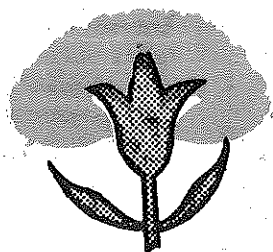


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COMMUNISM AND THE EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN



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30p

**THE COMMUNIST
PARTY OF IRELAND**

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COMMUNISM AND THE EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN

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1. INTRODUCTION

Women today are different. Events of the 20th century have brought us prospects that would have been unimaginable to our ancestors. The October Revolution heralded the beginning of a new era for women, for the construction of socialism has provided, for the first time in history, the material basis for the full emancipation of women. And it is not only in the socialist countries that things have changed. The contemporary women's liberation movement in the capitalist countries and the liberation movements in former colonies have brought about an immense ferment that has led women to ask the deepest and most searching questions about their lives. From this there can be no turning back. The problem is that there is considerable confusion about the way forward. Particularly in the developed capitalist countries, there exists great divergence of views concerning the source of the problem as well as its solution.

The purpose of this pamphlet is to discuss what exactly constitutes a communist approach to the women's question. This involves outlining the problem and showing the relationship between the oppression of women and capitalism. It is also necessary to assess the impact that has been made by the women's liberation movement and to analyse the ideas that have come to the fore with the emergence of this movement. In drawing the contrast between a communist and a petty bourgeois approach to the women's question, there must be a discussion of what light has been shed on this question by Marxist theory as well as what lessons are to be learned from Marxist practice. Above all, there must be presented the story of what socialism has meant for women in the socialist countries to date as well as ideas about what it should mean for women in socialist Ireland.

The basic argument of the pamphlet is this: (1) the source of the oppression of women lies in the sexual division of labour inherent in class society which confines large numbers of women to isolation of the private work of the private home and which results in their alienation from the realm of collective effort; and (2) the

solution to the problem is socialism as it provides the material basis for the full participation of women in social production and therefore in the decision-making processes at every level of society.

DEEPER THAN JUST REFORM

Although we, as Communists, intend to play our part in struggle for reforms on such issues as equal pay, contraception and divorce, we insist that it is vital to look deeper. We believe that it is only a socialist revolution that is capable of destroying totally the foundations of the exploiting society that has been the source of such immense suffering to women and of rebuilding society on altogether new foundations. We believe that it is only communism which is capable of bringing women's emancipation to fruition, releasing the full potential of creative energy from all human beings, reconciling them with nature and with labour.

What distinguishes the communist position from others is the assertion that labour is essential to liberation. We are often accused of having an economist approach to the women's question. It is said that we reduce everything to the level of crude economics, that we simply

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want to send women out to work and think that that will solve all problems. But this is a caricature of our position. We simply say that all efforts to achieve the liberation of women without providing the material basis for it are doomed to frustration and failure. Acknowledging the primacy of economics does not make us economic reductionists. We are only insisting that we build upon a firm foundation and not waste our time with sand castles that will be washed again into the sea.

It is only that class that controls the economy at present that wants to distract attention from the realm of economics. The class that rules claims that the source of liberation is deeper and more profound. Material conditions are supposedly irrelevant to the lonely quest of the bourgeois for self-discovery and self-assertion. The higher values which they discover with the help of their psycho-analysts or consciousness-raising groups supposedly have nothing to do with superficial things like economics, with surplus value, with a parasitic few living off the backs of the working masses, nothing to do with nasty things like class struggle. They are always talking about freedom - vague, abstract freedom. Will is all.

But the fact that we must look full in the face is this: control of the productive process is the condition of freedom. To monopolise the social product is to monopolise such freedom as society has produced. And so the basic question is: which class rules? This is why the primary goal of Communists is the liberation of the class that works. The socialist revolution opens the productive process to women, allows them to take their rightful place in the class that works and therefore to participate fully in the freedom made possible through control of the social product.

Nevertheless we take our stand against economism. An approach to the women's question which reduces all to the level of prices and wages borders on being reactionary as it limits a woman to her role as consumer and low-

grade worker. The sexual stereotyping that is rooted in the sexual division of labour has involved deep-rooted psychological damage to women. It is a phenomenon that needs to be analysed in its own terms and to be specifically combatted even after the productive relations which gave rise to it are displaced. We do not simply want to send women out to work. We want to restructure society in such a way that women will blossom in every way imaginable. We oppose economism because it is contemptuous of the residual but far-reaching potential in women. It is obviously not enough for women to participate in production in any way at all. The point is that women must have the educational and social opportunities to participate in production and in the whole social fabric stemming from it in a way that is commensurate with their abilities and compatible with their interests.

2. WOMEN UNDER CAPITALISM

The Contradictions of Advanced Capitalism

The balance of forces in today's world provides us with a situation unique in history. With capitalism and socialism existing side by side, it is possible to see what is at stake for women in the sharpest possible relief. While socialism has brought women limitless possibilities, capitalism, in stark contrast, has circumscribed us at every turn.

At first it might not be apparent what is the connection between capitalism and the oppression of women. After all it would seem that the development of capitalism has generated the industrial wealth necessary to provide the material basis for the emancipation of women. Moreover, the increasing rationalisation of productive forces has created the need for a more educated work-force and has put pressure on the irrational sexual division of labour that is so wasteful of human resources. Never before have women been so highly educated. Never have so many women been at work - and at work in many areas that were traditional male preserves.

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Why then are women not liberated in the advanced capitalist countries? The answer is that the persistence of the profit motive which is the basis of capitalism makes it impossible for the rationalisation of labour to be carried through. Capitalism, therefore, maintains a primitive form of domestic economy side by side with and in contradiction to its advanced form of industrial economy.

UNSTABILITY OF CAPITALISM

There are several reasons for this. First, capitalism is inherently unstable and so it is incapable of guaranteeing the full and secure employment of its able-bodied workforce, which particularly affects its female workforce. Capitalism, by its very nature, is subject to booms and slumps. Therefore it must have a reserve labour force to come and go with the ups and downs of its economic fluctuations. Second, capitalism needs to maintain and reproduce the labour force. But the services necessary for this do not generate profit and so they must be performed privately. So women must stay at home.

The oppression of women is therefore necessary to the survival of capitalism; because of its need for a reserve labour force and because of its need for privatised domestic labour. The sexual division of labour makes it possible for women to be exploitable in exactly this way and to fulfill precisely these functions. The kinds of changes necessary to achieve the full integration of women into the productive process would be so far-reaching as to be too unprofitable for a capitalist economy to structurally accommodate. Such changes can only be made within a restructured economy, an economy in which the means of production are not privately owned and so not subject to the profit motive. Thus capitalism generates an irresolvable contradiction: the contradiction between the rationalisation of productive forces and the persistence of the profit motive which puts brakes on this process and demands the exploitation of women. The working lives of women as

well as the domestic lives remain subject to all the anarchy of capitalist production.

This is not to say that democratic advance is not possible under capitalism. Formal equality under the law can be fought for and won. Women can achieve the reforms necessary to control contraception, to further their education, to receive equal pay and equal social welfare benefits, and to improve their social position generally. The full equality of the full female population is a structural impossibility in a capitalist economy.

THE SITUATION IN IRELAND

There is much that has been won elsewhere that has yet to be won in Ireland. Because of our economic under-development, Irish women have a longer way to go than do women in advanced capitalist countries. Because the scientific and technological revolution has not developed as far and because the productive forces have not been rationalised to the same degree, women in Ireland suffer far more from the anarchy of capitalist production.

In Ireland, thousands upon thousands of women are isolated in the private work of the private home, sometimes going a whole day never having a conversation with any person over three. Their spirit and vitality begin to drain away as they become increasingly immersed in a routine of trivial, tedious, soul-destroying work. The point is reached where there is little left to talk about aside from the price of butter, the best cream for eradicating nappy rash or the state of the neighbour's garden. The long winter of coping with bored and high-spirited pre-school children indoors (when they should be in state-run playschools) has led many a young mother to valium. When the children are finally reared, women are left without a sense of purpose and, in some cases, spend the rest of their lives going in and out of mental institutions.

When economic necessity forces married women to go out to work and the economic

situation allows it, they usually have no choice but to work in ghettos of low-pay industries where equal pay, if and when it comes into effect in this country at all, does not apply to them, even to put them on a par with the lowest of low-paid male workers. Here they are mercilessly manipulated, hired and fired at will, with very little protection owing to the low degree of unionisation among women, (only about 40% of all women workers in the 26 Counties are organised in trade unions) and often weak unions when they are unionised. The words of James Connolly are as true today as ever they were: *"The worker is the slave of capitalist society, the female worker is the slave of that slave."*

As if all this were not bad enough, now married women are under attack for the fact that they work at all. They, of all people, are being blamed for the level of male unemployment and for the plight of school-leavers. As a matter of fact, of the total workforce in the 26 Counties, only 3.5% are married women. This is one of the lowest rates in Europe. This attitude towards women's work is given structural support by the Irish state in various ways.

First, there are differences in entitlement to social welfare benefit between men and women. A married woman who is a mother is deemed unavailable for work. A fully qualified married woman who does manage to get work and then becomes unemployed is entitled to only 26 weeks unemployment benefit, whereas a married man so qualified is entitled to 65 weeks. A married woman's disability/unemployment full benefit rate is 13% lower than a man's. Her contribution is only 1.2% lower. Particularly objectionable is the fact that female school-leavers cannot claim unemployment assistance while male school-leavers can. Then there is the extraordinarily high rate of taxation of married women. As well as this there is the abysmal lack of such necessities as nursery and creche facilities and adequate retraining facilities. All of this constitutes a strong and very determined attack on a woman's right to work. The

4 right to work is a basic right that must be defended for all Irish citizens, male or female, married or unmarried.

UNEQUAL CONDITIONS

Even when, with all of this counting against them, women do manage to work, they work under the most unequal conditions - unequal pay, unequal responsibility, unequal opportunity for promotion. This is true, both North and South. Then there are job bars to women. It is virtually impossible for women to become apprentices in engineering trades and in most crafts. But it is more than explicit job bars that close many areas to women: women are geared from the very beginning to mentally close off the very idea of their entry into the skilled labour force and into the professions. It is extraordinarily incongruous that it is considered feminine to carry a bale of turf and three children at the same time or to sweat heavily the whole day through at a factory bench, but unfeminine to be an engineer, a surveyor or an airline pilot.

The foundations of all this are laid primarily in the education system. The majority of girls are educated in single-sex schools, the majority of these being controlled by female religious orders. The submission made by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions to the Commission on the Status of Women in 1970 specifically condemns single-sex schooling for the fact that male and female enter employment on unequal terms. The ICTU pointed out that nuns tend to discourage "career-mindedness" in girls and to encourage a narrowly traditional view of women's role in society. Girls educated in religious single-sex schools are more likely than those in co-educational schools to gear themselves to thing of their future solely in terms of fulfilling the role of wife and mother. Such schools result in an unhealthy separation of boys and girls during crucially formative years, which makes them inclined during adolescence to see members of the opposite sex too exclusively in

terms of potential sexual partners rather than as persons engaged in the same range of day to day activities as themselves. Thankfully there is a growing demand for comprehensive schools from Irish parents. However during his term as Minister for Education Mr. Burke proved far more sensitive to pressure from religious orders than from parents.

It is not only in the field of education that the particular influence of the Catholic Church in the Irish state has done such damage. Because contraception and divorce are prohibited by Catholic dogma, all citizens of this state whether they are Catholic or not, are denied the right to control conception and the right to obtain a divorce in the case of the irretrievable breakdown of a marital relationship. These are fundamental human rights and they are rights that all Irish citizens should be free to exercise with dignity. Women should be free to plan their families without pretending that the pill is being taken to regulate their menstrual cycle. Married men and women should be free to go their own ways and build again without having to prove that one or the other was mentally incompetent or deceitful at the time of marriage. The proposed nullity reform is the most recent reflection of the Government's cowardice in dealing with these issues.

INEQUALITY UNDER THE LAW

There are still further legal problems that create havoc in women's lives. The degree of inequity under the law in the 26 Counties is really quite staggering. The major problem is the legal status of married women. Upon marriage a woman enters into a state of civil death. Her domicile is automatically that of her husband. She must obtain his permission to make various kinds of financial transactions and even to have a gynaecological operation. He is not obliged to reveal to her his income. She, however, is obliged to reveal hers to him. She pays tax on her income, yet her husband is entitled to her rebates. In fact, for tax

5 purposes, a married woman has no status except as a tax-payer's wife! The father is the sole guardian of the children and has the sole right to decide upon their education, religion and domicile. He is the holder of the family's medical card. A man may desert his wife for as long as he chooses and on return be entitled to resumption of all marital and parental rights. However, if a woman deserts her husband she immediately forfeits all her rights, including access to her children or to the marital home.

WOMEN IN THE NORTH

Women in the North of Ireland do not suffer to the same degree from such gross legal inequalities or from such abysmally low wages and social welfare benefits. But it is only a matter of degree. Women in the North are still fighting for equal opportunities in education and in employment, as well as for full equality under the law. However the whole range of economic, social and legal matters affecting women have to a large extent been overshadowed in the climate of overwhelming political repression that has prevailed in the North. But this has left its own distinctive mark on the lives of Northern women. During the troubles, many women broke away from their traditional roles in the home and came out into the streets to play a leading role in the mass movement for civil rights. With the coming of Internment, the least show of protest put men behind the wire of Long Kesh, and so women played a major part in forming civil rights street committees, organising public meetings and carrying through the rent and rates strike. Male and female roles were reversed, and young women saw their male friends home in the hope that it would keep them from being 'lifted'. Later women themselves were interned, but this did not deter them from continuing to organise against Internment.

The Role of Sexual Stereotypes

From the very beginning females are channelled in a different direction from males.

Little girls are given dolls. Little boys are given trains and guns. When a little girl is asked what she wants to be when she grows up, she usually answers "a mother". Everyone smiles contentedly. If a little boy is asked and he responds "a father", everyone nervously asks "oh yes, but what else?" No one ever asks the little girl "what else"? Her upbringing is geared in such a way that her whole world comes to be confined to concern for the beauty of her body, the seduction of men, the rearing of children and the care of the private home. The Swedish Government has taken steps to ban school-books which teach young children to differentiate between male and female roles. There is no reason why we should not demand that the Irish Government do the same.

In a thousand subtle and overt ways the message comes across to a young girl. In a song popular in the 60s:

*"A man without love is only half a man,
But a woman is nothing at all."*

Or in the poet Byron's words:

*"Man's love is of his life a thing apart,
'Tis woman's whole existence."*

Or to quote Angela McNamara:

"Marriage and home-making are the most absorbing part of a woman's life, but for a man it is only half his life. The other equally important part is success in his job and fulfillment of his ambitions".

Freudian psychology in its more popularised form has done untold damage. Nonsense about penis envy and castration complexes results in a quite indefensible amount of time and energy being drained in protecting that most precious of all treasures: the male ego. It is most definitely time and energy that could be better spent and it is inevitably at the expense of a woman's own sense of identity which is thought to be of such negligible value. Marriage is supposed to be a woman's ultimate goal in life. Everything else is superfluous. But marriage is a dead-end for women in a way that it never is for a man. Her change of name is symbolic of the way

6 she comes to life off someone else's identity instead of developing her own. It is a relationship that is so proprietary, so exclusive and so all-defining of her being that she is effectively cut off from a wider world in which all sorts of healthy and warm human relationships are possible and in which there is greater scope for her creative energies.

An image of woman as a passive, trivial and narcissistic being is subtly interwoven with a romantic glorification of Woman as an intuitive, elusive and mysterious creature. When real flesh and blood women are constantly confronted with the Eternal Feminine, neurosis often sets in. Most women shape themselves in accordance with the images projected onto them by their society and so the sexual stereotype becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. What is considered to be the nature of women is actually something quite artificial. It is the result of forced repression in some areas and unnatural stimulation in others. We grow up believing there are psychological differences growing out of the biological differences between men and women: that men are more rational while women are more emotional, that men are active and aggressive while women are submissive and supportive, etc. But it need not be so.

Women must be free to be intelligent, assertive and angry. Men must be free to be sensitive, warm and patient. We all must be free to be more rational and more emotional at the same time, ie to be whole. Women must take their place in the world of labour, the world of politics, the world of culture. Men must take up their responsibilities in the home and learn more closely the joy of nurturing their offspring. There is no necessary connection between menstruation and scrubbing floors. There is no reason why the partner who gives birth and breast-feeds must for the rest of her life cook the meals and clear up after.

Sexuality will not be downgraded as we rid ourselves of sexual stereotypes, as both women and men become fully emancipated. On the contrary, it will be enhanced with the all round development of the human personality. Physical intimacy is greatly intensified by intellectual and emotional intimacy. Sexuality degenerates as it is disconnected from the rest of life. In capitalist society, sexuality tends to be a dissipating factor. In communist society, it will be an energising force, a binding force. And it is not only relationships between men and women that will be transformed. Relationships between women will be freed from the tension and suspicion that now infect them. Trained as women are to size up all other women as rivals for the attention of men, even when there is no specific man involved, there are great barriers standing in the way of developing warm and close relationships with other women. These must be broken down.

8. THE WOMEN'S LIBERATION MOVEMENT

Indeed such barriers are breaking down. Shoulder to shoulder, women are again on the move, this time making far deeper and more searching criticisms of the existing order than did their Suffragette predecessors. The impact of the contemporary women's liberation movement has been extraordinarily powerful and far-reaching. It has presented a radical challenge to the very idea of the sexual division of labour. It has analysed the psychology of sexual discrimination and uncovered the more subtle forms of women's oppression as well as protesting vigorously against its more obvious forms.

It is ironic that this movement arose at the time that it did, ie in the late sixties. The new upsurge came at a time when women were better off than they ever were before. Never were so many women working. Never were so many women receiving higher education. Never were so many new areas of activity being penetrated by women. And yet, never were women so dissatisfied with their lot. This is because it is

7 not those who are most ground down who rebel. It is those who have begun to rise up. With the growth of knowledge and with the widening of horizons, new possibilities are discerned, the injustices become more apparent and dissatisfaction increases. Women today are riding a wave of higher expectations. And quite rightly so.

The problem however is that the movement is very much split when it comes to the deeper questions that have been raised by this emerging consciousness. Different elements put forward very different analyses of what is the source of the problem and therefore very different visions of what is the way forward. Many of these ideas, however sincere and well-intentioned, are in fact dangerous ideas, for they divert the movement along unproductive paths. These are ideas that abstract the women's question from the general social question. This myopia needs to be overcome if we are to understand the women's question in a proper perspective.

The primary question on which the movement is divided is: is sex or class the primary contradiction? Shulamith Firestone in The Dialectic of Sex², claiming to be superceding Engels, attempts "to develop a materialist view of history based on sex itself." The argument is that women were the first class and that sexual oppression is the primary form of oppression on which all other forms are based. Proceeding along the same lines, Kate Millet in Sexual Politics³ sees economic power as a consequence of psychological domination. She regards the oppression of women as the cause of all other forms of oppression, so that once it disappears so will class oppression, racial oppression etc. But this is to stand matters on their head. It is class oppression which is primary. Historically, it is the development of productive forces resulting in the emergence of private property which gave rise to the subjugation of women as well as the subjugation of most men. Male domination rests on the economic dependence of all other members of the

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family on the father. It is the man's role as provider in class society which makes the exploitation of women possible. Male domination can therefore only be overthrown by overthrowing the mode of production on which it is based.

A variation on this is that sexual oppression and class oppression exist side by side and are of equal weight. But this not only blinds us to the historical process in which one arose out of the other, but it glosses over class differences in a most naive way. It is simplistic to assert that all women are sisters and should unite regardless of class and to believe that Jacqueline Kennedy and her maid are both in it together. For as an American woman, Marlene Sixon, pointed out: the likes of Gloria Steinham may become a general or a corporation vice-president, but the factory girl remains a factory girl.⁴ Even though we work in broad organisations and unite with all progressive elements who will work with us to achieve certain goals, our class consciousness must never be suspended.

RADICAL FEMINISM

The radical feminist position often involves the further assertion that men are the enemy. This position, in some of its more extreme forms, calls for the subjugation of men to some new form of matriarchy. Some even border on calling for the extinction of men, speculating on how scientific progress could facilitate lesbian conception. The more common form it takes is castigating women who are members of organisations of the left as being 'male-identified'. This confuses men's role as the instruments of exploitation with the source of exploitation which is a social system rather than a sex. It is not men as such, but male supremacy, that must be fought.

Another problem with the radical feminist tendency is the assumption that women must first solve their own psychological problems in the endless introversion of consciousness-raising

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sessions before looking for political solutions. This takes women further from seeing the source of their problems and the way to a solution. It effectively drains off the potential for militancy. Mary Maher, in an *Irish Times* article in November 1972, reported on a women's conference in London with women from all over the world in attendance. She quoted an Englishwoman coming to the microphone and saying: "I would like to say that I felt ashamed listening to our Australian auster talk of babies starving to death, when so many of us seem to think that women's liberation is about the number of orgasms you can have."⁵

There is also among these elements a glorification of spontaneity and dismissal of the need for proper leadership. And so, instead of leaders being democratically elected, spokesmen acceptable to the tastes of the bourgeoisie are thrown up by the mass media, a highly undemocratic procedure. This policy has brought confusion, fragmentation and chaos to the movement.

Still another feature of the radical feminist position is a tendency to romanticise homosexuality. It is one thing to demand civil rights for homosexuals, but it is quite another to talk about "revolutionary homosexuality" as does Sheila Rowbotham, a British Trotskyist-feminist, or to go on about the "gay left" as does *Red Rag*, a journal published by so-called Marxist women in Britain. There is nothing revolutionary about homosexuality. We should take care about jumping onto the bandwagon of "gay liberation". We still have much to learn regarding the source of homosexuality, but it is reasonable to suppose that the artificiality, the unnatural stimulation of some qualities and the repression of others, that is necessary to maintain the sexual division of labour in class society has done damage to all of us and a specific kind of damage in the case of homosexuals. But such damage is to be understood and overcome and not glorified as if it were liberation itself. It is the task of progressive forces to build the new man and the new woman,

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but the new man is not the drag queen and the new woman is not the butch. It is sheer fantasy to imagine otherwise.

The ideological confusion underlying the radical feminist position often results in the formulation of demands which are actually reactionary. *Banshee*, the journal of Irishwomen United, recently published an article demanding wages for housework.⁶ Mariarosa Della Costa and Selma Jones have also been prominent in putting forward this demand. The argument is that housework is an unrecognised form of social labour as it services and reproduces the proletariat. Withholding domestic labour is advocated as a central tactic. Not only would such a tactic involve lashing out at those who least deserve it, ie workers and dependent children, but it would dissipate the energy of women themselves in a totally unproductive way. The work of the housewife is a form of labour that is no longer socially necessary as the means for eliminating it now exist. What we must demand is the socialisation of domestic work and the housewife's right to work. Wages for housework would intensify the oppression of women by perpetuating their isolation in the private work of the private home. It would weaken the case for socialisation of domestic work and the struggle for the full employment of the female workforce.

It is obvious that the road to women's liberation is a hazardous one. It is full of pitfalls and dead-ends. Sexual stereotyping has done great damage to women. When we come to realise this, we often feel very badly burned and very bitter. It should not be surprising to anyone if we sometimes over-react. However, we should be careful not to over-react in such a way that we adopt attitudes and patterns of behaviour that are as unhealthy as those we have left behind.

One such trap is an exaggerated stress on autonomy. The very latest thing is 'autonomous self-development' which includes being

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'sexually autonomous' as well. Women are told that penetration is phallic colonialism, that they should not see sexuality in terms of relationships, that they should simply concentrate on what parts of their bodies they enjoy and do it themselves - this is called the 'sexual politics of the future'. This leads to the most extreme individualism and neurosis. It takes a person further and further away from the true source of creative personality. It is not so much independence we should want as more creative patterns of interdependence. Women do need a sharper sense of their own identity, but this cannot be developed in isolation. We are constituted by our relations. The kind of relationships we enter into, the pattern of our response to social forces, determine what we are. We find our own identity through sharpening our vision within the field of social interactions and not by withdrawing from it.

"FEMINIST PURITANISM"

Another blind alley is what might be called 'feminist puritanism'. It is a tendency to see sexism everywhere. There are in our songs and stories, and above all in our day to day conversations, healthy and natural expressions of sexual stirring in ourselves, subtle ways of reaching out to one another, that are not sexist. There are many ways in which our sexuality colours our personalities and our relationships with others that cannot be dismissed as sexist. Sexuality is a far more complex and pervasive force than is often recognised. It is not a peripheral activity, but a force that pulses through the whole fabric of our experience and is thoroughly interwoven with other forces. It is highly diffuse and it is more than what we occasionally do in bed.

The women's movement has come a long way. At first there was great excitement and unanimity. But as the movement was pressed to define itself further, different groups came up with different answers and so a period of fragmentation followed. By 1971 in the USA a clearly defined right wing had emerged. This was the period of 'trashing'.

All who refused to engage in the excesses of man-hating reactionary separatism, lesbian vanguardism, and the most virulent anti-communism were relentlessly hounded and 'trashed'. Because the left was not united, and some so-called left groups allied themselves with the right, it was the right wing that won. This sowed the seeds for the effective disintegration of the women's liberation movement. At this time in most major cities even the most minimal functioning of the women's centres became impossible. The most minute decisions provoked the most gigantic rows. The most vicious forms of intrigue and slander were rampant. At a national women's conference participants arrived for registration and were asked to supply their name, address, organisation and whether they were 'gay' or 'straight'. That conference degenerated into what was virtually a gay orgy. It was generally a time of chaos and it seemed that the movement was in ruins.

THE IRISH MOVEMENT

The movement only surfaced in Ireland in 1970. The Founder's Group, consisting mainly of journalists and various political activists, set in motion the Irish Women's Liberation Movement. Initially it elicited a degree of support that surprised even its founders. A massive meeting in the Mansion House in April 1971 testified to the high level of consciousness of a significant section of Irish women on the women's question. However those who had organised the meeting didn't really know where to go with it and the enthusiasm that had been aroused was largely dissipated. One reason for this was that certain elements in the Irish movement consciously modelled themselves on the prevailing element in the American movement. This brought with it the feminist resistance to efficient organisational forms and to an elected leadership, which made it difficult to channel the movement effectively. Nevertheless the Fownes Street operation continued, but there were constant rows and eventually those who were politically active on the left were made to feel distinctly unwelcome by those who came to predominate.

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Many women fell away, in America, in Ireland and elsewhere. However, they only fell away from the organisational forms of the women's movement, such as they were. Their consciousness and their commitment did not fall. What has followed has been a period of rethinking and regrouping. The women's movement has not seen its day.

IMPACT ON TRADE UNIONS

One of the most hopeful developments has been the degree to which its most progressive ideas have penetrated the trade union movement. Indeed there are signs of trade union women coming to effectively take leadership of the women's movement. In America, 1973 saw the emergence of the Coalition of Labour Union Women which elicited massive rank and file support. Recently there has been formed a broader organisation, Women for Racial and Economic Equality, based in the Labour movement and affiliated to the Women's International Democratic Federation. In Ireland, there is the Women's Advisory Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions which has formulated a Women's Charter that Congress is now committed to implement. There is also the Trade Union Women's Forum, set up by active female trade unionists to educate women to participate fully in the trade union movement and to stimulate the organisation of the unorganised. In the North, the Women's Rights Movement, a broad coalition involving women trade unionists, students and civil rights activists, has drawn up the Women's Charter for Northern Ireland. The audience that packed the Mansion House in Dublin on International Women's Day 1976 showed the degree of really serious interest in the women's question that still exists and must be carried forward.

The years ahead demand clarity. We must shape our vision of the future with boldness but also with care. We must formulate an intelligent coherent strategy that builds on the successes that the women's movement has achieved and that counteracts the damage that is being done by strategies that lead women up blind alleys.

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Marxism provides the deeper answers to the deeper questions. It puts the women's question into perspective, for it opens to us the dynamics of the historical process within which it must ultimately all be sorted out.

The Contribution of Engels

Still the most comprehensive theoretical work on the women's question from a Marxist point of view is Friedrich Engels' The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State⁷. In this book, Engels sought to discover the historical roots of the oppression of women. His thesis was that the family in its present form, private property and the State are inextricably intertwined. They came into existence at the same time and for the same reasons, as a result of the development of the means of production. Likewise, they will disappear together as a result of the further development of the means of production which will render them obsolete. His point was that the oppression of women is rooted in private ownership of the means of social production.

In the course of time, it became possible for men to appropriate and accumulate the surplus that arose in the area of production they were responsible for. Monogamy in its present form arose as a result of the desire of men to ensure undisputed paternity so that their accumulated surplus could be passed on to their heirs. Historically, monogamy is based on male supremacy, on the world-historic defeat of the female sex.

However, the particular oppression experienced by women as a result was not so much that they were limited to one partner in their sexual relations. Rather it came from the fact that a woman became the property of her husband, not much different from his slaves or his cattle. The oppression of women was rooted, not so much in the fact that the work she performed was largely domestic, but in the fact that a woman performed her domestic tasks as a private service to the men who had appropriated her rather than as a public service to the community.

We shall not find the answers in how-to-do-it articles on female masturbation or in do-it-yourself gynaecology classes. We shall not find our liberation in an endless succession of clitoral orgasms or in women's conferences turned into gay orgies. We should instead dig our heels into the progressive movements of this era and make whatever demands are necessary to ensure that we play our full part in fighting for the future. We cannot afford to isolate ourselves.

THE POSITIVE ASPECTS

This is not to say that there is no place for a distinctive women's liberation movement. It has been a great achievement for women to have organised themselves in this way. The movement has made fantastic gains in raising the consciousness of millions of women to a new awareness of their special problems as women. In its overall impact it has been a progressive movement. Its emergence amounts to a historic event of immense worldwide importance. Its reverberations have been felt everywhere and have reawakened both men and women everywhere to a consciousness of the injustice of women's position and the necessity to set things right. These achievements overshadow all of its limitations and the battle as to who should provide leadership to this movement is not yet over. All the more reason then not to gloss over its weaknesses, especially over the petty-bourgeois character of its dominant ideology at the moment.

Our liberation will be won in a complex and painful process, in a protracted struggle over a period of many years. We must be courageous enough to face such a process and not try to short-circuit it with easy answers. We must have great vision and great stamina if we are going to win the respect of our daughters.

4. MARXISM AND THE WOMEN'S QUESTION

Where then does Marxism come into this process?

The problem was that women were forced out of public production and therefore deprived of their independent economic, social and political existence. Engels therefore concluded that the oppression of women could be ended only by ending their isolation within the private work of the family and by re-introducing women into the sphere of social production. This means that the individual family must no longer function as the basic economic unit of society. It means that private domestic economy must be replaced by large-scale social economy. It means that domestic work must be socialised. Engels saw the impending working class revolution as the force that would destroy the economic foundations of monogamy. By transforming the greatest part of inheritable wealth, the means of production, into social property, all anxiety over inheritance is reduced to a minimum.

The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State is still surprisingly contemporary, various feminist attacks on it notwithstanding. The common line is that it is outdated, but it is never specified what research by what anthropologists has rendered which conclusions invalid. There have, of course, been developments which Engels did not anticipate, which we ourselves must take into account, such as the technology of contraception. However these factors do not invalidate Engels' basic position.

The Future of the Family

What then will become of the family? Engels' answer was: once the need to provide legitimate heirs is gone; once the economic basis of male domination is gone; once a woman plays her own role in social production and is no longer economically dependent on a man, then a new form of the family will emerge. He did not believe that the family was the cause of women's oppression or that the family must be abolished. He saw the family as an active force which advances from a lower form to a higher form as society advances from a lower to a higher condition. The bourgeois family will most certainly pass away when capitalism disappears. It will be replaced under

socialism by the socialist family. Indeed, it has been replaced by the socialist family which is emerging in those countries which have achieved socialism.

Just what is meant by the emergence of the socialist family? According to Engels, socialism meant there would be full freedom of marriage for the first time in history. He felt that a whole new situation would develop once neither partner would be dependent on the other for their material survival, once both partners assumed equal responsibility for their children, substantially assisted by the state in fulfilling this responsibility. Ultra-leftist elements assume that the family is essentially a bourgeois institution and that the survival of the family under socialism amounts to a betrayal of the revolution. The problem is that they fail to submit the family to historical analysis. It is only by blinding one's eyes to the historical process that one can so simplistically absolutise the bourgeois family and then proceed to condemn such a basic human institution to oblivion in the name of the revolution. Their attempts to construct a substitute here and now make a very sorry tale indeed, especially when it comes to the children who have been tragically disoriented in these experiments.

This still leaves open the question of the family under communism. The problem is that we can only see so far and no further. In any age it has only been possible to see ahead into the next age. The process of socialist construction is long and complex. As to what the communist future holds, we can only conjecture at present. Engels on this point said that his ideas were mainly of a negative character - i.e., they were limited mostly to what would vanish. The future, he said, would only be settled after a new generation had grown up, a generation who have never associated sex with any means of social power. He said that should the monogamous family in the distant future fail to answer the requirements of society it was impossible to predict the nature of its successor.

It would seem that most people will continue to want to live with the children they create and to be the primary nurturing force in their development. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to believe that social relations will be far freer and far richer than at present, once society as a whole takes upon itself the burdens that weigh so heavily on the family and once the soil is provided for the full flowering of the human personality.

5. WOMEN UNDER SOCIALISM

Criticism of our position is by no means limited to Marxist theory on the women's question. Radical feminists and Trotskyists are even more bitter in their attacks on socialist practice regarding women. A recent issue of *Banshee* in an article entitled "Feminism and Socialism" makes the assertion that in the socialist countries the oppression of women still continues.⁸ There is no factual evidence advanced to back up the assertion. Let us therefore look at the facts.

THE SOVIET UNION

In looking at the history of socialism and what it has meant for women, this pamphlet will concentrate primarily on the Soviet Union as the first socialist state. It is the state that has the longest history of socialist construction, the state that has led the way and forged a pathway into the future in achieving the material and moral emancipation of women. It is also the state this is the primary target of anti-Marxist propaganda.

Long before the revolution, radical theories of sexual and family relations were being discussed. The Young Russia proclamation of 1862 called for the abolition of the family and state responsibility for the care and education of children in order to give equality to women. As Marxists appeared on the scene, they took up the position put forward by Engels: that the emancipation of women meant restructuring society in such a way that women can return to socially productive labour. To make this

possible they advocated communal dining rooms, nurseries, laundries etc. They insisted that domestic services and the rearing of children should be a communal responsibility instead of weighing as a burden on the shoulders of the individual mother. They also took their stand against the dual standard of morality of 19th century bourgeois society.

THE OCTOBER REVOLUTION

This much was official party doctrine. After the October Revolution, steps were taken to implement it. From the very first days of Soviet power, Russian communists threw themselves, wholeheartedly and vigorously, into the task of building the new society, of which the emancipation of women was always an integral party. This amidst the most monumental difficulties, amidst the immense turmoil of civil war.

The first Soviet legislation set things immediately in motion. The decree of December 1917 on civil marriage and divorce set up a system of registration of marriage by specifically created Government organs. Henceforth only civil marriage was valid. Church marriage was declared to be void. It authorised divorce upon the request of either or both parties. The decree of 1918 was a detailed marriage code. It made provision for complete equality of the sexes in all marital relations as well as in the political and economic life of the country. It gave the same rights to so-called illegitimate children as to legitimate ones, ie it abolished the category of illegitimacy. The decree of 1920 made abortion legal when performed in hospital by a qualified doctor, but it stated (and this is rarely noted when dealing with the history of abortion legislation in the Soviet Union) that it was 'for so long as the moral survivals of the past and economic conditions of the present compel some women to resort to this operation.'⁹

Bolshevik policy on equality of the sexes was put into immediate practical effect during the years of war communism. The employment of

women in productive work and equal rights and responsibilities for women were necessities in a period of acute economic crisis and civil war. Acute food shortages, if nothing else, led to an extension of communal feeding. The multitude of homeless children, whose parents were killed in battle, imposed on the overburdened Soviet authorities the necessity of establishing children's homes.

In 1918, the first congress of working and peasant women was organised in Moscow. Although communications were still difficult and it was impossible to get in contact with certain areas, 1,000 delegates arrived instead of the expected 300. In 1919, at the initiative of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, sections for work with women were set up in offices and factories. They were schools of political education and were attended by hundreds of thousands of women. And in 1919, even while the very existence of the Soviet state was still in jeopardy, Lenin was calling for institutions such as communal dining rooms and creches that would free women from the necessity of privatised domestic labour. He said that such labour was petty and contained nothing that could further the development of women. In Central Asia, the twenties saw the birth of a movement known as *Khujama* (offensive). It was an offensive against feudal customs and prejudices. Women threw off their veils and burnt them on bonfires. Special centres were set up to teach women to read and write, to give them medical advice, and to train them to participate in production.

DEBATES OF THE 1920s

But some had further theories; notably Alexandra Kollontai, a member of the Bolshevik Central Committee from before the revolution, who argued that marriage was a function of bourgeois society, rendered necessary only by the importance attached to property relations. She believed that the family was simply a place of consumption, a means of preserving

bourgeois values after the revolution. She simply dismissed the upbringing of children as a problem. She spoke vaguely of "loving all children equally". What Kollontai argued was that the family was no longer necessary for child-rearing, because this would be taken over completely by the state. In her words: "In the future, the socially-conscious worker-mother will rise to the point where she no longer differentiates between yours and mine and remembers that there are henceforth only our children, the children of communist Russia".¹⁰

This, by the way, continues today. At a recent lecture in London entitled "The Family and Sexuality", children were never mentioned once. When questioned on this, the lecturer replied that too often discussions of the family get bogged down on the question of children. So she decided not to mention them! In the same circles, it is fashionable, whenever children are mentioned, to refer to "the children I live with", but never to "my children", or "your children".

But this approach is naive and misguided, and in some of its forms, callous. The special relation between a mother and her child, or between a father and his child, is one of the deepest and most vital things that many people ever experience in their whole lives. It is a mistake to project Communism as a force denying the legitimacy of that experience. For Communism is nothing so small or superficial. Certainly it will make a person more expansive, more socially conscious, more flexible, less rigid and less fearful. However this sort of expansiveness springs from the intensification of deep relationships between men and women and between parents and their children. It is healthy and natural that a mother should have a unique relation to the child she has felt stirring in her womb, to the child she endured so much for in labour. Moreover, experience shows that people tend to be more sensitive to other children through having children of their own.

These years were characterised by vociferous debate on these and other questions and by much experimentation along these lines as well. "Free love" was definitely in vogue, although in the case of Alexandra Kollontai, it wasn't even free love; it was simply free sex. Her message to women was: "Free yourself of the love of a man." She wrote a number of popular novels casting ridicule on all elements who restricted the absolutely uninhibited satisfaction of the sexual impulse, assuming it was the business of the state to take care of the consequences. For some, there was nothing in the realm of sexual relations that was ruled out. In some quarters, workers were actually encouraged to divorce their wives; women were encouraged to abandon their children - just to prove how revolutionary they were. A komsomol leaflet at the time put forth the idea that the satisfaction of the sexual impulse is everyone's private affair, just like the satisfaction of any other natural impulse. It held that it was an act of no more moral significance than drinking a glass of water.

These views, of course, never received official party endorsement. Lenin was particularly adamant against them. His strongest statements on these matters came in the Autumn of 1920 in the interview he gave to Clara Zetkin, the well-known German Communist. To quote from the interview:

"No doubt you have heard about the famous theory that in communist society satisfying sexual desire and the craving for love is as simple and trivial as drinking a glass of water. A section of our youth has gone mad, absolutely mad, over this glass of water theory. ... I consider this famous glass of water theory as completely un-Marxist and moreover as anti-social. It takes two people to make love, and a third person, a new life, is likely to come into being. This deed has a social complexion. Communism should not bring asceticism, but joy and strength. but the obtaining plethora of sex life yields neither joy nor strength. On the contrary it impairs them. This is bad, very bad, indeed in the epoch of revolution. Be neither monk nor Don Juan, but not anything in between either, like a German philistine. The revolution calls for the concentration and the rallying of every

nerve by the masses and by the individual. It does not tolerate orgiastic conditions as common among d'Anunzio's decadent heroes and heroines. Promiscuity in sexual matters is bourgeois. It is a sign of degeneration. The proletariat is a rising class. It does not need an intoxicant to stupefy or stimulate it. It should not and will not forget the filth, the filth and the barbarity of capitalism. It derives its strongest inspiration to fight from its class position, from the communist ideal. What it needs is clarity, clarity and more clarity. Therefore, I repeat, there must be no weakening, no waste, no dissipation of energy. Self-control and self-discipline are not slavery; not in the matters of love either."¹¹

But he had more than that to say. He went on to clarify the true nature of the struggle for the liberation of women. He emphasised the importance of taking the women's question and binding it firmly to the proletarian class struggle and to the revolution. He was also vehement in denouncing men, including communists, who did not think work among women to be very important. He said:

"Scratch the communist and you find a philistine."¹²

THE PERIOD OF SOCIALIST CONSTRUCTION

It was Lenin's views that won the day. It was the changed outlook associated with the ending of the civil war and the introduction of the New Economic Policy that brought strong reaction against these views. As Yaroslavsky, a prominent party official was forced to comment: "We don't want to be forever looking under our bedsheets."¹³ Especially under attack by 1924 was the casual attitude regarding sex and abortions. Many communists considered the number of abortions to be horrifying.

By 1936 stricter regulations regarding abortion were brought into effect, although it was always possible to submit a petition for abortion with cause. 1936 was also the year of reconstruction of the whole system of family legislation.

It was aimed at stabilising family relations and at ensuring the healthy upbringing of children at a time when multiple divorces were prevalent and the birth rate was declining. The 1936 legislation provided that both parties be required to appear at divorce proceedings and that fees be increased for second and third divorces. This was an effort to prevent marriages from being entered into hastily and dissolved hastily, especially in so far as children were involved. It also expanded the network of birth clinics, maternity homes, creches and kindergartens. It extended regulations protecting maternity. It gave state assistance to large families. The law of 1944 went further. The courts were to enquire into the motives for divorce and the possibilities for reconciliation. It returned to the concept in earlier Soviet legislation recognising only registered marriages. These years signalled an extremely negative attitude to casual affairs and state hostility to easy and casual divorce. However, at no time, was there any social stigma attached to divorce, especially when there was serious cause. It was at all times fairly straightforward with mutual consent.

It is important to be clear what the legislation of these years actually meant in light of the charge that the Soviet state took a retrogressive turn in dealing with these matters under Stalin. For example the charge is made that the decree of 1944 denied rights to children born out of wedlock and made unmarried mothers completely responsible for the upbringing of their children. But what the law actually did was to abolish paternity suits and to transfer responsibility for support of children so born from the father to the state. The law also gave allowances to unmarried mothers. This is hardly repressive legislation.

Sheila Rowbotham in Women, Resistance and Revolution carries this trend to absurd lengths in describing these years: "Women lost their rights in the family The new consciousness which had been developing was eroded and almost extinguished. The only kind of emancip-

ation was one which served the interests of the state and those interests were unquestionably defined by the men in power Women speak for a section of Russian society which was awakened and then silenced by the revolution."¹⁴ Also in an annotated bibliography, her comment on a collection of Stalin's writings on the question of women is the flippant remark: "Stirring if Uncle Joe is your cup of tea. Rather keen on emancipation being connected to hard work."¹⁵

We should be very clear about this: emancipation is connected to hard work. The emphasis during these years was quite rightly on the participation of women in social production. It is only the Trotskyist extension of all the ideals of bourgeois individualism which is unable to comprehend this. The essentially social nature of the individual person is one of the most basic principles underlying communist morality.

Soviet women have not shrunk from their responsibility to the socialist state, even under the harshest of circumstances. During the war, women shouldered the main burden of productive labour and some even fought at the front. Over a million women took part directly in military operations against the fascist enemy.

THE PRESENT SITUATION

Although there is much to be said about the present situation, what follows is an attempt to summarise briefly the major achievements that have been made by women in the Soviet Union. Equality between male and female starts from the earliest age, especially in school. All schools are co-educational. There is no division between girls' subjects and boys' subjects. Even in sport, there is little attention paid to physical differences.

Everything possible is done to facilitate the participation of women in social production. 51% of the workforce are women.

There is an extensive network of institutions which socialise the care and education of children, ie nurseries, kindergartens, playgrounds, extended day schools, pioneer camps. There are measures to protect female labour, especially with regard to maternity. The law not only guarantees equal pay, but eliminates the possibility of discrimination against pregnant women or nursing mothers. Maternity leave is eight weeks before and eight weeks after with full pay. This can be extended in the event of difficult birth or multiple births. She can also take her paid holiday before or after to prolong leave. As well as this, she has the option of unpaid leave up to the time her child is a year old. If she does return to work, she is given adequate time during the working day to nurse her child.

It is one of the most extreme forms of alienation in capitalist society that the ability to do such a tremendous thing as give birth is transformed into a liability. This is reversed under socialism.

As to facts and figures, pages and pages are available. But just to give some indication of what gains have been made, these few can be cited: 49% of all students in institutions of higher education are women. 41% of the professors or instructors in such institutions are women. 43% of all leading trade union officials are women. In 1975, there were 475 women elected to the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union, i.e. one third of all deputies. This is more than any capitalist parliament. It is true that there are lower percentages of women in the very highest positions, but it would seem that one reason for this is the fact that most women do choose to combine family and career and this often involves setbacks in career. Despite all services available, pregnancy and childbirth still take a lot out of a woman. There is also the fact that the process of socialist construction is long and complex and it takes generations for such monumental advances to be consummated.

In short, a new sort of woman and a new sort of family is emerging in the Soviet Union. Women still want to have families, but no longer as an escape from productive work. Women want a fuller life, but they identify this with participation in a wider world and not with a narcissistic preoccupation with their own psyches or with limitless sexual extravagances. Of course, women with large families are not expected to seek outside employment while their children are young and their work is respected, but if mothers of small families or women with no children at all do not work, without good reason, they are thought to be failing in their obligations both to themselves and to the Soviet State. To be neither raising children nor working is considered to be retrogressive and petty-bourgeois.

These facts make the standard feminist sneers against Soviet women seem either very ill-informed or very malicious. The statement is often that the socialist countries need a women's liberation movement. When a young Soviet woman, by no means a communist, was asked about this, she was astonished and replied: "Liberation to do what - to stay home?" It is often said that in the Soviet Union motherhood is idealised. There is a tendency to jeer at awards such as that of Mother Heroine given to mothers of large families. But motherhood is not idealised and it does not need to be idealised. It is honoured. Women who give birth are providing an immense service to the socialist state which is quite rightly recognised. And no one who has ever endured labour could doubt that there is genuine heroism involved.

One final point with respect to the Soviet Union. No one, least of all the Soviet people themselves, denies that there are still problems. No one denies that it is possible to find cases where women do more housework than men. But what is highly objectionable is the way all the tremendous achievements of the socialist countries are either not mentioned or quickly skimmed over only to harp on failings which are in any case individual failings and not structural defects in the Soviet system.

This approach is scandalously dishonest. What is even more distressing is to find this trend asserting itself within some communist parties. All sense of perspective, all sense of proportion, all rational standards of judgement, vanish with the wind when it comes to the Soviet Union.

OTHER SOCIALIST COUNTRIES

Such advances characterise the other socialist countries as well. Space does not permit elaboration on the many very interesting features of the lives of women in these countries, each of which has its own uniquely impressive story. In Vietnam, for example, Vietnamese Communists played a leading role in setting up a mass organisation of women which played an extremely significant part in the national liberation struggle as well as in the achievement of socialism. In Cuba, although there are still problems, for machismo was very strong in pre-revolutionary Cuba, women have a tremendous advantage in dealing with them. They have the full authority of the revolution behind them. And that makes all the difference.

C H I N A

China, however, is in a category of its own. Despite the excesses, and in fact the reactionary turn taken by the Maoist leadership, certain gains have been made. The Chinese Revolution overturned the feudal order and this changed women's lives immensely. There was a vast increase in the number of women participating in production. The usual family burdens were being removed, with medical care free or at minimal cost, maternity leave available to all women workers, and domestic work socialised through a network of child care centres, dining halls, laundries, etc. However, as a result of the failure of the Great Leap Forward, there was a cutback in employment of women which did much to revive feudal attitudes towards women. During the cultural revolution, the dislocation of economic and socio-political life had an extremely negative effect on the development of

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women. A whole generation of Chinese women were made to believe that their liberation could be won through the smashing of party and state organs in China, through the destruction of scientific and academic institutions. These were the young school-girls who 'discovered themselves' by coming forth to strike their teachers for what they, in their adolescent wisdom, judged to be reactionary ideas! This is a most dangerous concept of liberation. The All-China Democratic Women's Federation, founded in 1949, to involve women in the productive and socio-political life of the country, ceased to function. In 1966, the PRC broke its ties with the international democratic women's movement. It remains to be seen what will happen now with the new turn that has been taken in China. Hopefully these matters will be restored to a more sane footing.

6. SOCIALIST MORALITY

Discussions of the women's question has always tended to bring to the fore certain deeper human questions, particularly questions relating to the nature of human sexuality and the nature of morality. It is vital that we come to terms with our sexuality within a moral framework. Socialism brings with it a new moral framework. Bourgeois morality is individualistic and repressive. Socialist morality, on the other hand, is collectivist and liberating. It stresses how the untapped potential for growth in individuals is enhanced as they enter into the collective spirit. Of course, a healthy sexual morality is grounded in a healthy general morality. Socialism provides the material basis for the sort of social environment in which a healthy general morality can grow.

There are various misconceptions prevalent on the question of socialist morality as it affects sexuality. The first is a fear that Communism will unleash immorality upon the fair Irish earth, that 'free love' will be the order of the day and that no one will want to do anything else.

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The second, which contradicts the first, is very common as well. It involves an image of a totalitarian state ruled by dour, sexless and mechanistic creatures called Communists who monitor every aspect of citizens' intimate lives. Both are far from the truth.

There are several basic points we should keep in mind as we not only look to the future but seek to live morally in the present. First of all, we cannot romanticise Irish culture as it is. We must be acutely aware of the limitations of Irish society. Irish Catholicism, particularly with its Jansenistic influence, has shaped Irish society along very repressive lines. We tend to be a society of rigid, wooden bodies that almost never touch. It is either sexual intercourse or nothing. We never properly or fully acknowledge one another. We never deeply experience one another. We are afraid to be affectionate for fear of seeming to be seductive. We keep our eyes closely guarded; our words cautious; our hands to ourselves. We are afraid to take risks in our relations with one another. We are afraid of being too extravagant in our responses to one another. Alcohol, however, often provides a means of breaking through these barriers, without permanently lowering the defensive guard. We must believe that communism will release much of this tension and make us freer, more open, more expansive.

In Irish society, the approach to the question of marital fidelity is highly negative and repressive. There is a proprietary exclusiveness that demands that we not only forego sexual relations with anyone else, but even close and deep friendship with anyone of the opposite sex. Fidelity is something much deeper and much different than refraining from ever having sexual intercourse with anyone else, which is not really quite the point. Fidelity should be seen as necessary to all our relationships and not distorted into a rejection of other relationships in the name of one. The questions to ask of ourselves with regard to the morality of our behaviour in a marital relationship are such

things as: have I been responsive enough? Have I been generous enough with my time and with my energy? have I contributed enough to the responsibilities we have taken on in common, especially to children? Fulfilling these criteria may preclude having sexual relations outside or marriage. But the emphasis should be on what we give of ourselves rather than on what we refrain from giving. It is possible for someone to engage in the most puritanical renunciation and still be unfaithful.

On this question, Engels was always full of scorn for 'moralising philistines' and once humourously remarked: "If strict monogamy is to be regarded as the acme of all virtue, then the palm must be given to the tapeworm it passes the whole of its life in cohabiting with itself in every one of its segments."¹⁶

It is of the utmost importance that we give due attention to the whole range of other relationships other than family relationships that must be assessed by applying moral criteria. The emphasis must be on the collective spirit, on what we contribute to the whole. This, however, does not mean reducing our relationships to the least common denominator and losing ourselves in superficial chatter. On the contrary, it must be grounded in solid, deep and abiding relations with one's comrades. Our commitment to the whole is greater the more vivid and intense our feeling for its individual members. It is interesting to note in this regard that in a section on socialist morality from the documents of the Cuban party Congress the stress is on the need to establish new fraternal relations to consolidate the new society.

We must always be careful not to fall prey to petty bourgeois individualism. We must never lose touch with the concrete day to day reality of our own class. Nevertheless we must always have a larger vision and our class should be able to see the future in us. It is the role of progressive forces to gather up the past and project into the future and never confine ourselves to the levelling reality of the present. The only freedom for us is the freedom of our class. This of course does not mean that we have to cultivate rigidity

and tension. To some extent we must at least begin to embody many of the characteristics of the new society. Above all, we must be as deeply human as we find ourselves capable of being and this means being deeply disciplined. It is not lack of courage or critical spirit that keeps communists from having casual and irresponsible affairs. It is discipline. Not an abstract, artificial or external discipline, but a concrete, genuine, internal discipline, the sort of discipline that springs from a fully integrated life. The need for discipline arises not out of the need to impose unnatural restrictions upon ourselves. It has its source rather in the need to bring all the diverse aspects of our lives into a harmonious whole. Sex is only one aspect of our lives and it must find its place within the integrated whole. Just what this is cannot be answered in a dogmatic fashion. But our responsibility to our children and to those with whom we have brought forth those children, our responsibilities to our comrades, our commitment to the revolutionary process itself, must never be neglected. The point is that we must beware of the twin dangers of decadence and prudishness. Prudishness provides the breeding ground for decadence and it is not worthy of a communist. A prudish person is someone who is afraid of life. A Communist meets it head-on.

7. CONCLUSION

Finally there are certain basic errors within the left that stand in our way and must therefore be combatted. The first and the most serious, because it is the most prevalent, is the tendency not to take the problem of women seriously enough, and not to consider work among women important enough. But the women's question is a vitally important political question and the ground must not be surrendered to the right.

Then, there are two opposite tendencies. The first is the alternative society approach. But this must be resisted, because we cannot just make our own individual arrangements and be responsible for setting up completely viable alternatives within the capitalist framework.

Instead we must make our demands of the state and expose the inadequacies of the present state to meet our demands and clarify how a worker's state will meet these demands.

The other is the idea that nothing can be done until we achieve state power. A variation on this is the idea that between equal pay and state power there is nothing much to be done. But we must take certain measures in order to be in a position to struggle to achieve state power, especially those of us who are mothers of young children must make some sorts of alternative arrangements to ensure that our political work is taken seriously and that we have time to do it.

But there is an even deeper reason. This is because neither the new man nor the new woman will emerge out of nothing the day after the revolution. They must be created step by step, day by day, in the very midst of the struggle. Our way of building the revolution must be consistent with the kind of revolution we are building.

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