

Dear Sean,

My incoherence on Monday was due neither to the weakness of my cause nor the strength of your arguments; on the contrary there were plenty of more principled arguments which I could have given had I not been inexperienced at arguing on this question and very distressed by your bigoted attitude. For this reason I am writing the arguments down although of course it is difficult to sum up the content of the women's liberation movement in one letter. If you wish to reply you are welcome to do so in an equally civilised manner.

Since you are probably aware of descriptions by Marx and Engels of women's exploitation, I will not bother to quote them here (though if this bothers you I am willing to produce the necessary quotes on demand)*. It is more worthwhile to outline briefly the form and manifestations of women's exploitation, and the direction of the Women's Liberation Movement.

The Exploitation of women.

1. I hope you have noticed that this country is run by men. A male government, civil service, and army; male heads of companies; male city and county planners, male Trade Union leaders, male-dominated mass media; political parties and pressure groups almost invariably led and dominated by men - (three women at the CFB conference I attended) - these are just some of the most obvious areas of male domination. Cases of women reaching powerful positions such as these occur with about the same frequency and significance as cases of working class boys made good.

2. Why? Because a woman's place is in the home backing up her husband or lover and/or bringing up his children. A woman is not supposed to live for herself so much as for her husband and children; thus women are secondary beings. It is easy to dismiss this as abstract and trivial, or as bourgeois philosophising. But I have been to a succession of political meetings at which almost every voice was a man's; I have given out leaflets to thousands of couples in the streets and it was almost always snatched or declined by the men; things like this are only indications of a total domination which is so immense, so diverse and far-reaching that it is impossible to explore every aspect of it in a document of this length.

3. Because women's main roles are wives and mothers, a disproportionate number of women are pushed into the most boring unskilled jobs with the lowest pay, and servile domestic or secretarial jobs.

4. You asked me: "How many women work?" Why did you ask this question? The proportion of women who work is probably about the same as the proportion of men, possibly slightly higher; since women whose husbands do not work are
* See especially Marx, Communist Manifesto and Engels, The Origin of the Family, Private Property and The State.

liable to be rich enough to employ other women to do their work for them. The proportion of married women in employment was over a third in the 1960s, although it may have gone up since then. This figure includes women over retiring age; it does not include single women. Those not in employment are usually those with young children who need to be looked after, and investigation would show you that they do not "sit around the house reading Vogue and getting ~~punished~~ pounced up to look like prostitutes for their husbands when they come home". (I wonder what "political facts" this statement was based on??) In fact child rearing is not only a full-time job but an extremely dull and menial one. Those women with families who are employed are doubly exploited, since they have not just one but two jobs - however much their husbands may help out with the washing up they have the responsibility for keeping the house clean and the family fed and clothed. When a man comes home after a hard day's work he wants his meal on the table, he wants to put his feet up or to go out if he feels like it - this is understandable. Well, so does a woman, but instead she has to cater for the needs of her man, get his food, mend his clothes and stay with the children if he wants to go out.

5. In this society, women are dependent on men if they have children, because they cannot leave very young children in order to earn money and anyway they can't usually earn enough to bring up a family. Because they are dependent on men, the men are able to keep them in the servile position described above. Thus I hope you can see that women are not just exploited - they are exploited by men, including working class and revolutionary men. However exploited they may be themselves, men have something to lose in the faithful servitude of their own wives. Therefore we cannot expect them to fight our exploitation for us in left-wing or other groups, but we must fight it ourselves.

The Women's Liberation Movement.

A. Aims and perspectives

What do we don't want: equality. Equality to exploit and be exploited. We are not particularly interested in putting women into leading positions in the government, civil service, industry, church or mass media to help exploit the rest of us. Nor are the rest of us particularly dying to be elevated to the glorious position of working class men. Then we ought to be fighting for socialism? Yes: our socialism! We are not going to sit back and wait while the men bring about the socialist revolution, for we have no reason to believe that when they take power they will give up their privileges. In a sudden upsurge of public-spirited feeling: that is to say, individuals may do so but as a group, they will be no more ready than any other social group to relinquish any privileges they have. And if we "join forces" with the male left, as we are constantly implored to do, we will in effect be leaving it up to the men, for as I have observed the nature of society has led to a situation where men are bound to dominate in such a situation (witness the small proportion of women at political meetings and conferences and the even smaller proportion who speak).

No, we will make the revolution (together with the men of course), and among our demands will be not just the control of the means of production and abolition of bourgeois state machinery, but also the end of our status as servants and playthings for the man, the end of our total responsibility over our children, the end of our primary role as wives, lovers and mothers.

B. The nature of the Women's Liberation Movement

Women's lib. groups probably come near to being as numerous and diverse as male socialist groups. Some are made up largely of working class women while a large proportion, as you point out, are largely middle class. Does this disqualify them from fighting male domination and exploitation? Or do you agree with Lenin, who stressed the need to fight exploitation wherever and whenever it occurred and not just when it could be explained by the most highly popularised of Marx's theories; the need to go among all classes of the population seeking out and fighting exploitation? (See What is to be Done.)

A fair proportion ~~of~~ in my own group are students (I have not counted so I couldn't give you the exact proportion); the same goes for the Workers' Association and many other left-wing groups; I think you will find that female students work just as much as male students, so I can't for the life of me see why students are to be welcomed into the Workers' Association while their very participation shows the depravity of the women's lib. movement. A very large part of the group I am in have young children - and looking after young children is a full-time job to a middle class mother just as much as ^{to} a working class one. The rest of the group do what you would call work - i.e. they are employed, mostly as teachers I think.

We are all women, the second class beings described above, who are supposed to live to be wives and mothers, women whose admission into Emma College would make life "too complicated" according to Sir Gordon Sutherland - women on whom an expensive university education would be wasted since they get married soon after completing a degree, women who are known as chicks and whistled at every time we go by, like a dog, women whose very coming together is scoffed at by reactionaries and "revolutionaries" alike.

We just want to identify ourselves as a third world group, you say, for the benefit of our egos. Thanks for the free psychoanalysis, but I think we can do without it. (If I wanted to psychoanalyse you I would ask myself why you ~~reacted~~ reacted so hysterically to the idea of women's lib.) I was really surprised, because this kind of argument is often used to get at the left in general - just a load of egotrippers, etc. (No doubt there are some women who go into it just to boost their egos and make themselves feel great, as there are such people throughout the left although they never play a very large part.)

The reason we often identify ourselves with the blacks is not to boost our egos but because like the blacks we see an exploited group and our positions are in many ways quite similar, especially in America. Originally when the blacks were officially slaves in Southern America, women were also considered openly and frankly as slaves. "A man's wife and children are his slaves, and do they not enjoy, in common with himself, his property?" - this was a justification of slavery by an American sociologist at the time. At this time, in fact, the abolitionists worked closely with the female suffragettes. Now, neither blacks nor women are considered as slaves; but both hold a similar type of inferior position in society (especially in American society). Both have well-known stereotypes, both are often considered to be innately less intelligent than white men or at any rate less suited to jobs requiring "expertise"; the proportion entering professions or gaining powerful positions in society is similarly low.

Not all women's lib. groups, or at least not all women in all women's lib. groups, have revolutionary aims. Often activities are what you might call "reformist". As in the case of the Yeovil Workers' Association, this broad front work is extremely valuable, bringing people together to recognise their exploitation and organise against it.

Our exploitation as women is not quite so clear as that of the working class - partly because it is a bit more subtle and partly because not so much study has yet gone into it. Therefore we tend to spend quite a lot of our time discussing the nature of our exploitation so that we can recognise it and fighting against it, both individually and collectively. However, as recent events have shown this does not stop us from being active as well.

I do not expect this letter to convert you to women's lib. but I do hope it will cause you to consider the question seriously as an important political movement instead of just scoffing at it out of hand. Because as long as you continue to talk about women and their struggle the way you did last Monday, it is absolutely ludicrous for you to call yourself a Marxist or a Communist.

Debby.