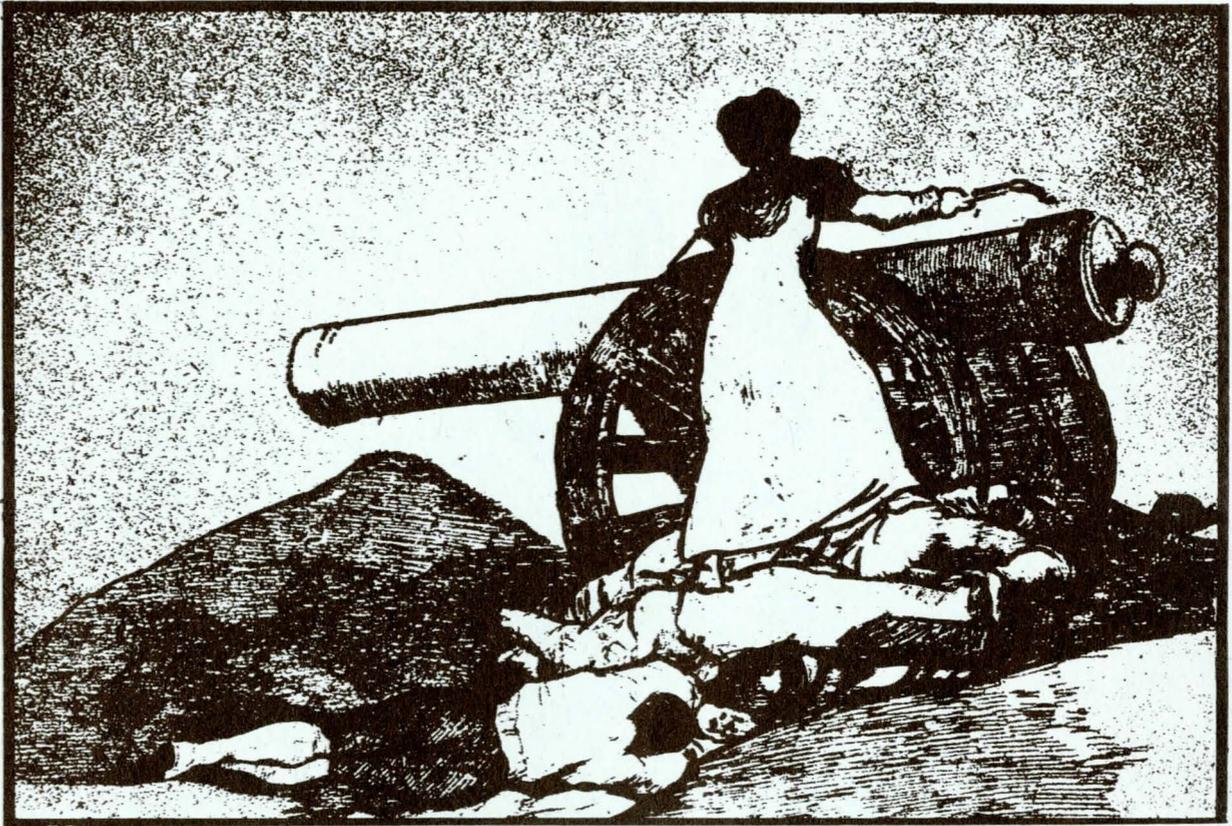


FEMALE LIBERATION



as the basis for social revolution

Roxanne Dunbar

Roxanne Dunbar is active in female liberation and the movement generally in Boston.

This article is one of a series chosen by Boston-area women and published by NEFP.

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FEMALE LIBERATION as the basis for social revolution

Women form the oldest and largest continually oppressed group in the family of humankind, their subjugation dating from the downfall of primitive communal society and the rise of private property.

This, the introduction to the SDS Resolution on Women's Liberation, was the theme of the policy question on women discussed at the National Conference in December 1968. The resolution covers several important areas of Female Liberation, particularly 'male supremacy'. Yet there is nothing in the resolution which would suggest what many of us mean by Female Liberation. The resolution calls for 'free speech' within SDS. The masculine structure of SDS is built-in, and not much will change if a few specially selected women are allowed to speak pedantically enough to share some power with the big guys, and exert power in a new territory of their own -- women.

Marriage or living arrangements, an overwhelmingly important and absorbing matter in the day to day lives of the majority of people, including SDS organizers, was simply not discussed. But the programmed subservience of women in the domestic situation assures continued masculine domination in public. Most SDS people come from 'privileged' families, and though they question many of the values of their heritage, they do not seem to question the economic and psychological basis of the middle class -- the nuclear family and the private possession of children. In fact, by jazzing it up a bit with drugs, colors, music, approved affairs, even a few orgies (group 'love'), intimate meetings, they have managed to make the coupling and breeding tradition of the bourgeoisie appear more attractive than ever before. But the frills do not diminish the oppressive nature of the institution for the female, and especially the children (male and female).

Upon what basis do New Left Americans and Europeans analyze (or refuse to analyze) the family? Surely not Marx and Engels. In 1846, they wrote: 'The first division of labor is that between man and woman for the propagation of children.' Later Engels wrote: 'The first opposition that appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression coincides with that of the female sex by the male.' (p. 5)*

The materialist conception of history is an analysis of the production and reproduction of the immediate essentials of life -- the production of the means of existence, and the production of human beings themselves--the propagation of the species. Contemporary radicals tend to totally ignore the latter, and emphasize the former. In strategy, Marx and Engels also downgraded the reproductive faculties, since they thought that the family had practically been demolished among the working class in the nineteenth century. One could, they thought, deal with the two functions separately, since they believed that socialism would finally annihilate the family (though not monogamy). It would seem that the rationale was in error then because the family has not been destroyed automatically through revolution, nor has capitalism destroyed the proletariat's sense of family. Certainly the rationale is in error now in America when the family (including its degeneration, divorce) has attained a whole new lease on life, even among the working class.

It is no accident, Engels said, that the enslavement of the woman coincides with the rise of private property; in fact, woman (her labor and her product) was (and still is psychologically) the most valuable property that a man could possess. (Today every pop song, every movie, every TV show, every personal statement from a man - including working class and radical men - attest to that fact.) If women were not so valued as property, or as a possession (psychological and possible in societies after a socialist revolution), they would not be so 'happy' in

* Page numbers cited from Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (International Publishers, N.Y.).

their situations. Slaves are always 'happy' (hopeless).

'The modern individual family is founded on the open or concealed domestic slavery of the wife, and modern society is a mass composed of these individual families as its molecules.' (Engels, p. 65) This precise statement suggests that to attempt to reform or transform the institution would be analogous to the attempts made to reform the institution of Slavery in the United States (see Southern almanacs and sociologists) or to transform the institution into peonage. Just like the African slaves, when a woman is declared legally free, her bondage is unbroken. Engels pointed out that 'in the majority of cases today, the husband is obliged to earn a living and support his family, and that in itself gives him a position of supremacy without any need for special legal titles and privileges. Within the family, he is the bourgeois and the wife represents the proletariat.' (pp. 65-66)

This is still the case, since the working woman is considered a temporary worker, a surplus labor force within a structure which idealizes the little wife and mother in the home with her brood.

Engels did not suggest that women or anyone else can be free from oppression within the capitalist system, but he certainly did not say that battles should be postponed, or that only working class men's women should be 'organized'. Quite the contrary. Engels saw the middle class man's woman as a domestic slave, not a middle class person. It is unfortunate that radicals are so programmed by the system's propaganda that they believe there is such a person as a 'middle class woman'.

As with the strategy for building revolutionary consciousness among the proletariat, Marx and Engels saw the necessity for a democratic republic to provide a 'clear field' on which the ultimate battles could be fought. They saw that legal equality of rights had to exist before the peculiar character of the supremacy of the husband over the wife could be revealed. 'Then it will be plain that the first condition for the liberation of the wife is to bring the whole female sex back into public industry and that this in turn demands the abolition of the monogamous family as the economic unit of the society.' (p. 66)

Even the present liberal demands of NOW (National Organization of Women) are not contradictory to our communist thesis, since those women are advancing the legal equality of women so that we have a clear field for the battles we are fighting, and such rights give women breathing space. It is disheartening to hear radicals condemning such reform activity as counterrevolutionary. Not everyone has to involve herself in such activities, but we should be glad that someone is doing it, and not condemn them for their labors which are ultimately necessary for our own fight, into which we hope to bring the women of NOW, when they see the reality of the system.

We now operate within the democratic republic (capitalist government) which Marx and Engels rightly saw as necessary to the revolutionary process in an industrial economy. Women will soon have nominal equal rights, and perhaps will even gain rights to their own bodies through legalized abortion. These legal rights do not mean much in reality for women (or for anyone), and such rights are never really won, but given by the system to preserve itself, as it needs to absorb pressures. But equal rights give women confidence to fight, and they expose the nature of the vicious prejudice against women at every level, just as analogous demands on the part of Blacks have revealed the character of racism.

Engels pointed out that in his time working class men enjoyed only the psychological and not the economic advantages of the oppression of women, but apparently Engels underestimated the tenacity with which these little men tend to hold on to their need for the servility of others. The working class white man in America enjoys the psychological and economic aspects of two servile castes - women and Blacks - which makes the working class white man doubly arrogant and filled with a false sense of power. In both cases, the worker compensates for his own wretched condition by venting his resentment on his competitors for jobs and the lower echelons of power (the family mainly).

In Engels' time, industry was taking the proletariat wife out of the home, and putting her on the labor market, then making her the breadwinner. In this way, the proletariat escaped the monogamous family through the 'freedom' of the working class woman to support herself and her children. Today in the United States, this is the case among the very poor, mostly immigrant and Black people. Generally the system, because of cybernation, has put the woman back in the home, making that situation at any rate the ideal, in order to get her off the labor market.

The counterrevolutionary freedom of the working class man in America is that he, too, can own a wife, kids, and a house just like a good bourgeois. The psychological rewards are enormous, even if the economic and social status is illusory. As a compensation for lost bargaining power (leaving public industry), women ('the happy housewife') have been given 'buying power'. Of course, we are educated (brainwashed) to buy certain things -- never our freedom. Women have also been given the right to engage in debilitating activities, formerly allowed only to men and courtesans -- drinking, smoking, drug-use, sexual promiscuity, all of which profits a capitalist economy based on consumerism at home. The crass Virginia Slims slogan capsulizes the new 'freedom': 'You've come a long way, baby; now you have your own cigarette.'

There is much confusion about the 'right' of a man to support, protect, and defend (i.e. possess) a family. This notion has led the Black movement onto a path, already tread by the White working class. That is, among the demands of Black radicals is the right to 'family'. The system agrees. Every major magazine and television special pronounces the virtues of family, and the tragedy of the Black man's inability to get one in his economic situation. And though Black radicals oppose Moynihan and his Report, they agree with his thesis: The Plight of the Negro Man. Get your manhood; get a Black woman, put her in a house, breed her, then you will be a man, just like the White man. And Kathleen Cleaver tells the San Francisco Chronicle Society reporter that she wants nothing more than a private life as mother and housewife: that she is only fighting to help her man out, so he can be a good father and breadwinner. This nonsense will surely change as poor Black women protest their falling

from 0 to -10 on the scale of relative freedom to even function in this sick society. Indeed poor Black women will have to emerge before the movement will move toward real liberation. For truly the last shall be first, and the first shall be last in the revolutionary effort.

II.

Now we can begin to think the unthinkable, ask questions never before posed. For instance: Why should the main organ for revolution be a masculine organ within which women's liberation is a faction (caucus)? The existence of power is always the rationale for continued power. When we insist on the primary importance of female liberation, we do not mean that men are excluded (really wishful thinking on the part of radical men), or that men are to become better domestic slaves. Nor do we hold that our oppression is greater than others; we simply say it is basic to all other struggles. The origin of caste (therefore class) was the subjugation of the female sex. The struggle against the basis of oppression is at a higher stage of revolution than the archaic strategy of the present radical analysis. In a time when nearly every American male is economically capable of possessing a household slave or a pretty toy, we consider women to be the proletariat.

Black people identify as a colony with colonized people all over the world. Spanish Americans and Indians identify similarly. Unless the men of those groups insist on sharing the privilege of the White man - possession of a woman and children - they might be able to establish organs for national liberation as a united front (men and women) with a conscious basis of female liberation.

The case is very different for the privileged white man. White male radicals are the inheritors of power, the golden boys of the society, the cream of the crop. They must prove their ability to lead to the fathers. They seem to think they are free of all that. Yes, indeed, Black people, Chicanos, women, workers need to be liberated in the revolutionary struggle, which White men will lead. The White man's role is the White Man's Burden--updated. Protect little brown people and women. But by what prerogative? What makes these men think they are equipped to deal with anyone's liberation when they have not even begun to analyze their own consciousness?

I do not find men all that oppressed by this society. though I hear men and women all the time argue that men are just as oppressed. I can not see it; they do not seem to find it unbearable. The compensations for men seem to leave them freer for creative activity than the compensations (humiliating at best) offered women in place of real power. Radical men want power, but they have a social conscience, so they must establish a new order of sorts. Yet they do not appear to be operating as leaders in a revolutionary effort (like Lenin, Mao, Fidel) or as theorists and cultural workers teaching the people (like Fanon, Sartre, Marcuse), but rather as politicians. They so accept their right to power that they do not even think it is a problem. No one of the master class has escaped the damage done to him in a caste society. Every White man in this country has been raised with a false sense

of power.

Men run the Movement. There is not much possibility that the situation will change automatically. Masters do not relinquish power. It is wrested from them. Radical men show no inclination to change their attitudes toward women, the family, the use of the economy (what else is there except rhetoric -- a politician's only tool?). These men transmit ideology for the radical movement. It is essential to know how they structure reality, if they are to retain positions of authority as teachers and leaders. If they consider themselves cultural workers in the service of the revolution (the people), would they not seek self-criticism, correct thinking? Would they not seek knowledge from the oppressed, rather than authoritatively directing their 'liberation'?

Women are now formulating ideology for a female liberation movement, and we have our own ideas and tactics for building a revolutionary base which we think will be more effective than the present ideology of the movement. The SDS resolution assumes that the ideal model of humanity is the man (the radical man, of course), and that women must be allowed to participate on an equal basis, but on masculine terms. We do not agree. In Female Liberation meetings, much of the meeting is spent in reminding ourselves to stop 'acting like men'. All of us seem to be infected with the competitive-aggressive structure to some extent, but the point is that we do not like it -- in ourselves or in men. We consider such behavior alien to what we are trying to do, and become. Nor do we like the identity men have given us -- femininity. We see that we must begin creating the new person -- in ourselves, and not by breeding heirs. We want men and women to reject their programmed roles, and question every single aspect of this society, their role in it, and their behavior.

The first question from a male radical to a woman threatening liberation is: 'What about sex?' This seems strange. Apparently, women can 'do their thing' as long as they don't cut off the sex supply which is the major use radical men have for women (like politicians). I answer such a question by saying that it is not an important question -- that women should, of course, have control of their own bodies, and never feel they must submit to sexual relations simply because they fear they might appear frigid or lose a friendship with a man. The response from the man is almost always that my attitude is repressive. It seems clear that the 'sex problem' is the man's problem, and he will have to work with it. Women have been accepting the responsibility for it for far too long. Females should be talking about political strategy, not sex. Men should be experiencing a little psychotherapy, group therapy and T-groups to straighten out their minds.

III.

The female liberation movement will undoubtedly continue to develop at many levels to meet the varying situations and needs of women. Groups have formed spontaneously throughout the society. The direction so far in these groups has been educational and analytical. We all seem to feel a need for new analysis, ideology, because little of traditional analysis relates to the timeless situation of woman. Our most accurate ideologists have been Socialists and Communists, but Marx and Engels are consistently used against us by male radicals, to the point that many feminists have rejected Marxist analysis completely. Though no man has ever completely overcome his mystification of women, and his need for an alter-ego, Marx, Engels, Bakunin, J. S. Mill, Lenin, and Mao have analyzed the situation of the female in history accurately.

Though female liberation is the most advanced revolutionary thought available to us at this point in history, we should not fight on an exclusive, narrow front. Ultimately, we want to destroy the three pillars of class and caste society -- the family, private property, and the state --- and their attendant evils --- corporate capitalism, imperialism, war, racism, sexism, annihilation of the balance of nature. By exposing attendant evils, as SDS does so well with racism, imperialism, war, and lately sexism, the nature of the system is revealed, but we do not begin to annihilate it. We must attack the pillars of the class system directly, as well as the attendant evils. They are so interrelated (private property, the family and the state) that an attack upon one should be an attack upon the other, but the family is often left free of attack because it is such a convenient unit for the very people who are attacking the system. But it is also basic to the continuance of the system. We should question whether we have truly attacked private property and the state, or are we still capitalists, trying to make a niche for ourselves?

The state and private property are being attacked from many sides. The struggle against American imperialism in process throughout the world is a battle against the State and private property (the claim of American corpora-

tions to the people's resources). Within each of these national liberation wars, a female liberation movement will emerge and radically reorient and radicalize the movement toward communism. It is vital that a Southern separatist movement (and other regional and cultural separatist movements) take form. The South, as a colony, can be mobilized against the State with a united front of women and poor Black and White men. The disintegration of the national structure is the key to the political revolutionary movement in North America, a fact that Northern radicals find hard to swallow since they identify with the nation and not with any colony. If they look they will find that they, too, are part of a colony, and must work from there (i.e. New England, Midwest, Jewish, Irish, Greek, etc.).

If men are to become truly revolutionary, though, they, too, must fight the institution of the family and not 'leave it to the women' as the family is now left. Everyone must fight for the end of caste, not just women.

There is only one way to overcome the enormous propaganda influence of the media and political liars which program the people: We must go directly to the people and teach them to think for themselves within a revolutionary framework. To do that we must enter communities, not use the political platform or the media. The people do not believe anything they hear through those organs; the programming is subtle and we can not hope to overcome it through the existing media or to replace the media. The key area of influence will be through the educational system, and through the cell organizations that are being formed by women. First organizers must be taught. It would seem that the American school teacher is a committed enough teacher to be convinced of the need for revolution. There is little tendency to Fascism among them; perhaps this is due in part to the fact that so many teachers are women, a unique historical situation. We should attempt to organize these women as organizers for female liberation.

We must avoid one major error of previous organizers. In an effort to 'win' people over to the movement (win a vote?), organizers often imitate the style of life of those they are organizing. This is patronizing and unliberating and cruel. People who are oppressed want new alternatives, and want to learn. They do not want to be further entrenched in their oppressive style of life. We must be generous with our knowledge, and not underestimate the desire for freedom on the part of the oppressed, and not mistake ignorance for desire. California is proof that people can radically alter their mores and style of life in a short time, and indeed want to do so. If we do not open doors to people, they will find 'liberation' through the oppressive structure -- through the California illusions of liberation.

IV.

Many radicals (male and female) seem to think that female liberation will be divisive, because women will be fighting the agents of their oppression -- men. Such a thought reveals the prejudice against women. That is, men make revolutions; women help. And if men have pressures on them from women, their power as fighters is diminished. I fail to see how women fighting the authoritarian power-hunger in men can but greatly aid the revolution.

There is a strong fascist trend developing among American men and I can imagine that somewhere even there is a young man developing into a Hitler. Such a force of Fascism could spell doom to a revolutionary effort by recreating a situation of genocide similar to Nazi Germany. Most of us would quickly be put away. Fascism is a man's game, not very appealing to women (Hitler had to brainwash the women to be earth mothers and breed, offering them freedom from men -- a budding woman power movement perverted to womb power). I do not think men can be trusted as long as they hold the kind of personal and social power they do, and they will hold it until it is taken from them, when women refuse to continue the game.

Finally, I want to explain the term 'female liberation' so that its full revolutionary meaning is grasped. I use the term 'female' rather than 'woman' to denote a principle. When I say female liberation, I mean the liberation of the female principle in all human beings -- the worldview which is maternal, materialist, and peaceful (non-competitive). I do not suggest that all women exhibit these qualities, though many do; certainly some men do, but not many. Women are programmed for a role - motherhood - which does allow the female principle to take ascendancy over the male principle. The position of the women in relation to the man in America is analogous to the position of the Black in relation to the White man or bossman. One must not romanticize that position, but it is clear that the excluded are less corrupt, therefore the potential leadership of the revolution.