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A review of THE POWER OF WOMEN AND THE SUBVERSION OF THE COMMUNITY

I wrote a letter to the Newsheet recently about "Women, the Unions and Work," in which, though I emphasised the demands it contains and the need for actions flowing from them, I alluded to the solid theoretical underpinnings that supported them. Now in THE POWER OF WOMEN AND THE SUBVERSION OF THE COMMUNITY we have a fuller view of those theoretical foundations, but again in concrete terms that all of us can recognise from our own experiences.

There are three parts to the 80-page book: a long introduction by Selma James, an essay by Mariarosa Dalla Costa entitled "Women and the Subversion of the Community" and Selma's 1955 essay entitled "A Woman's Place." In Mariarosa's essay we see the obvious connection with "Women, the Unions and Work." Not so obvious in the chain of relationships is its connection with "A Woman's Place." Yet this simple and concrete account of the struggle of ordinary women, of housewives particularly, was one of the starting points for Mariarosa's work, and for that reason she had it included in the Italian edition of the book which was published earlier this year.

In her new introduction to the English edition Selma says, "there is nothing in capitalism which is not capitalistic, that is, not part of the class struggle." Mariarosa's essay shows that though women for the most part work in "pre-capitalist conditions," we are central to capitalist production and planning. And that in our centrality lies our power. Our struggle against our exploitation and against the conditions that prevail in the community (what Mariarosa calls the "social factory") joins the disparate struggles that trade unions and political parties have fragmented.



Never before has the role of women as producers of that strange and basic commodity called labour-power been so profoundly examined as in Mariarosa's essay. Though not fully rounded out here, the outlines for an extension of Marxist theory are plain, a rare event in itself. It is significant that women have made this extension--and I do not refer to the two women who wrote this book. (In the movement it becomes increasingly difficult to trace the maternity of ideas.) Rather the book itself is a manifestation of ~~the~~ a level of struggle by women, of which our movement is the massive evidence.

If much remains to be done still, it is because theory as it relates to us has been criminally neglected for over 100 years. We may look to Mariarosa and Selma to develop their concepts at greater length in a future work. A longer book on the subject is needed.

We have enough, however, to begin to act now on these new understandings. We can find a clear direction that will gather our diffuse insights and integrate our struggles, giving them (and us) a new level of power. Mariarosa's theory is always at the service of struggle, as one passage will show:

Every place of struggle outside the home, precisely because every sphere of capitalist organization presupposes the home, offers a chance for attack by women; factory meetings, neighborhood meetings, student assemblies, each of them are legitimate places for women's struggle, where women can meet and confront men--women versus men, if you like, but as individuals, rather than mother-father, son-daughter, with all the ~~contradictions, the frustrations, that capital~~ possibilities this offers to explode outside of the house the contradictions, the frustrations, that capital has wanted to implode within the family.

So tightly is Mariarosa's essay structured that it is difficult to represent it with quotations out of context, unless it be to sample the felicities of her prose. For this the book-cover quotation is useful:



We pose then as foremost the need to break this role of housewife that wants women divided from each other, from men and from children, each locked in her family as the chrysalis in the cocoon that imprisons itself by its own work, to die and leave silk for capital.

"To die and leave silk for capital"--that is a phrase to haunt our imaginations. But Mariarosa, in the original or in translation, is no mere phrasemaker. As Selma sums up her contribution in the introduction:

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

It may come as a surprise to younger women that in a year before some of them were born, Selma was writing in "A Woman's Place":

More and more today, women are showing by their every action that they can't go on in the old way. They have no ~~XX~~ confidence any more that what is supposed to work really will, or what is supposed to be their lives, should be. Their husbands, their children, their work, all are in conflict with them. Ev erything they do, every decision they make, they feel may work. Marriage, children, home, none of these things are women sure of any more.

Now there is a mass international feminist movement which has, among its many contributions to politics today, responsibility for this book. Even its production (typesetting, designing, printing) was at the hands of women working with Falling Wall Press in Bristol. In more than one sense, this book helps us to discover our roots and our present resources.

Cassandra Southwick

(*alias Priscilla*)

*See you soon!*  
 This was sent to a woman's paper.  
 Janet Power  
 P.