee that the liberation of women might demand a different strategy for the entire struggle for socialism; or that the "socialism" that emerged out of male-dominated political movements, out of a struggle that did not involve women as equal participants in policy making, might be a very distorted socialism indeed.



LATER THAT NIGHT...



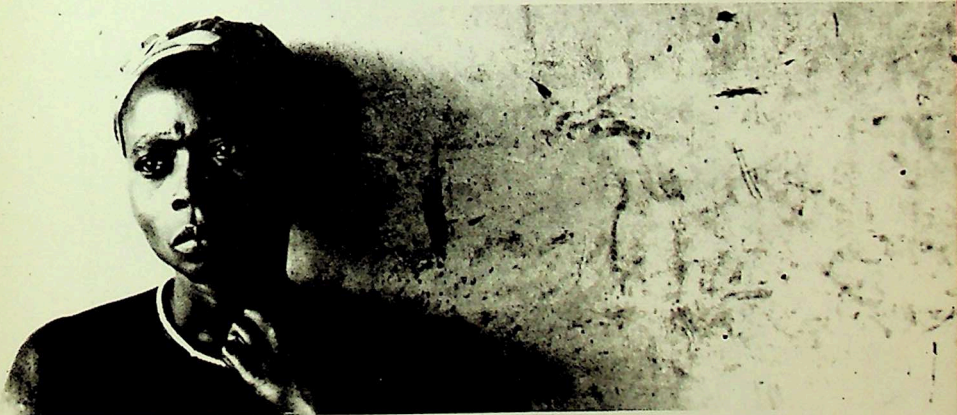
This theoretical error can be summarized as "reductionism," a philosophical term for the over-simplistic reducing of complex problems to the point where it appears that one simple change -- such as the integration of women into the work force -- will act as a panacea and solve the whole problem. Even if we accept the basic argument of Engels, that women's subordination was historically caused by an unequal division of labor, it does not necessarily follow that equalizing that division of labor now would solve the problem. During the centuries, millenia, during which women have been subordinated, society has created many other institutions and ideologies which serve to reinforce the original inequality. Everywhere in the world women's oppression is a complex phenomenon, a bundle of different and mutually supporting oppressions. Any one of these oppressions alone would be evil and unjust. But any one of them alone, too, might be alleviated without destroying the whole system of oppression. For example, women won the vote and equal legal rights fairly completely in most of the western world, but we have not produced a revolutionary change in the prevailing ideology about women or ended their economic exploitation. The contemporary belief that women find their true fulfillment in motherhood and wifehood; that we are by nature more gentle, submissive, instinctual, and emotional than men; that we are weaker and have different kinds of intellectual capacities -- these are ideas that have continued largely unchanged since the 19th century when women could neither vote nor enjoy legal equality with their husbands.

The nuclear family is one among many of these institutions and ideologies which help to keep women down. We are not claiming that the family is alone in playing this role. Especially important, we are

*"Women, The Longest Revolution," originally in New Left Review, Nov/Dec 1966, now reprinted by New England Free Press.

not asserting that the destruction of the family would automatically bring down the whole system and allow women to be liberated. There are many alternative structures that could contain, mold and channel people along sexist lines equally well. Consider the society of ancient Sparta, based on slavery, in which men lived only with men, and women lived with women, old people, and children -- controlled by the community in general rather than by fathers or husbands. In contemporary society one could imagine all sorts of substitutes for the family's various functions that would be more, rather than less, oppressive: Men organized in monkish business clubs could be induced to pour more sublimated energy than ever into production for U.S. imperialism. Child care could be given over to large nurseries and schools, providing huge profits for U.S. corporations, and which could serve as efficiently as families to the task of brainwashing children. Without marriage, that is, without possessive arrangements between mates, this society might well organize its women into a system of harems, i.e., a system of collective possession of women by men, because women would still be seen as commodities that could be possessed.

Some of these nightmares may not be so fantastic. In certain places and strata of our society families are already breaking down. Divorces, birth control pills, youth rebellion and unemployment are splintering families, and this movement is an objectively revolutionary force. This is not to say that it is an entirely desirable movement, nor do we think its outcome predetermined. We do not cheer



the way the hip capitalists are exploiting the hippies and their "chicks" as a market for tie-dyed shirts, fancy marijuana pipes, incense and black light. We find the cycles of divorces, remarriages and divorces painful and sometimes stupid. But we must not hide from the knowledge that the old society must disintegrate before a new one can be born. The women's liberation movement is tending something to strengthen that movement towards disintegration, and ought to consider itself especially to supporting women who are outside of families, and to provide alternative supportive communities.

But it would be foolish to make the destruction of the family a program. That would be like making the abolition of capitalism a program; and ideal is not a program. Similarly a frontal propaganda assault on the family would be of limited usefulness, for families are not like a vice to be cast off. Even if their functions are on balance oppressive, they are only successful at performing those functions because they serve certain needs. Families can only cease to exist when those needs can be met in other ways, -- we hope, in a socialist society where individuals can have the freedom to develop their potential without the exploitation of others. And even now, the family in itself is not the ultimate or the only enemy. It is one time-worn social structure adapted to the purpose of exploitation through a basic form of the division of labor. The women's liberation movement has discovered and rediscovered that everywhere, in every aspect of the society, the division of labor supports anti-woman, chauvinist ideologies which in turn support continued exploitation. The radical thrust of the women's liberation movement is precisely that it challenges all aspects of the division of labor, all at once. Venceremos!



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