

Socialism, Anarchism And Feminism

Carol Ehrlich

1977

Contents

Radical Feminism and Anarchist Feminism	6
On Practice	7
Situationism and Anarchist Feminism	11
Women and the Commodity Economy	13
Women and the Spectacle	15

You are a woman in a capitalist society. You get pissed off: about the job, about the bills, about your husband (or ex), about the kids' school, the housework, being pretty, not being pretty, being looked at, not being looked at (and either way, not listened to), etc. If you think about all these things and how they fit together and what has to be changed, and then you look around for some words to hold all these thoughts together in abbreviated form, you almost have to come up with 'socialist feminism.'¹

From all indications a great many women have "come up" with socialist feminism as the solution to the persistent problem of sexism. "Socialism" (in its astonishing variety of forms) is popular with a lot of people these days, because it has much to offer: concern for working people, a body of revolutionary theory that people can point to (whether or not they have read it), and some living examples of industrialised countries that are structured differently from the United States and its satellites.

For many feminists, socialism is attractive because it promises to end the economic inequality of working women. Further, for those women who believe that an exclusively feminist analysis is too narrow to encompass all the existing inequalities, socialism promises to broaden it, while guarding against the dilution of its radical perspective.

For good reasons, then, women are considering whether or not "socialist feminism" makes sense as a political theory. For socialist feminists do seem to be both sensible and radical — at least, most of them evidently feel a strong antipathy to some of the reformist and solipsistic traps into which increasing numbers of women seem to be stumbling.

To many of us more unromantic types, the Amazon Nation, with its armies of strong-limbed matriarchs riding into the sunset, is unreal, but harmless. A more serious matter is the current obsession with the Great Goddess and assorted other objects of worship, witchcraft, magic, and psychic phenomena. As a feminist concerned with transforming the structure of society, I find this anything but harmless.

Item One: Over fourteen hundred women went to Boston in April, 1976 to attend a women's spirituality conference dealing in large part with the above matters. Could not the energy invested in chanting, swapping the latest pagan ideas, and attending workshops on bellydancing and menstrual rituals have been put to some better and more feminist use?

Item Two: According to reports in at least one feminist newspaper, a group of witches tried to levitate Susan Saxe out of jail. If they honestly thought this would free Saxe, then they were totally out of touch with the realities of patriarchal oppression. If it was intended to be a light-hearted joke, then why isn't anyone laughing?

Reformism is a far greater danger to women's interests than are bizarre psychic games. I know that "reformist" is an epithet that may be used in ways that are neither honest nor very useful — principally to demonstrate one's ideological purity, or to say that concrete political work of any type is not worth doing because it is potentially co-optable. In response, some feminists have argued persuasively that the right kinds of reforms can build a radical movement.²

Just the same, there are reformist strategies that waste the energies of women, that raise expectations of great change, and that are misleading and alienating because they cannot deliver

¹Barbara Ehrenreich, "What is Socialist Feminism?", *Win Magazine*, June 3, 1976, p.4.

²The best of these arguments I've encountered are "Socialist Feminism; A Strategy for the Women's Movement", by the Hyde Park Chapter, Chicago Women's Liberation Union, 1972; and Charlotte Bunch, "The Reform Tool Kit", *Quest*, 1:1, Summer 1974, pp.37-51.

the goods. The best (or worst) example is electoral politics. Some socialists (beguiled by the notion of gradualism) fall for that one. Anarchists know better. You cannot liberate yourself by non-liberatory means; you cannot elect a new set of politicians (no matter how sisterly) to run the same old corrupt institutions — which in turn run *you*. When the National Organisation of Women (NOW)'s Majority Caucus — the radical branch of that organization — asks women to follow them “out of the mainstream, into the revolution” by means that include electoral politics, they will all drown in the depths of things as they are.

Electoral politics is an obvious, everyday kind of trap. Even a lot of non-radicals have learned to avoid it. A more subtle problem is capitalism in the guise of feminist economic power. Consider, for example, the Feminist Economic Network. The name might possibly fool you. Ostensibly it was a network of alternative businesses set up to erode capitalism from within by creating economic self-sufficiency for women. That is an appealing idea. Yet, FEN's first major project opened in Detroit in April, 1976. For an annual membership fee of \$100, privileged women could swim in a private pool, drink in a private bar, and get discounts in a cluster of boutiques. FEN paid its female employees \$2.50 per hour to work there. Its director, Laura Brown, announced this venture as “the beginning of the feminist economic revolution.”³

When two of the same old games — electoral politics and hip capitalism — are labelled “revolution”, the word has been turned inside out. It's not surprising that a socialist brand of feminism seems to be a source of revolutionary sanity to many women who don't want to be witches, primitive warriors, senators, or small capitalists, but who do want to end sexism while creating a transformed society. Anarchist feminism could provide a meaningful theoretical framework, but all too many feminists have either never heard of it, or else dismiss it as the ladies' auxiliary of male bomb-throwers.

Socialist feminism provides an assortment of political homes. On the one hand, there are the dingy, cramped quarters of Old Left sects such as the Revolutionary Communist Party (formerly the Revolutionary Union), the October League, and the International Workers Party. Very few women find these habitable. On the other hand, a fair number of women are moving into the sprawling, eclectic establishments built by newer Left groups such as the New American Movement, or by various autonomous “women's unions”.

The newer socialist feminists have been running an energetic and reasonably effective campaign to recruit nonaligned women. In contrast, the more rigid Old Left groups have largely rejected the very idea that lesbians, separatists, and assorted other scruffy and unsuitable feminists could work with the noble inheritors of Marx, Trotsky (although the Trotskyists are unpredictable), Stalin, and Mao. Many reject the idea of an autonomous women's movement that cares at all about women's issues. To them, it is full of “bourgeois” (most damning of all Marxist epithets!) women bent on “doing their own thing”, and it “divides the working class”, which is a curious assumption that workers are dumber than everyone else. Some have a hysterical antipathy to lesbians: the most notorious groups are the October League and the Revolutionary Communist Party, but they are not alone. In this policy, as in so many others, the anti-lesbian line follows that of the communist countries. The RCP, for example, released a position paper in the early 1970s (back in its pre-party days, when it was the plain old Revolutionary Union) which announced that homosexuals are “caught in the mire and muck of bourgeois decadence”, and

³Reports by Polly Anna, Kana Trueblood, C. Corday and S. Tufts, *The Fifth Estate*, May, 1976, pp. 13, 16. The “revolution” failed: FEN and its club shut down.

that gay liberation is “anti-working class and counter revolutionary”. All the Old Left groups are uneasy with the idea that any women outside the “proletariat” are oppressed at all. The working class, of course, is a marvellously flexible concept: in the current debates on the Left, it ranges from point-of-production workers (full stop) to an enormous group that takes in every single person who sells her or his labor for wages, or who depends on someone else who does. That’s almost all of us. (So, Papa Kari, if ninety per cent of the people of the United States are the vanguard, why haven’t we had the revolution yet?)

The newer socialist feminists have been trying in all manner of inventive ways to keep a core of Marxist-Leninist thought, up-date it, and graft it to contemporary radical feminism. The results are sometimes peculiar. In July, 1975, the women of the New American Movement and a number of autonomous groups held the first national conference on socialist feminism. It was not especially heavily advertised in advance, and everyone seemed to be surprised that so many women (over sixteen hundred, with more turned away) wanted to spend the July 4th weekend in Yellow Springs, Ohio.

On reading the speeches given at the conference, as well as extensive commentary written by other women who attended,⁴ it is not at all clear what the conference organizers thought they were offering in the name of “socialist feminism”. *The Principles of Unity* that were drawn up prior to the conference included two items that have always been associated with radical feminism, and that in fact are typically thought of as *antithetical* to a socialist perspective. The first principle stated: “We recognize the need for and support the existence of the autonomous women’s movement throughout the revolutionary process”. The second read: “We agree that all oppression, whether based on race, class, sex, or lesbianism, is interrelated and the fights for liberation from oppression must be simultaneous and cooperative”. The third principle merely remarked that “socialist feminism is a strategy for revolution”; and the fourth and final principle called for holding discussions “in the spirit of struggle and unity”.

This is, of course, an incredible smorgasbord of tasty principles — a menu designed to appeal to practically everyone. But when “socialist” feminists serve up the independent women’s movement as the main dish, and when they say class oppression is just one of several oppressions, no more important than any other, then (as its Marxist critics say) it is no longer socialism

However, socialist feminists do not follow out the implications of radical feminism all the way. If they did, they would accept another principle: that non-hierarchical structures are essential to feminist practice. This, of course, is too much for any socialist to take. But what it means is that radical feminism is far more compatible with one type of anarchism than it is with socialism. That type is social anarchism (also known as communist anarchism), not the individualist or anarcho-capitalist varieties.

This won’t come as news to feminists who are familiar with anarchist principles — but very few feminists are. That’s understandable, since anarchism has veered between a bad press and none at all. If feminists were familiar with anarchism, they would not be looking very hard at socialism as a means of fighting sexist oppression. Feminists have got to be sceptical of any social

⁴People who are interested in reading reports of the conference will find them in almost every feminist or socialist newspaper that appeared in the month or so after July 4th. Speeches by Barbara Ehrenreich, Michelle Russell, and the Berkeley-Oakland Women’s Union are reprinted in *Socialist Revolution*, No. 26, October-December 1975; and the speech by Charlotte Bunch, “Not for Lesbians Only”, appears in *Quest*, 2:2, Fall 1975. A thirty-minute audiotape documentary is available from the Great Atlantic Radio Conspiracy, 2743 Maryland Avenue, Baltimore, Maryland 21218.

theory that comes with a built-in set of leaders and followers, no matter how “democratic” this centralized structure is supposed to be. Women of all classes, races, and life circumstances have been on the receiving end of domination too long to want to exchange one set of masters for another. We know who has power and (with a few isolated exceptions) it isn’t us.

Several contemporary anarchist feminists have pointed out the connections between social anarchism and radical feminism. Lynne Farrow said “feminism practices what anarchism preaches”. Peggy Kornegger believes that “feminists have been unconscious anarchists in both theory and practice for years”. And Marian Leighton states that “the refining distinction from radical feminist to anarcho-feminist is largely that of making a step in self-conscious theoretical development.”⁵

We build autonomy
The process of ever growing synthesis
For every living creature.
We spread
Spontaneity and creation
We learn the joys of equality
Of relationships
Without dominance
Among sisters.
We destroy domination
In all its forms.

This chant appeared in the radical feminist newspaper *It Aint Me Babe*⁶ whose masthead carried the line “end all hierarchies”. It was not labelled an anarchist (or anarchist feminist) newspaper, but the connections are striking. It exemplified much of what women’s liberation was about in the early years of the reborn movement. And it is that spirit that will be lost if the socialist feminist hybrid takes root; if goddess worship or the lesbian nation convince women to set up new forms of dominance-submission.

Radical Feminism and Anarchist Feminism

All radical feminists and all social anarchist feminists are concerned with a set of common issues: control over one’s own body; alternatives to the nuclear family and to heterosexuality; new methods of child care that will liberate parents and children; economic self-determination; ending sex stereotyping in education, in the media, and in the workplace; the abolition of repressive laws; an end to male authority, ownership, and control over women; providing women with the means to develop skills and positive self-attitudes; an end to oppressive emotional relationships; and what the Situationists have called “the reinvention of everyday life”.

⁵Farrow, “Feminism as Anarchism”, *Aurora*, 4, 1974, p.9; Kornegger, “Anarchism: The Feminist Connection”, *Second Wave*, 4: 1, Spring 1975, p.31; Leighton, “Anarcho-Feminism and Louise Michel”, *Black Rose*, 1, April 1974, p. 14.

⁶December, 1, 1970, p.11.

There are, then, many issues on which radical feminists and anarchist feminists agree. But anarchist feminists are concerned with something more. Because they are anarchists, they work to end all power relationships, all situations in which people can oppress each other. Unlike some radical feminists who are not anarchists, they do not believe that power in the hands of women could possibly lead to a non-coercive society. And unlike most socialist feminists, they do not believe that anything good can come out of a mass movement with a leadership elite. In short, neither a workers' state nor a matriarchy will end the oppression of everyone. The goal, then, is not to "seize" power, as the socialists are fond of urging, but to abolish power.

Contrary to popular belief, all social anarchists are socialists. That is, they want to take wealth out of the hands of the few and redistribute it among all members of the community. And they believe that people need to co-operate with each other as a community, instead of living as isolated individuals. For anarchists, however, the central issues are always power and social hierarchy. If a state — even a state representing the workers — continues, it will re-establish forms of domination, and some people will no longer be free. People aren't free just because they are surviving, or even economically comfortable. They are free only when they have power over their own lives. Women, even more than most men, have very little power over their own lives. Gaining such autonomy, and insisting that everyone have it, is the major goal of anarchist feminists.

*Power to no one, and to every one: To each the power over his/her own life, and no others.*⁷

On Practice

That is the theory. What about the practice? Again, radical feminism and anarchist feminism have much more in common than either does with socialist feminism.⁸ Both work to build alternative institutions, and both take the politics of the personal very seriously. Socialist feminists are less inclined to think either is particularly vital to revolutionary practice.

Developing alternative forms of organization means building self-help clinics, instead of fighting to get one radical on a hospital's board of directors; it means women's video groups and newspapers, instead of commercial television and newspapers; living collectives, instead of isolated nuclear families; rape crisis centers; food co-ops; parent-controlled daycare centers; free schools; printing co-ops; alternative radio groups, and so on.

Yet, it does little good to build alternative institutions if their structures mimic the capitalist and hierarchical models with which we are so familiar. Many radical feminists recognized this early: That's why they worked to rearrange the way women perceive the world and themselves (through the consciousness-raising group), and why they worked to rearrange the forms of work relationships and interpersonal interactions (through the small, leaderless groups where tasks are rotated and skills and knowledge shared). They were attempting to do this in a hierarchical society that provides no models except ones of inequality. Surely, a knowledge of anarchist theory and models of organization would have helped. Equipped with this knowledge, radical feminists might have avoided some of the mistakes they made — and might have been better able to overcome some of the difficulties they encountered in trying simultaneously to transform themselves and society.

⁷Lilith's Manifesto, from the Women's Majority Union of Seattle, 1969. Reprinted in Robin Morgan (ed.), *Sisterhood is Powerful*. N.Y.: Random House, 1970, p.529.

⁸The best and most detailed description of the parallels between radical feminism and anarchist feminism is found

Take, for example, the still current debate over “strong women” and the closely related issue of leadership. The radical feminist position can be summarized this way:

1. Women have been kept down because they are isolated from each other and are paired off with men in relationships of dominance and submission.
2. Men will not liberate women; women must liberate themselves. This cannot happen if each woman tries to liberate herself alone. Thus, women must work together on a model of mutual aid.
3. “Sisterhood is powerful”, but women cannot be sisters if they recapitulate masculine patterns of dominance and submission.
4. New organizational forms have to be developed. The primary form is the small leaderless group; the most important behaviors are egalitarianism, mutual support, and the sharing of skills and knowledge.

If many women accepted this, even more did not. Some were opposed from the start; others saw first hand that it was difficult to put into practice, and regretfully concluded that such beautiful idealism would never work out.

Ideological support for those who rejected the principles put forth by the “unconscious anarchists” was provided in two documents that quickly circulated through women’s liberation newspapers and organisations. The first was Anselma dell’Olio’s speech to the second Congress to Unite Women, which was held in May, 1970 in New York City. The speech, entitled *Divisiveness and Self-Destruction in the Women’s Movement: A Letter of Resignation*, gave dell’Olio’s reasons for leaving the women’s movement. The second document was Joreen’s *Tyranny of Structurelessness*, which first appeared in 1972 in *The Second Wave*. Both raised issues of organizational and personal practice that were, and still are, tremendously important to the women’s movement.

“I have come to announce my swan-song to the women’s movement... I have been destroyed... I learned three and one-half years ago that women had always been divided against one another, were self-destructive and filled with impotent rage. I never dreamed that I would see the day when this rage, masquerading as a pseudo-egalitarian radicalism under the “pro-woman” banner, would turn into frighteningly vicious anti-intellectual fascism of the Left, and used within the movement to strike down sisters singled out with all the subtlety and justice of a kangaroo court of the Ku Klux Klan. I am referring, of course, to the personal attack, both overt and odious, to which women in the movement, who have painfully managed any degree of achievement, have been subjected... If you are... an achiever you are immediately labelled a thrill-seeking opportunist, a ruthless mercenary, out to get her fame and fortune over the dead bodies of selfless sisters who have buried their abilities and sacrificed their ambitions for the greater glory of Feminism... If you have the misfortune of being outspoken and articulate, you are accused of being power-mad, elitist, racist, and finally the worst epithet of all: a MALE IDENTIFIER.”⁹

in Kornegger, op cit.

⁹The speech is currently available from KNOW, Inc.

When Anselma dell'Olio gave this angry farewell to the movement, it did two things: For some women, it raised the question of how women can end unequal power relationships among themselves without destroying each other. For others, it did quite the opposite — it provided easy justification for all the women who had been dominating other women in a most unsisterly way. Anyone who was involved in women's liberation at that time knows that the dell'Olio statement was twisted by some women in exactly that fashion: Call yourself assertive, or strong, or talented, and you can re-label a good deal of ugly, insensitive, and oppressive behavior. Women who presented themselves as tragic heroines destroyed by their envious or misguided (and, of course, far less talented) "sisters" could count on a sympathetic response from some other women.

Just the same, women who were involved in the movement at that time know that the kinds of things dell'Olio spoke about *did* happen, and they should not have happened. A knowledge of anarchist theory is not enough, of course, to prevent indiscriminate attacks on women. But in the struggle to learn new ways of relating and working with each other, such knowledge might — just might — have prevented some of these destructive mistakes.

Ironically, these mistakes were motivated by the radical feminist aversion to conventional forms of power, and the inhuman personal relationships that result from one set of persons having power over others. When radical feminists and anarchist feminists speak of abolishing power, they mean to get rid of all institutions, all forms of socialisation, all the ways in which people coerce each other — and acquiesce to being coerced.

A major problem arose in defining the nature of coercion in the women's movement. The hostility towards the "strong" woman arose because she was someone who could at least potentially coerce women who were less articulate, less self-confident, less assertive than she. Coercion is usually far more subtle than physical force or economic sanction. One person can coerce another without taking away their job, or striking them, or throwing them in jail.

Strong women started out with a tremendous advantage. Often they knew more. Certainly they had long since overcome the crippling socialisation that stressed passive, timid, docile, conformist behavior — behavior that taught women to smile when they weren't amused, to whisper when they felt like shouting, to lower their eyes when someone stared aggressively at them. Strong women weren't terrified of speaking in public; they weren't afraid to take on "male" tasks, or to try something new. Or so it seemed.

Put a "strong" woman in the same small group with a "weak" one, and she becomes a problem: How does she not dominate? How does she share her hard-earned skills and confidence with her sister? From the other side — how does the "weak" woman learn to act in her own behalf? How can one even conceive of "mutual" aid in a one-way situation? Of "sisterhood" when the "weak" member does not feel equal to the "strong" one?

These are complicated questions, with no simple answers. Perhaps the closest we can come is with the anarchist slogan, "a strong people needs no leaders". Those of us who have learned to survive by dominating others, as well as those of us who have learned to survive by accepting domination, need to resocialize ourselves into being strong without playing dominance-submission games, into controlling what happens to us without controlling others. This can't be done by electing the right people to office or by following the correct party line; nor can it be done by sitting and reflecting on our sins. We rebuild ourselves and our world through activity, through

¹⁰*The Second Wave*, 2:1, 1972.

partial successes, and failure, and more partial successes. And all the while we grow stronger and more self-reliant.

If Anselma dell'Olio criticised the personal practice of radical feminists, Joreen raised some hard questions about organisational structure. *The Tyranny of Structurelessness*¹⁰ pointed out that there is no such thing as a “structureless” group, and people who claim there is are fooling themselves. All groups have a structure; the difference is whether or not the structure is explicit. If it is implicit, hidden elites are certain to exist and to control the group — and everyone, both the leaders and the led, will deny or be confused by the control that exists. This is the “tyranny” of structurelessness. To overcome it, groups need to set up open, explicit structures accountable to the membership.

Any anarchist feminist, I think, would agree with her analysis — up to this point, and no further. For what Joreen also said was that the so-called “leaderless, structureless group” was incapable of going beyond talk to action. Not only its lack of open structure, but also its small size and its emphasis upon consciousness-raising (talk) were bound to make it ineffective.

Joreen did not say that women’s groups should be hierarchically structured. In fact, she called for leadership that would be “diffuse, flexible, open, and temporary”; for organizations that would build in accountability, diffusion of power among the maximum number of persons, task rotation, skill-sharing, and the spread of information and resources. All good social anarchist principles of organization! But her denigration of consciousness-raising and her preference for large regional and national organizations were strictly part of the old way of doing things, and implicitly accepted the continuation of hierarchical structures.

Large groups are organized so that power and decision-making are delegated to a few — unless, of course, one is speaking of a horizontally coordinated network of small collectives, which she did not mention. How does a group such as NOW, with its sixty thousand members in 1975, rotate tasks, share skills, and ensure that all information and resources are available to everyone? It can’t, of course. Such groups have a president, and a board of directors, and a national office, and a membership — some of whom are in local chapters, and some of whom are isolated members. Few such groups have very much direct democracy, and few teach their members new ways of working and relating to one another.

The unfortunate effect of *The Tyranny of Structurelessness* was that it linked together large organization, formal structure, and successful direct action in a way that seemed to make sense to a lot of people. Many women felt that in order to fight societal oppression a large organization was essential, and the larger the better. The image is strength pitted against strength: You do not kill an elephant with an air gun, and you do not bring down the patriarchal state with the small group. For women who accept the argument that greater size is linked to greater effectiveness, the organizational options seem limited to large liberal groups such as NOW or to socialist organizations which are mass organizations.

As with so many things that seem to make sense, the logic is faulty. “Societal oppression” is a reification, an over-blown, paralysing, made-up entity that is large mainly in the sense that the same oppressions happen to a lot of us. But oppressions, no matter how pervasive, how predictable, almost always are done to us by some one — even if that person is acting as an agent of the state, or as a member of the dominant race, gender, or class. The massive police assaults upon our assembled forces are few; even the police officer or the boss or the husband who is carrying out his allotted sexist or authoritarian role intersects with us at a given point in our everyday lives. Institutionalized oppression does exist, on a large scale, but it seldom needs to be

attacked (indeed, seldom can be attacked) by a large group. Guerilla tactics by a small group — occasionally even by a single individual — will do very nicely in retaliation.

Another unfortunate effect of the *Tyranny of Structurelessness* mentality (if not directly of the article) was that it fed people's stereotypes of anarchists. (Of course, people don't usually swallow something unless they're hungry.) Social anarchists aren't opposed to structure: They aren't even against leadership, provided that it carries no reward or privilege, and is temporary and specific to a particular task. However, anarchists, who want to abolish a *hierarchical* structure, are almost always stereotyped as wanting no structure at all. Unfortunately, the picture of a gaggle of disorganized, chaotic anarchist women, drifting without direction, caught on. For example, in 1976 *Quest* reprinted an edited transcript of an interview which Charlott Bunch and Beverly Fisher had given the Feminist Radio Network in 1972. In one way, the most interesting thing about the interview was that the *Quest* editors felt the issues were still so timely in 1976.¹¹ ("We see the same trashing of leaders and glorification of structurelessness that existed five years ago." (p. 13)). But what Bunch had to say at that time was also extremely interesting: According to her, the emphasis on solving problems of structure and leadership was "a very strong anarchist desire. It was a good desire, but it was an unrealistic one" (p. 4). Anarchists, who are used to being called "unrealistic", will note that the unreality of it all apparently lay in the problems which the women's movement was having in organizing itself — problems of hidden leadership, of having "leaders" imposed by the media, of difficulty in reaching out to interested but uncommitted women, of over representation of middle class women with lots of time on their hands, of the amorphousness of the movement, of the scarcity of specific task groups which women could join, of hostility towards women who tried to show leadership or initiative. A heavy indictment! Yet, these very real problems were not caused by anarchism, nor will they be cured by doses of of vanguardism or reformism. And by labelling these organizational difficulties "anarchist" feminists ignore a rich anarchist tradition while at the same time proposing solutions that are — although they apparently don't know it — anarchist. Bunch and Fisher laid out a model of leadership in which everyone participates in making decisions; and leadership is specific to a particular situation and is time-limited. Fisher criticized NOW for "hierarchical leadership that is not responsible to the vast membership" (p. 9), and Bunch stated, "leadership is people taking the initiative, carrying things through, having the ideas and imagination to get something started, and exhibiting particular skills in different areas" (p. 8). How do they suggest we prevent the silencing of these women under false notions of egalitarianism? "The only way women will stop putting down women who are strong is if they are strong themselves" (p. 12). Or, as I said earlier, a strong people needs no leaders. Right on!

Situationism and Anarchist Feminism

*To transform the world and to change the structure of life are one and the same thing.*¹²
*The personal is the political.*¹³

Anarchists are used to hearing that they lack a theory that would help in building a new society. At best, their detractors say patronizingly, anarchism tells us what not to do. Don't permit

¹¹"What Future for Leadership?", *Quest*, 2:4, Spring 1976, pp.2–13.

¹²Strasbourg Situationists, *Once the Universities Were Respected*, 1968, p.38.

¹³Carol Hanisch, "The Personal is Political", *Notes from the Second Year*. N.Y.: Radical Feminism, 1970, pp. 76–78.

bureaucracy or hierarchical authority; don't let a vanguard party make decisions; don't tread on me. Don't tread on anyone. According to this perspective, anarchism is not a theory at all. It is a set of cautionary practices, the voices of libertarian conscience — always idealistic, sometimes a bit truculent, occasionally anachronistic, but a necessary reminder.

There is more than a kernel of truth to this objection. Just the same, there are varieties of anarchist thought that can provide a theoretical framework for analysis of the world and action to change it. For radical feminists who want to take that “step in self-conscious theoretical development”,¹⁴ perhaps the greatest potential lies in Situationism.

The value of Situationism for an anarchist feminist analysis is that it combines a socialist awareness of the primacy of capitalist oppression with an anarchist emphasis upon transforming the whole of public and private life. The point about capitalist oppression is important: All too often anarchists seem to be unaware that this economic system exploits most people. But all too often socialist — especially Marxists — are blind to the fact that people are oppressed in every aspect of life: work, what passes for leisure, culture, personal relationships — all of it. And only anarchists insist that people must transform the conditions of their lives *themselves* — it cannot be done for them. Not by the party, not by the union, not by “organizers”, not by anyone else.

Two basic Situationist concepts are “commodity” and “spectacle”. Capitalism has made all of social relations commodity relations: The market rules all. People are not only producers and consumers in the narrow economic sense, but the very structure of their daily lives is based on commodity relations. Society “is consumed as a *whole* — the ensemble of social relationships and structures is the central product of the commodity economy”.¹⁵ This has inevitably alienated people from their lives, not just from their labor; to consume social relationships makes one a passive spectator in one's life. The *spectacle*, then, is the culture that springs from the commodity economy — the stage is set, the action unfolds, we applaud when we think we are happy, we yawn when we think we are bored, but we cannot leave the show, because there is no world outside the theater for us to go to.

In recent times, however, the societal stage has begun to crumble, and so the possibility exists of constructing another world outside the theater — this time, a real world, one in which each of us directly participates as subject, not as object. The situationist phrase for this possibility is “the reinvention of everyday life”.

How is daily life to be reinvested? By creating situations that disrupt what seems to be the natural order of things — situations that jolt people out of customary ways of thinking and behaving. Only then will they be able to act, to destroy the manufactured spectacle and the commodity economy — that is, capitalism in all its forms. Only then will they be able to create free and un-alienated lives.

The congruence of this activist, social anarchist theory with radical feminist theory is striking. The concepts of commodity and spectacle are especially applicable to the lives of women. In fact, many radical feminists have described these in detail, without placing them in the Situationist framework.¹⁶ To do so broadens the analysis, by showing women's situation as an organic part of the society as a whole, but at the same time without playing socialist reductionist games. Women's oppression is part of the over-all oppression of people by a capitalist economy, but it

¹⁴Leighton, op cit.

¹⁵Point-Blank!, “The Changing of the Guard”, in *Point-Blank*, October 1972, p.16.

¹⁶For one of the most illuminating of these early analyses, see Meredith Tax, “Woman and Her Mind: The Story of Everyday Life”, Boston: Bread and Roses Publication, 1970.

is not less than the oppression of others. Nor — from a Situationist perspective — do you have to be a particular variety of woman to be oppressed; you do not have to be part of the proletariat, either literally, as an industrial worker, or metaphorically, as someone who is not independently wealthy. You do not have to wait breathlessly for socialist feminist manifestoes to tell you that you qualify — as a housewife (reproducing the next generation of workers), as a clerical worker, as a student or a middle-level professional employed by the state (and therefore as part of the “new working class”). You do not have to be part of the Third World, or a lesbian, or elderly, or a welfare recipient. All of these women are objects in the commodity economy; all are passive viewers of the — spectacle. Obviously, women in some situations are far worse off than are others. But, at the same time, none are free in every area of their lives.

Women and the Commodity Economy

Women have a dual relationship to the commodity economy — they are both consumers and consumed. As housewives, they are consumers of household goods purchased with money not their own, because not “earned” by them. This may give them a certain amount of purchasing power, but very little power over any aspect of their lives. As young, single heterosexuals, women are purchasers of goods designed to make them bring a high price on the marriage market. As anything else — lesbians, or elderly single, or self-sufficient women with “careers”, women’s relationship to the marketplace as consumers is not so sharply defined. They are expected to buy (and the more affluent they are, the more they are expected to buy), but for some categories of women, buying is not defined primarily to fill out some aspect of a woman’s role.

So what else is new? Isn’t the idea of woman-as-passive-consumer, manipulated by the media, patronized by slick Madison Avenue men, an overdone movement cliché? Well, yes — and no. A Situationist analysis ties consumption of economic goods to consumption of *ideological* goods, and then tells us to create situations (guerrilla actions on many levels) that will break that pattern of socialised acceptance of the world as it is. No guilt-tripping; no criticizing women who have “bought” the consumer perspective. For they have indeed *bought* it: It has been sold to them as a way of survival from the earliest moments of life. Buy *this*: It will make you beautiful and lovable. Buy *this*: It will keep your family in good health. Feel depressed? Treat yourself to an afternoon at the beauty parlor or to a new dress.

Guilt leads to inaction. Only action, to *re-invent* the everyday and make it something else, will change social relations.

The Gift

Thinking she was the gift
they began to package it early.
they waxed its smile
they lowered its eyes
they tuned its ears to the telephone
they curled its hair
they straightened its teeth

they taught it to bury its wishbone
they poured honey down its throat
they made it say yes yes and yes
they sat on its thumbs
That box has my name on it,
said the man. It's for me.
And they were not surprised.
While they blew kisses and winked
he took it home. He put it on a table
where his friends could examine it
saying dance saying faster.
He plunged its tunnel
he burned his name deeper.
Later he put it on a platform
under the Klieg lights
saying push saying harder
saying just what I wanted
you've given me a son.
— Carole Oles¹⁷

Women are not only consumers in the commodity economy; they are consumed as commodities. This is what Oles' poem is about, and it is what Tax has labelled "female schizophrenia". Tax constructs an inner monologue for the housewife-as-commodity: "I am nothing when I am by myself. In myself, I am nothing. I only know that I exist because I am needed by someone who is real, my husband, and by my children".¹⁸

When feminists describe socialisation into the female sex role, when they point out the traits female children are taught (emotional dependence, childishness, timidity, concern with being beautiful, docility, passivity, and so on), they are talking about the careful production of a commodity — although it isn't usually called that. When they describe the oppressiveness of sexual objectification, or of living in the nuclear family, or of being a Supermother, or of working in the kinds of low-level, underpaid jobs that most women find in the paid labour force, they are also describing woman as commodity. Women are consumed by men who treat them as sex objects; they are consumed by their children (whom they have produced!) when they buy the role of the Supermother; they are consumed by authoritarian husbands who expect them to be submissive servants; and they are consumed by bosses who bring them in and out of the labor force and who extract a maximum of labor for a minimum of pay. They are consumed by medical researchers who try out new and unsafe contraceptives on them. They are consumed by men who buy their

¹⁷Carole Oles, "The Gift", in *13th Moon*, II: 1, 1974, p. 39.

¹⁸Tax, op cit., p. 13.

bodies on the street. They are consumed by church and state, who expect them to produce the next generation for the glory of god and country; they are consumed by political and social organizations that expect them to “volunteer” their time and energy. They have little sense of self, because their selfhood has been sold to others.

Women and the Spectacle

It is difficult to consume people who put up a fight, who resist the cannibalizing of their bodies, their minds, their daily lives. A few people manage to resist, but most don't resist effectively, because they can't. It is hard to locate our tormentor, because it is so pervasive, so familiar. We have known it all our lives. It is our culture.

Situationists characterize our culture as a *spectacle*. The spectacle treats us all as passive spectators of what we are told are our lives. And the culture-as-spectacle covers everything: We are born into it, socialised by it, go to school in it, work and relax and relate to other people in it. Even when we rebel against it, the rebellion is often defined by the spectacle. Would anyone care to estimate the number of sensitive, alienated adolescent males who a generation ago modelled their behavior on James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause*? I'm talking about a movie, whose capitalist producers and whose star made a great deal of money from this Spectacular.

Rebellious acts, then tend to be acts of *opposition* to the spectacle, but seldom are so different that they *transcend* the spectacle. Women have a set of behaviors that show dissatisfaction by being the opposite of what is expected. At the same time these acts are cliches of rebellion, and thus are almost prescribed safety valves that don't alter the theater of our lives. What is a rebellious woman supposed to do? We can all name the behaviors — they appear in every newspaper, on prime time television, on the best-seller list, in popular magazines — and, of course, in everyday life. In a setting that values perfectionist housekeeping, she can be a slob; in a subculture that values large families, she can refuse to have children. Other predictable insurgencies? She can defy the sexual double standard for married women by having an affair (or several); she can drink; or use what is termed “locker room” language; or have a nervous breakdown; or — if she is an adolescent — she can “act out” (a revealing phrase!) by running away from home and having sex with a lot of men.

Any of these things may make an individual woman's life more tolerable (often, they make it less so); and all of them are guaranteed to make conservatives rant that society is crumbling. But these kinds of scripted insurrections haven't made it crumble yet, and, by themselves, they aren't likely to. Anything less than a direct attack upon all the conditions of our lives is not enough.

When women talk about changing destructive sex role socialisation of females, they pick one of three possible solutions: (a) girls should be socialised more or less like boys to be independent, competitive, aggressive, and so forth. In short, it is a man's world, so a woman who wants to fit in has to be “one of the boys”. (b) We should glorify the female role, and realise that what we have called weakness is really strength. We should be proud that we are maternal, nurturant, sensitive, emotional, and so on. (c) The only healthy person is an androgynous person: We must eradicate the artificial division of humanity into “masculine” and “feminine”, and help both sexes become a mix of the best traits of each.

Within these three models, personal solutions to problems of sexist oppression cover a wide range: Stay single; live communally (with both men and women, or with women only). Don't

have children; don't have male children; have any kind of children you want, but get parent and worker-controlled child care. Get a job; get a better job; push for affirmative action. Be an informed consumer; file a lawsuit; learn karate; take assertiveness training. Develop the lesbian within you. Develop your proletarian identity. All of these make sense in particular situations, for particular women. But all of them are partial solutions to much broader problems, and none of them necessarily require seeing the world in a qualitatively different way.

So, we move from the particular to more general solutions. Destroy capitalism. End patriarchy. Smash heterosexism. All are obviously essential tasks in the building of a new and truly human world. Marxists, other socialists, social anarchists, feminists — all would agree. But what the socialist, and even some feminists, leave out is this: We must smash all forms of domination. That's not just a slogan, and it is the hardest task of all. It means that we have to see through the spectacle, destroy the stage sets, know that there are other ways of doing things. It means that we have to do more than react in programmed rebellions — we must act. And our actions will be collectively taken, while each person acts autonomously. Does that seem contradictory? It isn't — but it will be very difficult to do. The individual cannot change anything very much; for that reason, we have to work together. But that work must be without leaders as we know them, and without delegating any control over what we do and what we want to build.

Can the socialists do that? Or the matriarchs? Or the spirituality-trippers? You know the answer to that. Work with them when it makes sense to do so, but give up nothing. Concede nothing to them, or to anyone else.

The past leads to us if we force it to.

Otherwise it contains us

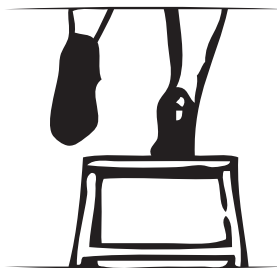
in its asylum with no gates.

We make history or it

makes us.¹⁹

¹⁹Marge Piercy, excerpt from "Contribution to Our Museum", in *Living in the Open*. N.Y.: Knopf, 1976, pp.74–75.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Carol Ehrlich
Socialism, Anarchism And Feminism
1977

Retrieved on April 29th, 2009 from www.anarcha.org

Carol Ehrlich's "Socialism, Anarchism, and Feminism" was first published as Research Group One Report 26 by Research Group One, 2743 Maryland Avenue, Baltimore, Md 21218, USA, in January '77, and ran to a second printing. It will appear in the anthology *Reinventing Anarchy: What anarchists are thinking these days* to be published by Routledge, Kegan & Paul, London, in Spring '79. An abridged version of *Socialism, Anarchism and Feminism* appeared in the American feminist magazine *Second Wave* Vol. 5, No. 1.

theanarchistlibrary.org