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VOICES OF BLACK FEMINISM

19th CENTURY WOMEN: SOCIALIST AND UTOPIAN
CHILDREN AND LANGUAGE

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CORRECTION: The photos appearing in Radical America Vol. 17, No. 6-18, No. 1 of the August 27, 1983 March on Washington were incorrectly credited. The photos were taken by Ellen Shub. Our apologies.

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INTRODUCTION

As this issue goes to press, Geraldine Ferraro has emerged from the Democratic Party convention speaking to and for women in the 1984 presidential campaign. We hope that Ferraro will help to widen the gender gap, and that sexism will prove to be an Achilles Heel for the Great Communicator. Yet, we are disturbed by the presentation of the women’s movement as an exclusively white movement. The Democrats and the media, in endless speculation about whether Walter Mondale’s Vice President would be a white woman or black man never once considered the possibility of a black woman, thus exacerbating the tension between feminists and black activists, over whose issues would be recognized. It was Jesse Jackson, not NOW, who challenged these assumptions by proposing the names of black women candidates for vice president. The failure of the liberal women’s movement to recognize the voices of black feminism has once again produced an opposition between the women’s movement and the black movement. The hegemony of the liberal women’s movement within feminism will not be broken without a mobilization of Third World and other, more radical, feminists. We’re happy to publish “Listening to the Voices of Black Feminism,” in which Fran White, speaking especially to black women, contributes to this effort.

In the enthusiasm of the early days of the women’s liberation movement, most feminists
assumed confidently that we were giving voice to the rebellion of all women. When the concerns of women were pitted against the struggles of the Vietnamese and other Third World liberation movements, white radical feminists responded with the *Fourth World Manifesto*, exposing the status of women within national liberation struggles and asking whose liberation was on the agenda. In the ensuing years, socialist feminism emphasized the interconnectedness of class, race and sex against orthodox notions of “primary contradictions” and secondary “questions” like the “Woman Question” and the ‘National Question.” Yet the emphasis on the connections between the structures of oppression remained often abstract, not part of the lived experience of the largely white women’s movement.

Within the context of black nationalist politics in the late sixties, as Fran White indicates, black women had also begun to challenge their assigned roles. And yet, for so long, she points out it seemed to black feminists as though the alternative to a male-dominated black movement was a white-dominated women’s movement. Black and other Third World women who began to organize as feminists in the mid 1970s confronted a women’s movement, including the socialist feminist wing, largely blind to the culture-bound character of its analysis of male power and women’s condition. It was not sufficient, Fran White emphasizes, to simply add a recognition of racism or class oppression to the white-defined analysis of sexual politics, a kind of double or triple oppression model.

Black feminists, rather, saw the need to rethink feminist analyses and struggles around the family, motherhood, sexuality, etc., in the light of their distinct meaning in Afro-American women’s experience and history. Given the history of racism, what does male power mean in the black community? How far can the Afro-American family or the contradictions of motherhood be understood from existing feminist analyses of patriarchal family structures? Given the concrete entanglement of race, class, gender and sexuality, does the label lesbian even adequately cover the black experience? It became crucial to rethink present experience in the light of Afro-American history. The greatest part of Fran White’s article is devoted to a critical look at the results of this historical rethinking in the work of Bell Hooks (Ain’t I A Woman?) and Angela Davis (Women, Race and Class) in particular. Drawing on her own work as an African historian interested in those parts of Africa from which most Afro-Americans came as slaves to the U.S., she offers a fascinating and original discussion of the key question of the sources of sexism in Afro-American culture. From a feminist perspective, she reopens the question of the African legacy into Afro-American experience, as well as examining the slave experience and subsequent interaction with white society. She then turns to black and white women’s experience of alliance during the 19th century suffrage struggles, laying out the troubled legacy black women inherit from that period and carry into the women’s movement today.

While Fran White brings feminist insight into rethinking the history of Afro-Americans, Mary Ann Clawson reviews two books by feminist historians which reconsider the history of socialist movements in the 19th and 20th centuries. Barbara Taylor in *Eve and the New Jerusalem* (see also her “Lords of Creation: Marxism, Feminism and Utopian Socialism,” *RA*, Vol. 14, No. 4, July-August 1980) explores the implications for the relationship of feminism and the left of the loss of a utopian dimension with the scientific socialism of Marx and Engels. Mari Jo Buhle’s *Women and American Socialism* examines the relationships between the autonomous women’s movement and socialist politics in the early twentieth century. In focussing both on the development of a socialist vision out of the women’s movement and on the buried contribution of feminist activism to the history of socialist politics in the U.S. Has U.S. feminism been less resistant to socialist politics than the U.S. Left has been to feminism? Through what organizational forms can women and feminism best influence and challenge the Left? What are the political limits and strengths of the bonds of sisterhood?

Loie Hayes turns to Cynthia Enloe’s discussion of the militarization of women’s lives, *Does Khaki Become You?*, to elaborate the insights feminism brings to anti-militarist politics. She takes up a dilemma that many of us as both feminists and anti-militarists have faced: how does
feminism influence our response to U.S. intervention, and the increasing militarization of the U.S. role in the world? Following Enloe, she forces us to consider both the impact of U.S. foreign policy on women around the globe, as well as the domestic underpinnings which enlist women in the mission of the military.

Kathleen Weiler reviews *The Tidy House*, in which a teacher in England analyzes a story about family life written by three working class girls in a primary school. She underlines how starkly children's writing exposes the contradictions between ideology and experience, between what these young girls see and understand about the confinement and tensions in "tidy houses," at the same time that they reproduce the cultural idealization of home and motherhood, which they assume will be their futures. As a teacher, she argues passionately that what happens in schools is not foreordained by the schools' assigned position as transmitter of dominant cultural norms and ideology. Rather, she maintains, reading and writing are critical political tools and schools can be spaces where radical teachers help children to re-envision the world which confines them.

In *RA* Vol. 15, No. 5 (Sept.-Oct. 1981), we examined the various strategies developed by American business to overcome the seemingly chronic recession of the 1970s. As part of this search for "new ideas," American managers began to cast envious glances at a Western-oriented capitalist economy that did appear to work. Just how did Japanese business keep labor relations harmonious, productivity and quality control high, and profits soaring? Those in favor of a more well-developed form of state capitalism pointed to the close cooperation between Japanese firms and the state. Another key to Japanese success was the supposed ability of Japanese companies to elicit fanatical loyalty and constantly rising productivity through the implementation of a system of labor relations vastly different from that of American companies. It was reported that Japanese workers in return for their fidelity benefitted from a form of "cradle-to-grave" paternalism in the form of lifetime employment guarantees, and a generous wage and benefits program. Secondly, Japanese firms did not lord over their workers but instead enlisted their participation in the organization of the production process. This cooperative approach made the workers feel appreciated and happy, hence more productive.

On closer inspection, the myths unravel. Only 35 per cent, mostly male, of the Japanese labor force receives the lifetime guarantees and generous benefits. And, while these workers are relatively more privileged, the implications of lifetime employment with large, extremely right-wing multinational firms are not pleasant. The second myth of the happy, productive Japanese worker sharing responsibility for production is debunked by our reprint of an article by Eichi Itoh entitled "Labor Control Through Small Groups." Itoh, a Japanese postal worker, explains how: beginning in the 1960s, Japanese managers in both the public and private sectors shifted away from direct control of the labor process, Taylorism, to the tenets of so-called humanistic management. Now, workers are organized in small group production teams (bypassing the union structure) which serve both as conduit for company propaganda, and as a structured setting for peer group pressure to meet the company's goals. The imposition of this form of pseudo worker control was not a harmonious process and Itoh's chronicle of the resistance to these "innovations" destroys the illusion of a totally quiescent Japanese working class. The alacrity with which Americans accepted this illusion is connected with racist notions about Asian docility and herd mentality.

Itoh points out that the theoretical base for labor control through small groups is derived from the early work of American organizational theorists. This long and dishonorable tradition has brought us such concepts as progressive management and human resource development — ideas considered gospel in management programs across the land. As with past innovations of management science, the importation of Japanese labor relations techniques to the United States bodes ill for American workers. In his introduction Martin Glaberman discusses how auto manufacturers not satisfied with givebacks have drastically modified work rules and established even greater control of the workplace while simultaneously establishing Quality Circles, sug-
gestion boxes, etc. The implementation of these
“innovations” has been a cover for the further
erosion of workers’ rights.

Itoh’s article fits in with RA’s long standing
emphasis on issues relating to control at the point
of production and social relations at the work-
place. It is from this perspective that we will con-
tinue to explore the ramifications of the “Japani-
zation of the American Workplace.”

Three issues ago (Vol. 17, No. 4, July-August
1983) we printed two articles, Catherine MacKin-
non’s discussion of the politics of abortion “The
Male Ideology of Privacy: A Feminist Perspec-
tive on Abortion” and Boas Evron’s analysis of
the political uses of the Holocaust, “Holocaust:
The Uses of Disaster,” which, to our delight,

have elicited a great deal of response and debate.
We apologize both to our readers and to those
who wrote as soon as the articles appeared (now
almost 8 months ago) for the delay in publishing
the debate. Our special issue on the Mel King
Campaign and Coalition Politics in the Eighties
intervened to delay the debate for an extra issue.
We are printing here responses to MacKinnon by
Ros Petchesky and Carol Joffe, as well as a reply
by the author; and a series of critiques of Boas
Evron’s article and our editorial introduction to
it, in which we characterized Israeli policy as
“genocidal.” We are also printing a reply by
Evron and by the RA editors. We intend to con-
tinue the discussion of the multiple issues of anti-
semitism, the Middle East, the Holocaust, and
the situation of the Palestinians in future issues.

The one on the left will start WWII.
The one on the right will end it.

PEACE—not war—in 84
mobilization
FOR SURVIVAL
853 Broadway, Room 2109,
New York, NY 10003
LISTENING TO THE VOICES OF BLACK FEMINISM

E. Frances White

Black feminism has emerged at the juncture between anti-racist and anti-sexist struggles. In this space, black women have turned their marginalization in both arenas into a vital political force. Until recently the most visible manifestation of this black feminism came through the fiction of black writers. Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, and many others spoke to us and for us. Now a small but highly visible cadre of women have taken up their pens to construct the feminist theories that complement the ongoing literary renaissance.

This article takes a critical look at this growing body of theoretical writing. It begins with an introduction that delineates the context in which this writing as well as my own black feminism emerged. Next comes a section that looks in depth at revisions of Afro-American history influenced by black women looking at their largely ignored past. Finally this historical

The ideas in this article have crystallized after years of dialogue with my feminist friends. Among these friends are Marla Erlien and Margaret Cerullo, who first suggested and then read and commented on the article. Also Kay Johnson, along with Cerullo, helped deepen my understanding of feminist theory. Nina Payne read the next-to-last version and selflessly shared her version of engaged writing; in the process she helped me to communicate my passionate concerns and anger. Finally, Paulla Ebron shared her extensive bibliographic knowledge and spent countless hours hashing out with me the issues involved in black feminism. Without her help, this article could not have been written. But of course, only I can take the weight for the ideas presented here.

excursion informs the concluding section on the three issues — family, class, and sexuality — that form the core of contemporary black feminist theory.

Many of today’s most articulate spokeswomen took part in the black student, civil rights, and black nationalist movements. Like their white counterparts, these women felt frustrated by restraints imposed on them by the men with whom they shared the political arena. I remember refusing to leave discussions at regional black student society meetings to go help out in the kitchen. The process of alienation from those militant and articulate men had begun for me. A few of my sisters and I refused to be persuaded by those arguments about the need for black men to assert their masculinity. Yet to my horror, my classmates at the all-women’s college I attended began to echo these sentiments as they argued that the time had arisen for black women to take a back seat to black men. We had to give them a chance to lead — a “privilege” they had long been denied. My incipient feminism railed against this position and the emerging women’s liberation movement supported my stance.

Other black women shared a growing alienation from black nationalism’s celebration of black manhood. None would have denied that black men had been horribly and consistently oppressed in the United States. We had been driven by the knowledge that black men were imprisoned, mutilated, and killed in an effort to keep all blacks in subordinate roles. We knew that more black men were likely to face jail sentences, chain gangs, and even the gallows than black women. But the notion that we were either complicit in their oppression or that we should pay for what white society had done to them seemed, at best, a cruel and twisted interpretation of our history.

The move into feminism was hastened by the

*Nashville students take their books and sit in at local lunch counters, Feb. 13, 1960.*
demise of black liberation movements in the '70s, as vicious government attacks on black organizations effectively neutralized efforts toward any significant improvement in black life in this country. The confusion that reigned in the wake of the government assault led many to escape into fantasy causes. In search for easy solutions to our increasingly demoralized state, quasi-religious institutions such as the Nation of Islam flourished. The Black Muslims must be acknowledged for their work in rescuing alienated drug abusers and imprisoned black men. Yet the movement’s leaders were in the forefront of the call for greater restrictions on women. The Nation proposed models of the family that had very little to do with black reality. These petty capitalists wanted women rigidly confined to a domestic sphere ultimately dominated by men. As I experimented with Afros and cornrows, my female friends in the Nation resurrected their straightening combs. They traded their pants for long skirts, insisted on bras, and asked permission to commute to and from work.

Meanwhile other black women joined cultural nationalist groups that placed the black family at the center of their program. These groups, such as the Committee for Unified NewArk in Newark and the Institute of Positive Education in Chicago, harkened to mythical African values to justify their misogynist positions. The appeal of such groups to black women totally escaped me at the time. But now, with some distance, I can recognize that the cultural nationalists appeared to offer protection from the harsh realities of poverty and street violence that many women faced. Black men, although dominant, were to become responsible for the financial support of the family, thus helping to lift a burden women had often carried singlehanded. Cultural nationalists affirmed aspects of black culture that differed from European-American culture thereby creating a black autonomous space. Their critiques of the dominant society threatened white hegemony enough to elicit repressive measures from the state. But their view that a conservative family structure provided a refuge from racial oppression blocked arguments for women’s independence.

Frances Beale’s 1975 article “Slave of a Slave No More” responded directly to cultural nationalists and their self-serving interpretations of African history and culture. She, in turn, is unfairly hostile to our African past — a position that stems from a variant of Marxism. This view organizes human history into succeeding and increasingly progressive economic stages; pre-colonial Africans, then, lived in a primitive state with backward social relations. Despite this unfairly negative interpretation of African history, Beale does make the crucial point that sexual relations in the past do not represent viable models for the Afro-American present.

Beale’s article, along with such other classics as Tony Cade’s The Black Woman, reached out to the early black feminists as we emerged battle-scarred from our confrontation with cultural nationalists. A few early attempts were made to break down the barriers among isolated black feminists. For example, in 1973 black women joined together in New York to found the National Black Feminists Organization. The NBFO failed ultimately because little consensus had emerged over what a black feminist perspective could be. Smaller groups, such as the Combahee River Collective, were more successful. The women in Combahee River have attracted much attention from feminists because their positions on black feminism have been widely disseminated and their alliances with white feminists have helped raise the race issue in the feminist community. Their political actions taken around issues that

Plan of the Brookes, slave ship, 1788. Built to accommodate 451, it carried as many as 609 captives according to abolitionists.
affected all black women in their home base, Boston, have been particularly impressive. When they took up the cause of black female murder victims, their cries appealed to white feminists as well as Boston's blacks.

Many black feminists sought out white feminists in what at first seemed like a natural alliance: womanhood. Feminism made all women more aware of themselves as women and extended support to black women as they confronted the sexism of black men. Serious divisions among women were temporarily obscured by the call for women to unite. Black women entered alliances with white women with the expectation that a raised consciousness of female oppression led to a constructive sensitivity towards other forms of subordinating oppressions. When many white feminists remained blind to major class and race differences, black feminists felt betrayed. Some renounced feminism altogether and joined those blacks who charged that feminism was relevant only to white women. Others, shocked by racism and a blatant ignorance of class bias in the women's movement, sought out an independent position that attempted to sensitize feminists to race and class issues. Indeed, much black feminist writing today addresses white women in an effort to point out the errors of their ways, a sentiment captured by Lorraine Bethel in her prose poem, “What Chou Mean We, White Girl?” Gloria Joseph, a black feminist whose commitment to black liberation becomes obvious through her writings, highlights differing perspectives of black and white feminists. She also demonstrates her commitment to working through these differences by jointly authoring Common Differences with Jill Lewis, a white, British-born feminist. It is clear from Joseph's research that Bethel's poem strikes a deep chord among black feminists, some of whom have rejected the possibility of coalescing with white women. Many are just damn angry and justifiably so.

Yet just at the time I was beginning to despair that we spend so much time in diatribes against racist white women that we have little time left for dialogue among ourselves, a new phase in black feminist writing emerged. The articles in Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology, edited by Barbara Smith, recognized the need for coalitions with white women but focused
mainly on issues of direct concern to black women. The recent pentalog between five black feminist literary critics printed in Conditions: Nine was also a refreshing change from the earlier trend of speaking mainly to a white audience.’ As I read this piece, I felt that they addressed issues that I faced. For example, they offered insights on the problems inherent in being honestly critical of other black women’s work in journals read by many whites who have little understanding of black women. They argued for the importance of using the available forums to exchange ideas among black women and strengthen our analysis.

**Between Black and Female**

As black women responded to white women’s racism, they raised the issue of the intersection of race, gender, and class in the United States. Particularly relevant for this discussion has been the ongoing revision of black history that has been developing over the past decade. This reinterpretation begins with Africa.

Influenced by black nationalist movements, many black feminists have recognized the importance of Africa in Afro-American history. Unfortunately some have retained a simplistic and uninformed view. Jean Noble devotes a whole section of Beautiful, Also, Are the Souls of My Sisters to the South African militarist Shaka. Apparently neither Noble nor her editors at Prentice-Hall realized that Shaka was a man, a mistake equivalent to getting Napoleon’s gender wrong. In Common Differences, Gloria Joseph romanticizes the African past by discussing African women as strong and powerful rulers. She never raises questions about what the quality of life would have been for most women living under these rulers. And yet this evocation of the African past is an effort to recapture our stolen legacy, an effort important to us not only as black people but also specifically as black women.

While making a more extensive attempt to explore African women’s history, Bell Hooks and Frances Beale accept nineteenth-century accounts of African women at face value and thus see them primarily as beasts of burden. The complexities of African women’s history disappear behind the issue of whether or not African women are strong or weak. Placing African women in the context of African cultures and history reveals that African women’s ability to control their labor and sexuality and to exercise power has differed greatly over time and place, as it must in so intricate and varied a continent. In pre-colonial West Africa, the area most closely tied to Afro-Americans, women, responsible for much of the farm labor and petty trading, banded together in organizations that represented their interests. These groups (secret societies, trade associations, and kinship networks) were structured hierarchically by age and ability. While such organizations allowed women to exercise great power, ultimately men controlled the society. In such societies where power stemmed from lineages and production was based in these lineages, men’s dominant positions in families gave them (especially older men) greater access to power than women had.

As we attempt to understand the balance of power and social relations of production in African societies — as we search out our African roots — we black women have special obligations. For too long we have been the victims of those who have created false and negative images of us merely to suit their own purposes. We must not do the same to our African sisters: our purposes must not distort the African reality. Moreover, we stand to
benefit from careful and sensitive explorations into African history, for the insight gained from this inquiry influences our view of how sexism entered into Afro-American culture. Was pre-colonial Africa characterized by powerful women who only lost control of their lives when they became enslaved in America? Or were African women beasts of burden who continued their suffering in the US? Was sexism in Afro-American culture a distortion of African culture imposed on black people during slavery? Do we need to look beyond our white oppressors for the source of at least some of the suffering black women endure?

Black feminists continue their reinterpretation of black history into the slave era. Once again the origin and extent of sexism in Afro-American culture occupies our attention. All agree that historians have generally ignored black women in slavery. An early attempt to redress this imbalance is Angela Davis’s influential work “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves.” This essay deserves an honored place in black feminist writing. Angela Davis sat in her jail cell and, despite her limited resources, wrote a compassionate essay that spoke powerfully of black female resistance to slavery. Her own bondage gave her insights into a past that became a metaphor for racial oppression today. Her focus on resistance to slavery must have given her strength in the long days of her incarceration.

In both “Reflections” and her more recent book Women, Race and Class, Davis demonstrates a keen sense of what it meant to black people to have their labor appropriated. Yet when it comes to her analysis of the black family she betrays a limited understanding of feminist issues. For Davis, the black family in
slavery was characterized by sexual equality.

Within the confines of their family and community life, therefore, Black people managed to accomplish a magnificent feat. They transformed that negative equality which emanated from the equal oppression they suffered as slaves into a positive quality: the egalitarianism characterizing their social relations.12

Clearly black men never possessed the resources to maintain the kind of patriarchal rule that richer white men could. But black people not only created a strong family institution as Davis suggests but also expected men to head these families whenever possible. As is clear from Herbert Gutman’s work on the Black Family in Slavery and Freedom13 and my own beginning-stage research on rice plantations along the South Carolina coast, even many slave owners identified men as heads of these families. There was an ideological bond between slave holding men and slave men that placed men at the heads of black families.

It is at the level of interpreting ideology that Davis goes most astray. Her vision is blinded by her view of slavery as only a labor institution—a view that cannot explicate the social relations that underlay this society. She does not fully understand the contradictions inherent in such a racist and sexist system. The question of how to reconcile such rigid categories as male, female, black, and white has continued to plague US social relations. If female means mother-housewife, as Davis argues, then what does black female mean? If male signifies patriarch and black, slave, then what is a black male? Davis argues that black women escaped the restrictive definition of “womanhood” and gained equality with black men inside the family structure. But given the seriousness of this contradiction in a racist and sexist society, no such all-encompassing resolution was possible.

The contradiction inherent in the idea “black female” is partially resolved by the bad woman/good woman formulation. Black women, like poor white women, were bad women. Yet in her discussion of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin14, Davis herself provides a case where this formulation breaks down. Stowe gains sympathy from her white readers for the important character Eliza by portraying her as a duly concerned mother—a good woman. Davis maintains:

The central figure (Eliza) is a travesty of the Black woman, a naïve transposition of the mother-figure, praised by the cultural propaganda of the period, from white society to the slave community. Eliza is white motherhood incarnate, but in blackface—or rather, because she is a “quadroon,” in just-a-little-less-than-white face.15

Ironically, the ideological contradiction between black and female left room for abolitionists to manipulate these symbols against slave society. The abolitionists demanded to know how moral whites could stand by and watch children torn from the breasts of their mothers in a society where motherhood was so highly valued. Abolitionists attempted to use the emotional appeals of motherhood and womanhood to soften the negative messages of blackness. Given the popularity of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, such appeals worked for a large section of the northern population.

Bell Hooks also looks at racism and sexism...
during the slave era but she comes to very different conclusions from the ones found in Davis's work. For Hooks, sex roles in the slave community mirrored those among the master class because black men adopted “white sexist attitudes towards women.” This position virtually ignores the development of an independent black culture that shared some values with white Americans but also transformed African values into Afro-American ones. Moreover, her view underestimates the complexity of the interaction between racism and sexism just as Davis's work does.

Hooks does point out correctly that a sexual division of labor that favored men existed in the slave community. Both women and men labored in the fields. However, the most prestigious and skilled positions, such as coppering and blacksmithing, were reserved for men. Women did most of the domestic labor often after putting in as many hours in the fields as men. Yet it is likely that this division of labor stemmed from African values as well as Euro-American ones. Moreover, the existence of this division contradicts Hooks's notion that black women were masculinized during slavery because they performed male tasks. Once again, a one-dimensional attempt to explain the complex interactions between race and sex fails.17

When Hooks points out the relatively privileged position of men in the slave community, she angrily castigates historians and sociologists for ignoring the exploitation of black women. Strongly and justly she argues that social scientists have been more interested in the symbolic emasculation of black men than the actual rape of black women. Ironically, discussions of the sexual exploitation of black women have centered around the meaning of this treatment for black men's self-esteem. Missing is any sympathy for the physical and emotional scars left on black girls and women. Moreover, the emphasis is on black men's loss of control over black women. Hooks explains:

To suggest that men were dehumanized solely as a result of not being able to be patriarchs implies that the subjugation of black women was essential to the black male's development of a positive self-concept, an idea that only served to support a sexist social order.18

Here Hooks’s acute sense of the injustice black women have faced over the years sets straight the history of Afro-Americans as presented by mainstream social scientists. But is Hooks fair to black men? Is her obvious anger at them justified? These are questions black readers inevitably must ask as they read Ain't I a Woman. I conclude that her poorly thought-out arguments and unsubstantiated accusations distort her justifiable anger into an unfair diatribe against black men. In an attempt to demonstrate the impact of sexism on black women, she takes unnecessary swipes at black men, whom she indicts for standing idle as women labored at difficult jobs. Given a slave system where the possibility of successful revolt was remote, how can we criticize black men for
failing to take collective action in support of black women? In her futile attempt to rank the oppressions of enslaved men and women, Hooks appears to forget the magnitude of the oppression all black people faced.

Hooks's distortion of the slave era stems from her lack of sources and her misuse of those she has. For example, she tells us that during the colonial era, slave parents failed to prepare their daughters to face sexual exploitation because blacks avoided issues of sexuality just as their white owners did. Given the paucity of slave testimony and writing from the colonial era, I wonder what sources could have provided Hooks with such as intimate view of slave interaction and worldview. Moreover the fact that she relies on the Linda Brent narrative without mentioning that some historians consider it to be a fake weakens what evidence she does use.

Hooks's misinterpretations of black history set the foundation for her views about the present. She argues that black and white men, bound together in their sexism and male violence, both have "a serious commitment to maintaining political regimes throughout the United States and the world that are male-dominated.

It is absurd and infuriating to equate the power of white men with that of black men who lack even the most basic control over their own lives and whose fate for the most part is imprisonment or early death.

Ain't I a Woman has elicited in me the same angry reaction I had to Michelle Wallace's Black Macho and the Myth of the Black Superwoman. I felt heartened that a black woman called black men on their misogyny in a book accessible to many black people. Hooks and Wallace do us a great service by highlighting the undercurrent of sexual politics in black liberation struggles. But both grossly overstate their case when they argue, for example, that Angela Davis was admired only for her beauty and devotion to black men and not at all for her political convictions. However much we rejected and continue to reject Davis's Communist Party positions, we cried for her because she challenged this racist and capitalist system. To reduce, as Hooks and Wallace effectively have, our anti-racist struggles to an attempt by black men to recapture their patriarchal rule over black women is unfair not only to black men but also to all black people.

Like other black feminists, I was incensed not only by the uncritical way many white feminists accepted Hooks's and Wallace's ideas, but also by the ease with which presses published their misinformation. Strong but sensitive editorial guidance from someone knowledgeable about Afro-American history could have improved these books and strengthened the valuable insights both offer. The pentalog by the five black feminist literary critics in Conditions: Nine characterized the phenomenon of uncritical editing and acceptance of black women's work as the dancing dog syndrome: no one expects dogs to dance; any dog who jumps around on its hind legs will be praised for good dancing. The racism implicit in the uncritical acceptance of Wallace's and Hooks's works further alienated black women from white feminists.

When black feminists look at the first wave of feminism, the problems inherent in forging alliances with white women are highlighted. Ironically many white women, some of whom were in the most radical wing of the movement, learned the language and political skills to confront their own oppression through their work in the anti-slavery movement. Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Sarah and Angelina Grimke all worked toward abolition of slavery and helped articulate the first responses to changes that women faced from the increasing separation of production from the home. Tragically, many of these early feminist crusaders, including Anthony and Stanton, later denied the roots of their movement in the anti-slavery struggles and got swept along with the virulent racism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Frustrated by their efforts to have women's suffrage included in the Fifteenth Amendment, they joined in alliances with blatant racists who worked against black male suffrage. Admittedly Frederick Douglass's misguided approach of placing black male suffrage above female suffrage (despite his commitment to the latter) alienated Stanton and Anthony, but this does not sufficiently explain their willingness to sacrifice the rights of black people for their own gain. Northern white women pushed aside their
old allies, such as Douglass, to gain the support of southern white women. And it was not beneath such feminists as Stanton to argue that white women should gain the vote so that white supremacy could be maintained. 21

This betrayal stands as a harsh lesson for black feminists and feminists such as Bell Hooks and Angela Davis have been justifiably harsh in their assessment of this treachery. It came at a point when black people desperately needed allies — the period when white people searched for ways to keep blacks in subordinate roles despite abolition. In those dark post-reconstruction days, black people faced new threats: death by lynch mob; virtual enslavement on chain gangs and in prison work camps; and segregation enforced by Jim Crow laws.

Already accustomed to agitating for the end of slavery, blacks attacked post-slavery oppression with renewed vigor. Prominent among these attacks was the black women’s club movement. For the leaders of the movement, such as Mary Church Terrell and Ida B. Wells-Barnett, the clubs were seen as a way to mobilize black women for the “uplift” of the entire race. They did try to establish links to white women’s clubs but often found themselves rejected by those who feared contamination of their womanhood. Ironically white feminists, such as Belle Kearney from Mississippi, remained captive to the very notions about womanhood that kept white women subordinate. Purity of the white race was inextricably linked to purity of white womanhood. Failing as they did to recognize the pitfalls inherent in accepting separation from working-class and black women, white middle-class women supported a system that gave them a certain amount of power based on class and race but less power than white middle-class and upper-class men kept for themselves.

Similar contradictions plagued the black women’s club movement. The middle-class members of these clubs were more closely linked to poor black women than their white counterparts were linked to poor white women. Racial solidarity helped foster these links and kept the club members in touch with the needs of their less fortunate sisters. Yet what in hindsight seems so clear remained hidden to the club leaders. They failed to recognize the need to attack the ideology behind the notion of good women and bad women. They struggled to have black women reclassified as good women rather than admitting the bankruptcy of the entire concept. They keenly felt the injustice toward black women, who had few defenses against rape but yet were accused of having loose morals. They knew the danger black women faced when they walked down the street alone or worked as domestics. After striving to become “ladies,” they felt personally wounded when they failed to achieve this status in the eyes of white people. The black women’s clubs worked both to introduce bourgeois habits to poor black women and to convince whites of their ability to acquire these habits.

Among their most serious campaigns was the attack on white supremacist rule through lynch mobs. Neither black women nor men were safe
from the terror of the lynch mob although black men clearly faced these mobs more often than women did. Traditional Afro-American historians have looked at this period narrowly. They argue correctly that the charge of rape against innocent black men was more about defending white supremacy than its symbol, “White Womanhood.” The recent work by Mary Frances Berry and John Blassingame carefully expose the lie behind this blatant racist attack on black people as a whole. But Blassingame and Berry ignore other important variables. As Angela Davis who comes much closer to understanding the “myth of the black rapist” argues, this myth strengthened not only white hegemony but also white men’s control over white women. To support this position, she quotes Mary Talbert, one of the black women leaders of the Anti-Lynching Crusaders:

Economic dependence, contacts with none save “polite, refined, womanly” pursuits, mental activities in no other field than home life — all these male-imposed restrictions have borne more heavily upon women in the South and have been maintained more rigidly than in any other part of the country.

In short, the myth that “White Womanhood” needed defending helped to circumscribe the arenas in which white women could operate.

Davis also links the fiction of the molested white woman with the very real rape suffered by black women. Sexual assaults on black women perpetrated by white men continued in the post-bellum period as if slavery had not ended; white men maintained the right to possess black women’s bodies. Bell Hooks would agree:

Sexual exploitation of black women undermined the morale of newly manumitted black people. For it seemed to them that if they could not change negative images of black womanhood they would never be able to uplift the race as a whole. Married or single, child or woman, the black female was a likely target for white male rapist.

Both Hooks and Davis should have added that the barrier of white skin privilege that protected most white women from black men left black women open to attacks by those men. Virtually no legal protection was provided for women who could be portrayed as loose and licentious. Under such conditions, black women — promiscuous by definition — found it nearly impossible to convince the legal establishment that men of any race should be prosecuted for sexually assaulting them. The vulnerability they faced was greater than that suffered by all black people from black-on-black crime: the rape of black women was simply no crime at all.

The Black Family: Defiance and Accommodation

Black feminist history helps illuminate the present condition of black women because it sheds light on such important feminist concerns as class, sexuality, and the family. As black feminists look at the contemporary scene, it is with these three subjects that they are most concerned.

Creating in its wake an impoverished and marginal class of black women, capitalist devel-
development has had such a negative impact that many black feminists have focused on its interaction with race and sex. Most published black feminists grew up in or surrounded by working-class families. Because of their commitment to black liberation, these women have not forgotten their less privileged sisters. Although they share with many white feminists a healthy critique of the simplistic Marxian analysis that concentrates solely on class and capitalism (Angela Davis is an exception here), they have been influenced by socialist traditions. The Combahee River Collective declared:

We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy. We are socialists because we believe that work must be organized for the collective benefit of those who do the work and create the products and not for the benefit of the bosses.
Bonnie Thornton Dill, in “Race, Class and Gender: Prospects for an All-inclusive Sisterhood,” approaches systematically the oppressive forces in black women’s lives. Although she would agree with the women in the Combahee River Collective that the three systems affect black women simultaneously, she analytically separates race, gender, and class to illuminate the way they shape women’s lives. Through her study of black household workers, Dill has focused much-needed attention on the only job that most black women found available to them during the first half of the twentieth century. Talk about people who kept General Motors running! Not only did they free many white men, women, and children from the drudgery of housework, they also gave many white men an illusion of patriarchy, complete with idle women and children. Then these maids combined their hard-earned wages with men’s low and often sporadic earnings in order to enable the black community to survive the permanent depression it faced.

These household workers — invisible in most feminist literature as they were invisible in the households themselves — have many stories to tell of their triple oppression. Recently, an ex-domestic worker, now in her seventies, entertained me with black humor-laced tales about her work experience in the South and North. Each episode ended with, “I done seen some hard times.” And I remember my mother telling me how she walked home three miles in a blizzard rather than stay overnight at work, despite the protestations of her employers, because of her previous experience with sexual harassment on that job.

Dill points out that black women were concentrated in household work because they were poor, black, and female. Their poverty limited their economic resources and educational opportunities. Their race narrowed their employment options to the servicing functions that grew out of their role in slavery. Their gender relegated them to household work in a society where the sexual division of labor assigned women most domestic chores. Since the ’60s, most black women have escaped household work but few have escaped to a better life. Now their class, race, and gender combine to keep many in the growing underclass dependent on a state that has little use for them.

The contemporary black family also receives concerned attention from black feminists. Hazel Carby, a member of Britain’s black feminist movement, has identified a central contradiction that makes the task of black feminists difficult.

We would not seek to deny that the family can be a source of oppression for us but we also wish to examine how the black family has functioned as a prime source of resistance to oppression. We need to recognize that during slavery, periods of colonization, and under the present authoritarian state, the black family has been a site of political and cultural resistance to racism.

Moreover, the black family has in its very structure even deeper contradictions. The establishment of the family during slavery, for example, can be viewed both as an act of defiance (as an institution where slaves actively and forcefully created their own space) and an act of accommodation (as an institution that bound Afro-Americans to the slave system). Historically, the black family has contained an unusual amount of sexual equality, as is demonstrated by women’s ability to control their economic life. But sexism reigns nonetheless. By recognizing only the positive aspects of the black family and ignoring the power imbalance that favors men, anti-feminists have been able to criticize feminists as anti-black. Others have studied the black family as if feminism never existed. Numerous studies have been undertaken to explicate the extensive support networks based in the black extended family while the unequal distribution of power among its members goes unnoticed. It is within the family, along with other key institutions such as schools and the media, that black women are socialized to seek out and remain in heterosexual relationships that are often abusive. Lesbian and other alternatives are suppressed. Neither are black women taught to challenge black men on their sexism. Instead, women are offered tools to help them persevere when men withdraw from their part in the collective responsibility for the family or remain present but abusive. The black family has evolved into an institution that offers shelter for the black community in the face of political repression.
and economic depression. Unfortunately black women continue to pay the heaviest toll for keeping this shelter together.

Beth Richie-Bush has emerged as a powerful black feminist voice speaking out against domestic violence. Co-chair of the Women of Color Task Force of the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, she began organizing in the black and Latin communities with the intention of assisting families in their fight against the oppression they faced. Soon, however, it became apparent to her that these families had serious internal problems that threatened black women’s lives.

After a period of time, I gradually realized that some of these strong, culturally-identified families, which we had been supporting so vehemently, were dangerous places for some women to live. Furthermore, the political machine at the forefront of the grass-roots community movement was in fact subtly exploiting women by denying the reality of sexual oppression. As I began to look closely, the incidents of battering, rape and sexual harassment became obvious.33

Yet Richie-Bush felt trapped by the fear that the Third World communities would accuse her of disloyalty if she spoke out against battering and sexual abuse in a community under siege from racial and economic oppression. She eventually found her voice to protest domestic violence by giving the women among whom she worked the space to bring out issues that were important to them. The problem of domestic violence naturally emerged during this process, and served, as it has for many black women, as a path into feminist consciousness.

Richie-Bush has done us a service by exposing the fallacies in the analysis offered by Battered Minority Women, or BMW, based in New York. Along with sister organizations in Boston, Los Angeles, Detroit, and Atlanta, BMW exposes the impact of racism on the black family but denies the reality of sexism within the black community. From this perspective, black women do the entire community a service by receiving “regular whippings in order to alleviate black men’s stress.”32 Accordingly, they are proud of the high rate in which women return to their “safe homes.” The perniciousness of such an absurd argument coming from black women makes me shudder. Yet it clearly illustrates the way an analysis that focuses on racism to the exclusion of an understanding of sexism can add to the burdens that black women face. As Richie-Bush would maintain, the women in BMW have become trapped in a false loyalty to race that struggles for the freedom of black people by sacrificing black women.

In the literature on black families, little attention has been paid to same-sex relations. Much of the mother-daughter literature that does exist is culturally bound to Euro-American traditions. Nancy Chodorow’s Reproduction of Mothering, for example, ignores cultural difference and presents a universal model of motherhood.34 Her Euro-centric bias reflects the psychoanalytic tradition from which she
draws much of her analysis. Her oversight also reflects the tendency of some white feminists to think of white women as representing Womanhood.

Gloria Joseph’s work stands as a much-needed challenge to these traditions. She is virtually alone as she takes seriously the black mother/daughter dyad. Her work will stand as a model against which future works will be compared.

Joseph insists that race intervenes in the mothering process and thus the black mother/daughter dyad must be placed within the context of this racist society to be understood. For example, black mothers not only teach their daughters how to survive in the black community but also how to continue the survival of the black community itself. She argues that historically black mothers and daughters have been subject to conditions different from those of white mothers and daughters.

Societal conditions intensified Black mother/daughter relationships. While societal factors had a tendency to fracture the European mother/daughter relationship, in an ironical way they forced the role of the Black mother in her family to persevere.  

Consequently the mother is more valued in black culture than in Euro-American cultures. Yet Joseph is aware of the contradictions inherent in the celebration of black motherhood.

The Black mother, however, is also a woman, and herein lies the great contradiction. The “honored” mother is the same second-class citizen who is often regarded and treated as an object to be used, bruised, and abused for years and who is considered to be used up after thirty, forty, or forty-five years. The societal attitude toward Mother is one of both idealization and degradation. The mother’s role in the family is symbolic of contradiction and contrasts.

As black women fulfill this unique role, they socialize their daughters to become independent beings who, ironically, define themselves in relationship to black men.

While we must take white feminists to task for the color-blind way they often have approached mothering, certain insights gained from their studies can help us avoid common mistakes. Nancy Chodorow and Susan Contrato have examined the literature on mothering and noted the strong tendency to portray mothers as all-powerful creatures responsible for the psychological health or illness of children. There are only good mothers and bad mothers just as there are only good girls and bad girls. Joseph’s work has the tendency to fall into this thinking. Her black mothers are strong black women: good mothers.

Mothers loom like giants in the lives of most women. We all face the psychological struggles involved in paring these giants down to human proportions. This task is made particularly difficult for black women because we so identify with our mothers’ struggles. Many of us have mothers who persevered through hard times; an increasing number, mothers who raised us alone. Despite their good efforts, our mothers face many negative images in this society. How dare we admit the psychological battles that need to be fought with the very women who taught us how to survive in this racist and sexist world? We would feel like ungrateful traitors.

The dilemma facing black feminists who
want to reach a balanced understanding of black mothering is great. Yet we as feminists must struggle with this dilemma if we are to break the bonds that hold us in sexist relationships. As Gloria Joseph so rightly points out, many black mothers teach their daughters to expect sexist behavior from black men. Yet so many women remain trapped in abusive families. We need to understand the role mothers play in socializing women into both accepting and resisting our relationships to these families. Given the power men have in this society, we need all the insight we can garner to smash the sexism in the black community.

Black feminists are divided on how to deal with this sexism. Joseph argues that black women must reject any philosophy that includes "separation, rejection, or exclusion of men." For her, racism inextricably binds black women and men together. Within the black lesbian community, however, the issue of whether to abandon any attempt to sensitize black men to their sexism is hotly contested. The Combahee River Collective decared their intention to ally with progressive black men. Zulema, a black women's collective in San Francisco, is quoted as follows in the introduction to Top Ranking: A Collection of Articles on Racism and Classism in the Lesbian Community:

Many white women have the mistaken notion that there is only one women's community and that its needs and goals are a reflection of white society. This premise is not only narrow, it is incorrect. The presumption of separatism is one that we, as Third World women, vehemently object to... Many white women ignore the fact that as Third World women we have to struggle against racism as well as sexism. What hope do we as Third World people have if we separate according to our sex? True, we struggle against sexism in our various Third World movements, but we also struggle against racism in the women's movement. We do not see masses of white women coming forward to eliminate the racism in this society. To cut ourselves off from Third World men and to turn our backs on the problems of racism in this society would be akin to suicide.

Yet black lesbian separatists do exist and must be acknowledged. For them, black men are a lost cause; their sexism sets them off as enemies to all black women. Anna Lee (a pseudonym) declares in Interviews, "I want to be very clear about this — my vision of the future does not include males." While not denying that racism exists in the feminist and lesbian communities, black lesbian separatists give priority to the struggle against sexism. Until I read Anita Cornwell, I believed that such a political stance could come only from women who had not lived through the turmoil of the sixties and seventies. Such a position seemed divorced from the reality of racial and class oppression. Yet Cornwell's experience in the black community has led her to reject any alliance with black men. Her years of struggling with the isolation that stemmed from being a black lesbian in white and black communities resonates powerfully; hers is a voice that speaks with authority to younger lesbians.

Yet ultimately I find her position untenable. Clearly any vision that leads to such a narrow separatist position must be revealed for the shortsighted fantasy that it is. The brutality with which racial oppression is directed at us requires a collective response. Admittedly, I often feel pessimistic about the possibility of egalitarian sexual relations developing in the black community. Black men gain from their sexist relationships to women. Until we can force our black communities to protect women from abusive men — to take sexism as seriously as they do racial and class oppression — black
sexism will continue. Yet the potential we lose to sexism helps cripple the entire community: many women are too tired or too hurt to turn their attention to collective, anti-racist action. And yet we must. I agree with the Combahee River Collective that “We [must] struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism.”

Nonetheless black lesbian separatists, along with other black lesbians, have consistently pushed black feminists to acknowledge the existence of an alternative to heterosexual lifestyles. Some feminists, such as Bell Hooks and Angela Davis, have refused to take black lesbianism seriously enough to incorporate an understanding of heterosexism into their analysis. Given the major contribution of black lesbians to feminism as a whole, this denial represents an unjustifiable loss, and an outrageous one. Indeed, much of the best black feminist writing has come from the pens of black lesbians. By openly rejected heterosexual privilege, they have enlarged our vision of the profound contradictions in white and black society. Lesbians such as Barbara Smith and Audre Lorde have asserted themselves forcefully in issues that affect black women and men and women of every color and class.

As black lesbians have pushed for recognition, they have searched for a self-definition that recognizes their uniqueness from the experiences shared with others. Recently the black literary critics in Conditions: Nine even wondered if they should accept the label lesbian, a word some felt might not adequately cover the black experience. At the center of this search is the knowledge that race and class intervene to shape both the black lesbian self-image and the public characterization. Black women begin life as “bad girls” by dint of their race and, often, class. A decision to live openly as a lesbian threatens women with the loss of what protection the black community usually offers. In her introduction to Home Girls: A

Black Feminist Anthology, Barbara Smith provides a particularly graphic description of what it means to be an "out" lesbian and face the wrath of black men who feel threatened by independent black women. Particularly now, as conservative black churches and some nationalists condemn homosexuality as a threat to the very existence of the black community, black lesbians often face enforced isolation. Those lesbians who take a sincere interest in black liberation face the unfair task of trying to prove loyalty. And yet, some of us are very brave**; we refuse to deny our lesbianism, our feminism, and our blackness.

From the struggles against all the onerous forces that impinge on our lives, black feminism has emerged to promote the often neglected interests of black women. Not surprisingly the quality of our theoretical and political analysis varies: after all, we are thinking aloud, exchanging ideas, and groping for solutions. Yet the special condition of our marginality has made us particularly perceptive about the way oppressive forces interact in this society. The questions we pose in our quest for understanding, the challenges we raise in our anger, push at the frontiers of knowledge about how all of us remain oppressed. "Black women done seen some hard times and we got many stories to tell."

**Paraphrase from the marvelous title, All the women are White, All the Men are Black, But Some of Us are Brave.

FOOTNOTES

1. Nationalism is not inherently anti-woman. The Garvey movement of the 1920s contained much space for autonomous female activity. While much of the philosophy behind this autonomy was based on traditional Western notions of an appropriate female sphere, women nonetheless influenced the movement's direction. Most visible among the powerful female leaders was Amy Jacques Garvey, who effectively ran the United Negro Improvement Association during Marcus Garvey's imprisonment. She continued as an important force in Jamaican politics until her death in the early 1970s.


12. Ibid., p. 18.


15. Davis, Women, Race and Class, p. 15.


17. Hooks's argument that white women did not labor in the fields grossly underestimates the number of poor, farming families that either had no slaves or worked alongside their three or four slaves. Here Hooks perpetuates the romanticized vision of a South with many large plantations, lazy aristocrats, and numerous households.


23. Quoted in Davis, Women, Race and Class, p. 196.
24. Hooks, Ain’t I a Woman, p. 56.
29. Ibid., p. 17.
31. Joseph and Lewis, Common Differences, p. 82.
32. Ibid., p. 92.
34. Joseph and Lewis, Common Differences, p. 29.
38. The Combahee River Collective, p. 213.

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LABOR CONTROL THROUGH SMALL GROUPS

Japanese Labor Today

Eichi Itoh

The following article, by a Japanese postal-union activist, is reprinted (with editing) from the English-language publication Rank and File, which he publishes in Tokyo. In this article, the author describes the use of management-dominated "small groups" as a way of exerting greater control over workers. He seeks to relate this labor-relations technique to the writings of Frederick Winslow Taylor, Elton Mayo, and other Western pioneers of "management science."

The author wants contact and communication with North American labor activists. He can be written c/o Rank and File, Zentei Tokyo/Omori Branch, 3-9-13 Sanno, Otaku, Tokyo, Japan.

The article is followed by a commentary by Radical America associate editor Martin Glaberman, a longtime Detroit autoworker who has written extensively about issues of workplace control.

"Scientific management" was an early initiative to reorganize the workplace. Frederick Taylor recommended that management reorganize the workplace on the basis of three principles: (1) to select the best man for the job; (2) to instruct him in the most efficient methods, the most economical movements, to employ in his work; (3) to give incentives in

the form of higher wages to the best workers. Workers understood the meaning of “scientific management” and found ways to resist the changes which had so great an impact on their lives. In the long run they lost their struggle for control over the labor process, but they were not spiritually controlled. Rather, management removed workers from any participation in the planning and decision making. “All possible brain work should be removed from the shop and centered in the planning or layout department” (Taylor).

It was natural that under “scientific management” workers were indifferent to the quality of the work they did. The work became too monotonous. That is called “the alienation of labor.” At first management tried to overcome it with “the carrot or the stick.” Workers organized themselves and defended themselves against that. The industrialists changed the course a little bit and began to teach their employees that there is no alienation of labor because workers are part of management. The workers are divided into small groups and pseudo-control is given to them to let them work harder. Now, management tries to overcome the alienation of labor by brainwashing.

Theoretically, the labor control system through small groups is based not on the work of Taylor, Frank and Lillian Gilbreth, and Henry Ford, but on that of Elton Mayo and Abraham Maslow. The core of the latter theories is: (1) the atomistic view of society that studies the worker as an isolated unit must be denied; work is a group activity. (2) Informal groups within the work place exercise strong social controls over the work habits and attitudes of the individual worker. (3) There is something far more important than hours, wages, or physical conditions of work; the need for recognition, security, and sense of belonging is more important in determining workers’ morale and productivity. (4) Therefore it is necessary to link the informal groups with the company’s objective, the increase of productivity. This theory seems to be more humanistic than “Modern Times” management, but the realization of this theory led us to the hyper-controlled society.

In what follows, we look at three different types of workplaces to understand the use of small groups in Japanese industry.

**A Matsushita Worker Speaks**

We meet a female worker who works for the Radio Division of the Matsushita Electric Company. She is 22 years old and has worked there for 7 years. We follow her daily life.

8:00 a.m. her work begins. She and her colleagues gather around her group leader. Each worker at Matsushita belongs to a group of 20 to 30. Her working life centers on this group. Workers begin to sing a song of the company and then recite the code of their business. This code consists of Basic Business Principles, Employees’ Creed, and the Seven Spiritual Values. After reciting, one worker is asked to give a 10-minute talk to his group. This is called Shokan (impression). His theme is free. The central aim is to improve the skill of persuading others. One member of the group gives a shokan talk every morning, thus each person must talk to his or her group almost once a month. Today he talks about the relationship between the firm’s value and Japanese society.

8:15 a.m. She and her colleagues set to their routine work. “On the assembly line we work with great intensity,” she said.

Of course, people are distinct from one another. One can work at a high rate of speed, another not, but the group leader is always taking care of promoting efficiency. He comes down to help or to give advice to inefficient workers. The group leader is respected among workers. During the three years since we were employed by the company, we are set only in the seniority wage system. Three years later we are automatically ranked wage level A-2. I was an efficient worker so I was ranked A-3 soon.

When I reach A-4 I can take the examination for group leader. The group leader doesn’t work side by side with us. His job is to think how his group can increase productivity.

Her working day is as follows:

8:00-8:15 morning meeting
(Chokai)
8:15-10:00 routine work
10:00-10:10 10-minute break
10:10-12:00 work

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12:00-12:45 lunch break
12:45-2:20 work
2:20-2:30 10-minute break
2:30-4:40 work
4:40-4:45 evening meeting
(Yukai)
4:45-5:00 supper break
5:00-6:00 or 7:00 Overtime
(depending on business conditions)

At the evening meeting, they sing a company song again and then the group leader informs them of business conditions, tomorrow’s tasks, etc.

In the Matsushita company, QC (quality control) circles are also formed. Each group (han) is a QC circle at the same time. Quality Circles have been formed in thousands of factories since the 1960s. Workers are encouraged to organize QC circles “voluntarily” in order to make improvements or solve problems arising in their own daily work. QC circles are praised and considered a key to Japanese management by foreign economists; but for us, rank-and-file workers, it is clear we strangle ourselves.

At Matsushita a meeting of QC circles occurs once a week for almost 30 minutes after work to discuss how to promote efficiency and eliminate defects. The circle is “voluntary,” therefore they are not paid for QC activities. Once a month a whole factory morning meeting takes place where employees’ suggestions are rewarded. Under the slogan, “Think about your job, develop yourself and help us improve the company,” all the workers are forced to give suggestions, at least three per month. Each suggestion is ranked on a scale from grade 1 (Tokusen—outstanding) through 9. Grade 9 is called Kasaku (a fine work), and suggestions which are not ranked are called Sengai (left out of suggestion). She said:

If my suggestion is ranked grade 8 (Hakkyu), I get 1000 yen. Kasaku and Sengai are not monetarily rewarded, but if all the group members give suggestions, their group gets money (1500 yen, almost $6). We keep this money as a group fund and use it for a group trip of a New Year’s party. It is difficult for suggestions to receive rewards. Only when my suggestion leads to the company reducing the cost of production is mine rewarded.

The best suggestions receive company-wide recognition and special rewards are given. Many Japanese firms have suggestion programs. An important fact is that Matsushita not only rewards suggestions of employees but also organizes the suggestion movement. A suggestion-driving committee member is put in each group, and encourages group members to write suggestions.

The famous characteristic of the Matsushita company is to emphasize spiritual values. Matsushita trains workers to be pure company people. A kind of feudalistic moral philosophy plays a big ideological role in this company. Matsushita set up a school of philosophy and this school publishes a monthly journal, PHP, full of conservative ideological non-sense. It is free whether or not Matsushita workers subscribe to this magazine, but everybody subscribes to it. “If you want to get a good position in this company, you must read this journal. Many questions in the exams for promotions are related to the Matsushita philosophy.”

We were surprised to hear how she was completely controlled. Work on the assembly line is undoubtedly monotonous. If workers controlled the speed and there was a relaxed atmosphere, worker alienation would be resolved to some extent. Longer and more frequent rest periods and a wage increase are also necessary. But the Matsushita company tries to resolve the problem of worker alienation by brainwashing and competition. The small working group is effective for competition. Its members are manipulated to feel themselves to be superior to other groups in the competition to increase productivity. The naked exploitation is veiled by “Matsushita philosophy.” The “Seven Spirited Values” promulgated by the firm are as follows:

(1) National Service Through Industry
(2) Fairness
(3) Harmony and Cooperation
(4) Struggle for Betterment
(5) Courtesy and Humility
(6) Adjustment and Assimilation
(7) Gratitude
Every morning workers are forced to repeat these words, and they unconsciously become "company people." They unconsciously try to forget their material poverty and hesitate to doubt the company's policy and the society as a whole. And shokan, ten-minute talk, is also an effective way to make company people. Nobody can criticize the company's policy, because they are guided by Matsushita philosophy and the firm's values. And having to persuade others is the most effective way to persuade oneself.

At the workplace, the trade union plays almost no role. Like many big unions in private industry in Japan, the Matsushita union is a typical company union. With the phrase "long-term interests of workers in the market economy," the union has never organized a strike. To our questions, "Has the union ever been able to help you with a problem connected with your work?" "Do you know of anyone else who has been helped in this way?" "Do you talk about union matters at work?" she answered merely, "No." "If I need help at work, I'll go to my group leader, not to the union," she said.

Workers are not paid for QC activities. They meet to discuss productivity increases "autonomously," therefore they are not paid. This is the company's logic and the reality of "humanization of working life." It is nothing but deceit. It is also said that the QC activity is entirely voluntary, but nobody can leave for home. "Voluntary" means here invisible compulsion. Anyone refusing to take part in the QC meeting would be ostracized from the group.

In the private sector many workers are forced to participate in QC circles, to write suggestions, and to compete with each other to increase productivity. The forms of the labor control system through small groups vary from company to company, but there are characteristics shared with the Matsushita case, i.e., brainwashing, increased competition, invisible compulsion, and the disappearance of union activity at the workplace.

JNR Workers' Anti- Marusei Struggle

The labor control system through small groups was also introduced into public enterprises. There were strong unions, especially the JNR (Japan National Railway) unions and the Potal Workers' Union. Public workers found ways to resist reorganization of the work place, which clearly affected the union's strength and their lives.

From 1970 to 1971 at the work places of the Japan National Railway, small groups called "the study teams of the productivity increase movement" were organized by the management. This campaign was called the Marusei movement. The management aimed at a "revolution of workers' consciousness" to increase productivity. JNR unions, the National Railway Workers' Union (Kokuro) and the National Railway Locomotive Engineers' Union (Doro), were key unions and strong points in the Japanese labor movement. In the past the management had tried to eliminate their strength but always failed. For example, the management had set up a strike breakers' union, the Japan Railway Workers' Union (Tetsuro), and helped it to split workers from the two militant unions. This time the management set up "the study teams of the productivity increase movement" (Seiunken). Formally, the productivity campaign was not related to unions. "We want only to study the theory of the Productivity Drive," said a group member. Theoretically the productivity campaign must be conducted by "autonomous" small groups. In this sense his answer was right, but in practice the campaign was guided by the management to change the balance at the workplace in favor of the employer. The structure of the Marusei movement varied from one workplace to another, but it was summed up as follows:
(1) The Stationmaster served as president of the federation of the study groups and the section chiefs as vice presidents. Foremen were ranked as coordinators. This was the presidium of the productivity movement at a station. Under this presidium, the study teams, which consisted of five to seven members, were organized at the workplaces. Team leaders were selected among the members and they recruited new members. They often induced union workers to desert Kokuro or Doro unions and join the yellow union.

(2) There were many examinations linked with job quality, status, promotion within the JNR. Traindriver, trainmaster, machinist, trainman — all jobs were linked with examinations. The management tried to organize these examinations into the movement. They hinted, “If you join the study team of the productivity increase movement, you will pass the examination.”

(3) In some cases, all employees at a station were divided into small groups and joined the productivity campaign. It was ideal for management and became the model. It had the same function as QC circles in the private sector. Workers were forced to be always aware of efficiency and to conduct “autonomously” the productivity increase movement. They met once a week or every day after work to discuss the productivity increase through the method of “criticism and self-criticism” within the small group.

The productivity campaign was in a sense a “spiritual” movement aiming at “the revolution of the JNR employees’ consciousness.”

A report says:

Team leaders are sent to the joint study meetings for a week. They get lectures on increasing productivity and various management theories. But most important is the candle party which takes place on the last evening. Before a lighted candle, every worker is asked to make a vow to carry on the productivity increase movement at his work place. A worker begins to cry and confess: “I am ashamed for my unawareness of efficiency.” The atmosphere becomes emotional. Another says, “For a new JNR,” and all say together, “For a new JNR.”

When we realize that the JNR is a stronghold of militant trade unionism and workers are well organized, the meaning of the slogan “For a new JNR,” is clear. A new JNR would be a de-unionized one, or at least free of militant
unionism. The development of the productivity campaign coincided with an increasing number of unfair labor practices.

At first the two militant unions in JNR didn’t concern themselves so much with the productivity campaign. But after it became clear that the management had carried out a series of unfair labor practices, such as hinting at promotion for those who desert the two unions in order to get more unionists to join the campaign, the two unions counterattacked against the campaign. Marusei became the common word which meant the productivity increase movement through weakening the militant unions. At the shop floor, unionists who had participated in a study team were persuaded to desert the group. Meetings to promote a productivity campaign were prevented from taking place by unionists.

On the other hand, an intermediate labor court (Koro) ruled that the JNR authorities had interfered illegally with union activities, and ordered the JNR authorities to apologize. It was the first victory of the workers. At the same time members of parliament of opposition parties began a joint investigation into alleged unfair labor practices which were prohibited by the Labor Union Law. The Marusei campaign became a controversial political matter. On October 27, 1971, the JNR management notified its two unions that the Marusei movement would be suspended for two months, and suggested setting up a joint committee to resolve labor disputes. The two unions won, because the Marusei campaign was not resumed and the JNR work places remained the stronghold of the Japanese labor movement. But now JNR unions are being attacked by the management and the government.

Labor Control Through Small Groups in the Post Office

The introduction of the labor control system through small groups raised controversial problems also in the post office. Work in the post office relies mostly on manual labor. That means that the senior workers’ control of the workplace, which had been formed in a century of history, played a decisive role. Senior workers taught younger ones work and social life at the work place, and the importance of workers’ solidarity. From 1955 to 1960, the Postal Workers Union gained various victories over the management, for example, a change in the policy that prohibited management from collective bargaining with dismissed union leaders, re-employment of temporary workers as regular workers leading to the removal of various status distinctions, employment of more workers, etc. The main tactic of the union was to work to rule. It was very effective, and the strength of the union on the shop floor was proved every time.

In 1961 the postal management authorized the new policy that was designed to break the union’s power. It consisted of three points: (1) Supervisors should hate union workers and should call them “reactionaries!” (2) Changing the atmosphere on the shop floor in favor of management. Postal workers should be “first postal employees, not union workers.” (3) Winning senior workers or natural leaders at the workplace to management’s side. In 1963 small groups were formally formed at the workplace. The union opposed this move, but it was difficult to fight against small groups because it seemed to be merely formal. There was already the working crew. The new move was only to recognize legally the crew and to appoint a group leader from the senior workers. The newly appointed group leader was paid a little bit more than the other workers, but it was not a considerable amount.

Training Courses

The management still avoided confrontation and concentrated its efforts to organize and educate core members for the productivity increase movement through small groups. At that time, various training courses were opened in the postal academy. Group leaders who were loyal to the management were sent to the re-educational course. The training course played an important role in reorganizing the work floor. Management could do everything inside the classroom without being observed by the union. Group leaders were pressured to leave the union and asked to play a key role in changing the atmosphere at the workplace in favor of management. At the same time the training
course for newcomers was prolonged, and they were encouraged to be non-union or to join the yellow union. The Postal Workers Union (Zentei) demanded that management abandon the anti-union labor policy and staged various struggles in the '70s. The anti-Marusel struggle in 1978–79 was the decisive struggle. Many workers were dismissed and the union was after all defeated. The development of the labor control system through small groups got into a new stage.

How can management change both together? The post office's relatively late entrance into the reorganization of the work floor allowed management to model the labor control system on the most advanced and successful examples available in the Japanese business world. After careful study of behavioral science theories and various models in the private sector, the postal management designed a new policy: the workplace vitalizing program or the workplace development program.

**Fake Autonomy**

This program is based on the philosophy that people will work hard when they know they are responsible for their own destiny or that people will sacrifice themselves for their company when they find satisfaction from their work to attain their own "autonomous" purpose. The management says, "Everybody has creative power or some kind of ability. Labor control through autonomous purpose is aimed at using the whole of human ability." According to this theory, all workers will be divided into small groups of 5 to 10 members and, as a member of a working group, each person will be asked to link his own aim to the group's. Efficiency will not be the official orders of a supervisor, but each group's own "autonomous" task.

Workers will take 10 pleasures in acting in the group: (1) to overcome inferiority complexes; (2) to be highly esteemed for their performance; (3) to perform the task by themselves; (4) to recognize their genuine capability;
(5) to develop their own ability; (6) to realize their own potential abilities; (7) to cooperate with friends on a project; (8) to win friendship or love; (9) to work for a good company; (10) to live well materially. Workers are forced to feel pleasure only when they link their entire lives with the company.

The key to the new management policy, labor control through autonomous purpose, is the small group. Under the careful guidance of management, a small group accomplishes "autonomously" the process of "Plan — Do — See." Workers discuss their goal within their small group, try to accomplish their aim with other members, and consider their achievement within their group. The whole process seems as if workers conducted themselves autonomously but, of course, it is carefully planned and guided by management. The union plays no role in the whole process because it belongs to "the management's right to plan and control the work process."

The management sees two advantages from the creation of small groups. It both enhances a sense of belonging among group members and helps to develop solidarity between group members and supervisors.

Workers who are appointed group leaders, generally speaking, begin to feel superior to their fellow workers, although the wage is only a bit more than the others" (almost 5,000 yen, $25). They are sent to training courses and encouraged to think themselves superior. They are sometimes sent to model work places, e.g., the Matsushita company. They are impressed by the success of small group activities. "I can play such a role in the work place as a supervisor. I am not small." They don't come to union meetings any more, and begin to organize group activities to increase productivity. This is the first stage of the development of small group activities.

Group activities begin with uncontroversial issues: to study postal law, to clean the workplace. Then they get into the second stage: a group meeting once a week. Group leaders spend more of their time in supervision and less in straight production work. Themes of meetings remain still uncontroversial at first: how to improve the postal service or to study postal regulations. When meetings come to occur regularly and workers get accustomed to group meetings, they get into the third stage: how to increase efficiency, and to compete with each other.

At our workplace we, union members, refuse to attend the group meetings. Therefore, small group activities are stagnant and the union's strength still remains. But in post offices where union members are in a minority, small group activities are flourishing. The state of workers there warn us. A worker says:

The atmosphere on the working floor becomes worse. We feel suffocated by the "autonomous" goals imposed on us: write suggestions, write about our group, help each other, accomplish norm, etc. It is said that group discussion is an excellent method to solve problems. But if the results of group thinking are predetermined, group discussion would be a waste of time. I always refuse to speak at meetings to express my disgust for pro-management group activities.

Increased Competition

The situation there comes near to the Matsushita case. A union activist who works there says:

"The task to improve efficiency leads inevitably to increasing competition. In the past nobody said, "You are lazy," or "You rest too much," but now a group leader unashamedly says, "Regrettably our group has still some inefficient members. They are our burden." He said it in a meeting of all employees. We are against small group activities, but we cannot find a way to counterattack.

At our workplace, the group meeting occurs at 3 p.m. on Monday. Union members don't take part in it. Group leaders, most of whom are union members, are perplexed, but they must discuss themes given by management with unorganized workers. That scene will be likely to end because the national union leadership ordered union members to participate in the meetings to have the initiative in the workplace and to influence unorganized workers. But there is the unsolved problem of how we can have the initiative in the workplace cooperating with small group activities."
Prospects

As we have seen, in the most advanced stage of the labor control system, through small groups the workers are completely controlled by management, both spiritually and physically. Their entire lives are linked with the goal of management, to increase productivity. The workers think themselves autonomous or independent, but management guides them carefully to the managerial goal, and workers come to think only of the interests of the company.

Pro-management small groups easily turn into blind group loyalty to management and various pressures against dissidents. For example, in Nissan dissidents are severely and violently attacked. Harassment and beatings against dissidents occur every day. There is the case of Mr. Yagi, a worker at the Nissan Oppama factory. In October 1979 he opposed the dismissal of dissident workers. Since then has has been violently attacked. Supervisors and their hangers-on poured a bucket of water on him, kicked him, and gave him a blow almost every day. According to his report, the small group system played an important role. At group meetings other workers got after him for a low score for their group. Occasionally defects were intentionally made to get a rise out of him. "You made a lot of defects and troubled our group with them." "Take your responsibility." "You should quit the company." The small group became a kangaroo court.

Small Group System Dangerous

The labor system through small groups is dangerous for free and independent unions. Union bureaucrats, especially in the private sector, hold a different view toward the labor controlled system through small groups. According to their view, this system serves workers' participation and the quality of work life. Some bosses say it is better than collective bargaining, because collective bargaining serves to achieve only immediate interests. We should remember that Japanese workers have not even gained "only immediate interests." Low wages, short rest periods, increased efficiency are justified by them under the pretext of the "long-term interests of workers in the market economy," i.e., to win the company-vs.-company war. In fact, small groups are comparable with squads in an army. Every effort is made to cut workers off from their class consciousness and infuse them with a blind subservience to the company policy. It is worthwhile to remember that "National Service Through Industry," one of Matsushita's Seven Spiritual Values, was the name of the militarist government-sponsored Patriotic Industrial Association during the war, which was modeled on the Nazi Arbeitsfront. Union bureaucrats forget the true inter-

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to work this out; very generally we can say: it is most important to revitalize union activities at the workplace.

Fortunately, union activists and scholars siding with militant unionists are beginning to carefully study this problem. Some union publications issued a special number on this labor control method. Better late than never, because it is a matter of vital importance for free and independent union workers.

AFTERWORD

Martin Glaberman

This article by a Japanese postal worker is a helpful addition to the growing body of material that is giving the lie to the widespread mythology about Japanese labor relations.

Because it deals with three different types of employment, one in the private sector and two in the public sector, it helps to modify the idea that Japanese labor conforms to some kind of monolithic reality. In fact, there is a wide range of working conditions, of union forms, and of labor struggles. The situation at Matsushita, a major electronics firm which has been the most aggressive propagator of the small group method of labor control, is not typical of other industries, such as auto. The work force has a substantial proportion of women (and therefore doesn’t rate the same kind of fringe benefits that are associated with the mythology about Japan) and did not have a militant union to contend with in establishing its policy. The contrast in the auto industry is that the existing company unions were established by splitting or destroying militant unions after long strikes at Nissan and Toyota.

Generally speaking, industries involved in substantial export trade have been those most subjected to industry/government attacks on militant unionism. Public employee unions have been those most able to maintain significant independence. The author equates the struggles of the Japanese working class with the struggle for militant industrial unionism. This seems to be a reflection of the relative youth of the current Japanese labor movement. Unions had been very weak in Japan in the period between the two world wars. For ten years, from the mid-thirties to 1945, unions were totally crushed by a military dictatorship. From 1945 on, unions began to form from scratch. These were originally encouraged by the American Occupation on the theory that they should resemble the safe bureaucratic unions that prevailed in the United States. But the unions quickly developed a militancy and a politicization that far exceeded what the Occupation was willing to accept. Many unions were influenced by the Communist Party and most became involved in battling US-imposed regulations and treaties. In a number of cases, including coal mining and transportation, workers took over production and ran things as a form of strike.

By 1947 and 1948 the US Occupation began to crack down in order to domesticate the unions. The union federation known as Sohyo was created in this period as an anticommunist, yet independent, union movement. But even Sohyo moved toward greater militancy and in the early fifties, when Japanese industrial expansion was taking off, some of the Sohyo-type unions were defeated and a much more conservative (not to say reactionary) federation known as Domei was created. Sohyo retained its influence in much of the public sector and Domei became the dominant federation in the private sector, especially in export-oriented industries.

One consequence of this is that, while there is plenty of evidence of bureaucratization in
unions that are free of the taint of company unionism, the kind of bureaucratization that became general in the American labor movement from the 1940s on was not allowed a peaceful development in Japan. The struggle against the kind of company unionism evident at Matsushita and in the auto industry has taken first place in the minds of Japanese militants. In some ways this gives the impression of a Japanese labor movement that resembles the US movement in the thirties, rather than the bureaucratized movement of today.

The author’s discussion of how the use of small groups in Japan has replaced the traditional forms of Taylorism is quite fascinating. Making the workers responsible for their own exploitation, through heavy emphasis on “brainwashing” and indoctrination, the use of company unions, and the availability of a complex structure of wages and fringe benefits that lends itself easily to social control over the work force, is replacing the traditional elements of Taylorism — time study and an absolute hierarchy of control. Most observers of the industrial (or political, or social) scene tend to be overwhelmed by the short-run reality. It is worth remembering what became known as the “Hawthorne effect,” one of the conclusions drawn from a famous experiment at a Western Electric plant in the suburb of Chicago. A team of industrial psychologists and sociologists from Harvard University, led by Elton Mayo, performed experiments at that plant for a number of years in the late 1920s and early 1930s. In one of the experiments the working conditions of a group of women working in a wire room were manipulated. Lighting was improved and productivity went up; lighting was further brightened and, again, productivity went up; lighting was decreased and still productivity
went up; and, finally, lighting was made worse than at the start and productivity still increased. The experimenters couldn't understand what was happening until they finally figured out that workers were responding, not to the physical conditions but to the fact that for the first time people were paying attention to what they thought and what they said.

The small group and the quality circle of Japanese management are based on that Hawthorne effect. It gives the impression that management is listening to what workers say. But the underlying reality of the Hawthorne effect is that it is temporary. Ultimately, the speedup and the social controls at work and outside work that go along with it become intolerable. That is especially true in a country like Japan which has a fairly recent record of great labor militancy. What may seem to outside observers as a well-discipline work force (especially to American managers and labor leaders who want to use an alleged Japanese labor docility to help discipline American workers) is in fact a very explosive situation. The tighter the lid, the more violent the explosion that will follow.

The same thing is true of the attempts to import Japanese methods into the United States. More of this has happened than people are aware of. For example, the United Auto Workers is taking a militant stance before going into contract negotiations with Ford and General Motors. Restore the concessions, and so on, seems to be the line of the union from top to bottom. In fact, there is a huge element of fakery involved in that by Beiber and company. The huge auto profits of 1983 were only partly the result of concessions in pay scales and fringe benefits. The major element for the auto companies was the fantastic erosion of working conditions through widespread modification of work rules. The national union negotiated the financial concessions. The local unions were left on their own to give up long-standing work rules that protected workers. These, generally, went unreported in the press and are not involved in the demand to restore old pay scales. In addition, the UAW permitted the auto giants to pit local plants against each other — those making the most concessions got the most work. All these are contributing to the “Japanization” of the American workplace — but also leading to increased tensions and resistance. The wildcat strike last year at the Twinsburg, Ohio, plant of the Chrysler Corporation that shut down most of the company is an indication of things to come.

The article that follows seems to have a largely pessimistic tone. That is understandable in the context of the defeats and retreats suffered by Japanese labor in recent years. But there is a larger context that should not be ignored. Over 30 percent of the Japanese working class is organized into unions, most of which are not company unions. This compares with less than 20 percent in the US. There is also a greater political involvement by Japanese workers than is usual in America. Finally, much of the new Japanese labor relations were based on a very rapidly expanding economy which was able to sustain a rising standard of living for the working class. That expansion is pretty much over and the economic screws will be tightening on Japanese workers at the same time the alienation and regimentation of life at work will have lost the glow of the Hawthorne effect. It is difficult to believe that the discipline that is characteristic of some Japanese industries will be maintained indefinitely.

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BREAKING TRADITION

Grandma would jump when the pitcher got low, to refill it, carrying the dinner table on her shoulders like Atlas, keeping an eternal vigil lest our conversation be interrupted by a need.

I thought it had been settled once, with the Sunday School Mary and Martha; Mary’s hands hugged her knees when she listened and gestured when she spoke, while Martha’s hands grew sore from peeling potatoes and washing dishes. And Jesus said Mary had chosen the better portion. But then, really, what could Martha do? Tell Jesus to get his own dinner?

And Grandpa would always chide, “Why don’t you sit still? We’re fine,” but you knew he would not think to refill the pitcher.

I had thought red, tired hands ran in our family… on my mother’s side. A gender-linked deformity.

Then perhaps I have broken the chain. My own hands hug my knees when I listen, gesture when I speak, lie pale and heavy in my lap like frozen birds when the talking stops.

Grandma would jump when the pitcher got low, to refill it. I will let the pitcher stand empty and keep Daddy and Jesus waiting.

Pam McAllister
Socialist women activists. From Appeal to Reason, Sept. 5, 1903.
OF AUTONOMY AND INCLUSION

Nineteenth Century Feminism, British Utopians and American Socialists

Mary Ann Clawson


Nineteenth century feminism has often been portrayed as a homogeneous movement "composed solely of respectable middle-class ladies seeking merely to gain for themselves prerogatives their menfolk enjoyed, rather than challenging the entire system of sex- and class-based prerogatives." Two recent books, by feminist historians Barbara Taylor and Mari Jo Buhle, go far to discredit such a view. As Barbara Taylor notes in *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, the traditional socialist insistence upon the non-revolutionary character of feminist politics has rested upon a very partial understanding of women's history. Taylor's account of British Owenism reveals a feminist analysis nurtured by traditions of working-class radicalism, while Mari Jo Buhle's *Women and American Socialism* describes the emergence of a socialist vision from within an autonomous and largely middle-class American women's movement.

In contrast to its American outpost at the utopian community of New Harmony, British Owenism was a popular and largely working-class movement. During its first phase (1828–34), Owenite-influenced trade unions focused on strikes, labor agitation, and the formation of worker-owned shops, acting as "the left wing in a wider upsurge of labor militancy." After the collapse of these efforts amid a more general defeat of labor, Owenism was
reorganized as a membership organization devoted to proselytizing and the founding of cooperative communities. But the movement's two phases were united, Taylor argues, by the continued working-class composition of its membership and by its persistent belief that moral and psychological transformation as well as institutional change were necessary to bring about the end of the "competitive system" and the building of the "New Moral World."

What Taylor documents in fascinating detail is that a commitment to gender equality and to the transformation of relations between the sexes was central to this vision. Unlike the Marxist socialism that followed it, Owenism was more than a critique of the relations of production. Rather it was a wider, if less precise, indictment of "all forms of social oppression," which were united in three mutually re-enforcing institutions: religion, marriage, and private property. Religion worked to promote superstition and a belief in human individualism, laying the basis for the "competitive system." By making individual wealth "the basis of social power," private property introduced acquisitiveness into all human relationships. Marriage provided the emotional basis for such competitiveness by converting women into masculine property and by establishing the nuclear family, which promoted social disunity through its organization of both sentiment and material life around small and inward-looking groups.

The cooperative communities envisioned by Owen were to deal with these institutions by abolishing them through the collectivization of both work and social life. Although Owenites also supported what they saw as reformist demands for civil marriage, divorce, and educational opportunities for women, they stressed that only the cooperative communities could establish the material base needed for true feminine emancipation, since only then would women cease to be dependent upon men for their livelihood.

The rejection of the nuclear family did not result in the transformation of Owenism into a sexually egalitarian movement, nor did it promote the organization of women as an autonomous force. The Owenites did not, for example, succeed in getting tailors to include women in their struggles against employers. The local branches produced a meaningful female leadership in only a few areas. And the cooperative communities were especially demoralizing to women. It had been assumed that the efficiencies of collective housekeeping would by themselves allow women to take on additional work in the fields and workshops. But the failure to question the traditional sexual division of labor, combined with grossly inadequate funds and facilities, meant that women worked longer hours than men and harder than in their pre-collective days.

Yet Owenism clearly contained a theory of male supremacy and feminine subjugation. This was most pointedly developed by the Owenites William Thompson and Anna Wheeler. They differed from Owen in locating the barriers to social change less in the self-centered character of the nuclear family and more in the power of the husband/father, a power which made of the family "a centre of absolute despotism, where ... intelligence and persuasion are quite superfluous to him who has only to command to be obeyed." In their formulation, it was the relation of male dominance and female subordination which provided the basic model of social inequality and laid the psycho-sexual basis for the internalization of hierarchical values: "from these centres, in the midst of which all mankind are now trained, spreads the contagion of selfishness and the love of domination through all human transactions ...".

The feminist implications of Owenism could easily have been ignored or repudiated by the growing movement. But they were not. Owenism provided, if not a consensus, a unique social space within which gender issues could be openly and legitimately discussed. Taylor's research reveals, for example, fascinating differences between men and women on issues of marriage and sex reform. Men tended to an uncritical celebration of sexual freedom, replete with hydraulic and aeronautical metaphors ("the dammed and pent-up stream that bursts its banks; the eagle ... of the air, soaring twixt heaven and earth" etc.). Women more soberly warned against the premature abandonment of
traditional norms in a society where their economic dependence and political unfreedom still left them vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

Economic differences were often aired in the Women's Page of the Owenite paper The Pioneer, where readers' letters revealed the enormous tensions felt by men and women in the domestic trades as capitalist reorganization pitted them against each other. Here again we hear people speaking for themselves in wonderful detail, as the tailor Edmonds argues that "only lazy, gossiping, drunken wives would consider leaving their homes to attend union meetings." while an angry tailoress responds by charging that the men, with their exclusionary practices are "as bad as their masters". As always, Taylor does an excellent job of placing the debate in context, explaining the political economy of the declining trades and its differential effects upon men and women as workers and family members. The influence of Owenite feminist ideas is most strikingly revealed in the comments of The Pioneer's editor James Morrison, a former journeyman painter and union activist. Morrison does not simply demand equal pay and admission of women to unions. He defends those women workers who were undercutting the price of masculine labor (in some cases acting as strike breakers) by arguing that "the low wages of women are not so much the voluntary price she sets upon her labour, as the price which is fixed by the tyrannical influence of male supremacy."

During its second phase Owenism continued to offer a platform for the expression of feminist ideas. At a time when few women spoke in public, Owenite lecturers like Emma Martin and Margaret Chappelsmith were trading insults with clerical opponents before large and raucous audiences, in striking contrast to the traditions of the American feminist movement. Despite the absence of a female leadership in all but a few areas, Owenism was differentiated from contemporary movements like Chartism by the degree of sexual integration and feminine participation which was achieved at the local level, where women typically voted and where men and women dined and socialized together at a time when sexual separation was the norm. Most interestingly,
the creation of the Owenite "Social Institutions" as places for meetings and social activities was motivated by a conscious intent to remove political life and discourse from the male-dominated pub settings of traditional radicalism. This sensitivity to the political meaning of the social setting is a major factor which distinguishes Owenism from later socialist movements.

American history, in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, suggests that a feminist politics can only come from women's autonomous self-organization (and responses to it). Does the example of Owenism call this into question? Like later socialisms, Owenism did not identify women as having any special role in their own emancipation. Nor did it create or encourage independent organization among women. On the other hand, it did not attempt to deny conflicts of interest between men and women or immediately to subordinate them to the issue of class. Indeed, as we have seen, the Owenite press offered the movement an institutionalized forum which was supportive of attempts by women to articulate their special interests and concerns, even when these conflicted directly with the views of their male comrades. We can only wonder whether Owenism, had it survived more than its twenty-five years, would have been able to produce and tolerate an actual women's movement, or whether it could have progressed further in its attempts to rethink and reorganize the bases for integrated male and female participation.

In its focus on American socialist history, Mari Jo Buhle's *Women and American Socialism* deals with a political movement familiar to many of us. Yet like Barbara Taylor, Buhle reveals a largely forgotten face of socialist history, in this case the legacy of feminist activism before and after the formation of the Socialist Party. She describes the very different, but more familiar political situation in which class and gender-based movements are organized independently and around different principles, and thus face the question of what their relationship can and should be. In the case of the United States, the Socialist Party faced a women's movement that was years older and many thousands larger than any American socialist movement.

Founded in 1901, the Socialist Party represented a precarious alliance between two very different sectors of American society. Immigrant and first-generation socialists maintained an ethnic identity and vision of socialism grounded in European models. Native born Americans, based in the smaller towns of the West and Midwest, came to socialism via the traditions of American popular radicalism. Each of these milieus produced its own particular form of participation for women, and Buhle has done amazing work in reconstructing the activities, leadership, and central issues characteristic of each.

Among immigrant groups, women's involvement occurred primarily in what Buhle calls the "fraternal" sector, where women were responsible for the network of social, recreational and service activities which gave the movement much of its cohesiveness and communal spirit. Such activities were defined by the movement as "auxiliary," involving as they did the creation of social support systems in which women essentially acted out their customary (and customarily devalued) family roles, while the men occupied themselves with the "real" political work of building socialism. These traditional "party wives" were largely excluded from consideration as serious political actors. But Buhle emphasizes that they provided an institutional infrastructure which was crucial to the movement's survival, as well as producing several notable women leaders who were committed to the politicization of women's roles.

In distinct contrast to this, the socialist move-

*Community members at dinner, Oneida community, 1862.*
ment of American-born women emerged from the political context of an independent women’s movement. Buhle demonstrates that most of these women understood their socialist beliefs as the direct consequence of their earlier participation in either the suffrage campaign, the women’s club movement, or the Women’s Christian Temperance Union. This was especially true for women in the WCTU, where the charismatic Frances Willard’s commitment to Christian socialism profoundly affected the political ideals of a number of temperance activists. It was these women who would form the nucleus of a largely independent Socialist women’s movement in states like Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska and California, all areas where the WCTU had been strong.

The socialism that such women espoused was not that of the Second International. Rather it was a political faith grounded in a vision of sisterhood and based on a critique of a modern industrial system which these women saw as increasingly at odds with feminine concerns and values: “womanly virtue against marketplace capitalism, cooperation overcoming competition, social reconstruction rather than class warfare ...”4 The logic of this critique led them towards participation in a variety of radical movements, through the creation of organizational alliances as well as through individual involvement. Many women were understandably drawn toward the Nationalist clubs inspired by Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*, a book which made the realization of feminist concerns central to its vision of evolutionary socialism. Others, more surprisingly, made overtures toward the Americanized sectors of the Socialist Labor Party, which was intensely and narrowly class-conscious and thus largely hostile to their efforts. Most important was the extensive participation of women in the populist movement. There, building on the solid base of their experience in the WCTU and the Grange, women made confident and significant contributions on local levels, despite the movement’s attempts to relegate them to ancillary roles as it focused on electoral politics.

Buhle’s research reveals that socialism was a significant minority position which developed independently, as a radical tendency, *within* the American women’s movement, and then moved outward to establish connections to other radical movements. She convincingly demonstrates that the history of American socialism must be reconceptualized as a plurality of tendencies, of which the socialist women’s movement was one — tendencies which reached a tenuous reconciliation in the Socialist Party of the early 1900s.

As a result, the Socialist Party had links to an important group of women leaders and activists with years of experience in the temperance and suffrage movements. Feminists and socialists were able to collaborate on a variety of campaigns of special interest to women, including suffrage, support for women strikers, and involvement in issues of women’s sexuality ranging from social purity campaigns to birth control agitation. But a host of unresolved theoretical and organizational issues ultimately limited these alliances.
Socialist and Feminist Politics

Because Owenite socialism was the only organized political context within which feminist positions were articulated, Owenism as a movement did not discern a conflict between socialist and feminist transformation. But American activists had to construct a relationship between movements which were organizationally separate and theoretically unreconciled.

The much-debated question of how the Socialist Party should express its support for woman suffrage provides an example of the kinds of choices that arose.

Should Socialist women continue to work as individuals within a middle-class suffrage movement? Had they the power, and the rightful prerogative, to organize their own distinctly Socialist suffrage organizations? [Did] Socialists as Socialists [have] anything decisive to contribute to the struggle for women's political emancipation?

The party clearly failed in its tortured attempts to render suffrage a class rather than a gender issue, a failure which was symptomatic of its more general inability to comprehend gender as a separate category of oppression. Nonetheless, Buhle finds that party mobilization on behalf of suffrage was a significant force in a number of crucial state and local campaigns, where it was important, not simply in providing foot soldiers, but in holding the increasingly conservative suffrage movement to more democratic positions. Whether working inside or outside the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), Socialists consistently opposed attempts to strike deals for a restricted suffrage involving literacy, property, or nativity requirements. Suffrage may not have been a class issue, but there were class issues within the suffrage movement which socialists could usefully articulate.

In general Buhle believes that the Socialist Party served both women and itself best when socialist women set aside their party's inadequate theoretical analysis and followed their own instincts about collaboration with the mainstream women's movement. The example of suffrage is convincing, that of strike support less so, since the Socialist Party's collaboration with the Women's Trade Union League, highly successful in mobilizing for the New York shirtwaist strike, ended in red baiting and exclusion of socialists, hardly a victory for party interests. But beyond the successes or failures of particular campaigns is the fact that the socialist women's movement remained primarily a reactive one, responding well to crisis but unable to spark interest among unmobilized women.

This was the case, Buhle argues, because "key questions concerning the precise relationship between the overthrow of capitalism and the liberation of women remained unsettled." Lacking an analysis of the family, and of women except as they entered the workforce, the party was unable to address the concerns of women working within the home. Because such women were in a strict theoretical sense auxiliary to the class struggle, the party, with its single-minded focus on wage labor, could not articulate a vision of how they could be socialists.

The result was that while most early twentieth century Socialists supported the organization of women workers, the extension of suffrage, and perhaps even the legalization of birth control, they viewed these as tertiary issues. "Only a small minority had ever considered the mainstream women's movement a constitutive, creative force in its own right." At issue was the question of agency, of whether women, struggling as women against masculine power, could in themselves be a force for fundamental social change. The socialist movement was fundamentally limited by its inability to recognize the political character of feminist struggles.

This issue was played out in the history of the Women's National Committee, established in 1908 with the goal of recruiting more women into the movement. The young women who worked as organizers for the Committee represented a new generation of what may be termed integrationists. They recognized women as a special problem for organizers, but not as a special constituency, and they thought that feminine interests could best be served by incorporating women into mixed party locals. As such they were opposed to both the earlier
traditions, the auxiliary and the independent socialist women's clubs, each of which had assumed that women's socialist activities would occur in sex-segregated settings.

In their work, these young organizers continued, with great effectiveness, to use parlor meetings, socials, and other staples of nineteenth century feminine social life. But they regarded their use of such social forms as a regrettable expedient, a necessary step along the way to full participation with men in mixed locals. In locating the barriers to women's full participation, in their political inexperience, they ignored what an older generation of women socialists such as Josephine Conger-Kaneko had known: the frequent character of the local as "a sort of man's club — a place where men met and talked and smoked, and split hairs over unimportant technicalities, transacted a little business, talked and smoked some more . . .". While the integrationist leaders were correct in insisting that women not be confined to traditional gender-specific forms of participation, they failed to develop any model for women's involvement other than a call for them to function as individuals in an overwhelmingly male organization, which would remain unchanged by their presence. This made it difficult to appeal to any but the most self-confident and highly politicized women, and it frequently exacted a price of political or emotional ambivalence from even those women who achieved leadership roles, as Buhle's sensitive depiction of the leaders of the Women's National Committee suggests. Beyond that, however, the movement as a whole was surely impoverished by its inability to be more open to the energies of the women's movement, through a willingness to incorporate diverse modes of participation and rethink the grounds on which men and women might ultimately meet.

Such failures were clearly rooted in the logic of socialist theory, as well as in the propensity of "boys to be boys" which Conger-Kaneko noted. Yet I am concerned by the extent to which the American women's movement seems to appear as the implicit and unproblematic measure of political correctness. The nineteenth century women's movement often portrayed women as a force for change in ways which curiously paralleled the traditional Marxist view of the proletariat, "not merely because they possessed the moral rectitude but because their own development had a validity", a logic of its own. When Buhle laments the disappearance of the "original telos of the Socialist women's movement," she comes perilously close to an unqualified acceptance of "woman" as universal subject, an acceptance that creates as many problems as it solves.

It must be recognized that nineteenth century American feminism, like other movements, was the product of a highly specific class, religious, and ethnic experience. Buhle often seems to imply that these differences are not as fundamental a problem for a cross-class women's movement as are gender-based conflicts for a socialist movement organized around class. Her treatment of Frances Willard and the WCTU exemplifies both the strengths and weaknesses of this approach. Not only does she convey the moral passion and social activism which fueled Willard's movement, but she makes us understand how a genuine socialist impulse was its logical outgrowth, an outgrowth that orthodox Marxism could neither predict nor appreciate. Yet she fails, I think, to examine the implications of a socialism so intensely Protestant in its origins and conventions in a society where the growing industrial workforce was largely non-Protestant and where the history was one not just of cultural difference but of antagonism and condescension. This was, of course, a perennial problem of the American Left, not least of all the Socialist Party, and by no means peculiar to the women's movement. But it was no more amenable to easy solution via the
bonds of womanhood than it was by the impartial logic of proletarianization; it would be helpful if Buhle examined the common problematic thread at work here.

Underlying these social and cultural limitations is a fundamental assumption that demands to be questioned. The nineteenth century movement derived much of its conviction and energy from a conception of womanhood rooted in Victorian sexual conventions and the tenets of evangelical Protestantism. We can recognize the empowerment which women found in their appropriation of this concept without forgetting its socially constructed character, as Buhle sometimes seems in danger of doing. The analysis of woman as a transformative force was in this case based largely on a view of her as a special kind of person, with qualities of nurturance and spirituality most often seen as the product of innate dispositions rather than of social oppression. Thus despite evident differences, socialists and feminists shared a common limitation in their failure to develop a social analysis of woman’s position. Both could have benefitted from Owenism’s more inclusive analysis.

In social terms, the Owenites attempted, through the creation of a new institution, to offer an alternative to the pub and the church, and thus to place both men and women on neutral ground. Their desire to create “a new style of working-class recreation” and to establish communal ties which would prepare them for life in the co-operative communities, led them to attack the men’s club model of socialism which was to prevail in the U.S. 75 and 125 years later. But Owenism’s greatest value was in its attempt to develop an institu-
tionally based theory of male psycho-social dominance, a theory which was rooted in the family but dynamically and systematically related to other forms of economic, political and social oppression. This focus upon the family as one of the constituent elements of the “competitive system” made the abolition of the family a central part of Owenism’s political agenda and so located women in the arena of political action in a way that Marxism, with its exclusive focus on the sphere of paid labor and the production of surplus value, could not. This was not a subject for inquiry within the Marxist tradition which superceded it, nor was it a specific project of the nineteenth century women’s movement, despite the insights which particular leaders developed. Thus Owenism’s loss to socialist memory is especially regrettable.

FOOTNOTES

2. Ibid., p. 84.
3. Ibid., p. 38.
4. Ibid., p. 97-98.
5. Ibid., p. 70.
7. Ibid., p. 310.
8. Ibid., p. 148.

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“THE TIDY HOUSE THAT IS NO MORE A TIDY HOUSE”

Children, Language and Class

Kathleen Weiler


Teaching is highly political work. As a high school teacher for twelve years in a number of different kinds of schools, I have tried to teach in a consciously political way while coping with the institutional demands and structural limitations of the schools. Like many other teachers, I try to create classrooms in which mutual respect and reflection can occur. I believe that under certain conditions, a classroom space can encourage critical thinking, an exploration of social realities and a respect for the human qualities of thought and feeling. I also believe that the acquisition of writing and reading skills can enhance students’ capacity for critical reflection.

Often as teachers, we become submerged in the daily details of school life and lose sight of the potential and meaning of what we are doing and what we can do in political and social terms. That is why it is exciting to come upon a book like The Tidy House, in which a teacher reflects upon her own classroom experience and draws out meanings from it.

The Tidy House takes its name from a 2000-word story written by three eight-year-old girls, Carla, Lindie, and Melissa, in a primary school in a London council housing estate (public housing project). In an open classroom setting (more common in England than in the United States) the girls worked collectively to produce a “domestic novel” about parents
and children, nurturance and confinement, and the lives of working class women. The story is written as a series of domestic conversations, at night in bed between husbands and wives, at tea time between friends, or between parents and children. Here are two characters, Jo and Mark, a childless couple, in bed:

I want to get to sleep
Don’t worry, you’ll get to sleep in time.
Don’t let us, really, this time of night.
Shall I wait til the morning?
Oh stop it.

Or here is Jamie and her son, Carl, who is three and a half:

A boy said
Is my mummy here?
Yes. Jamie, here is Carl.
Go home. I won’t be a minute.
No, I want to stay here.
All right. Stand still and shut up.

Jamie smacked Carl.
Carl started to cry.

Throughout the story the voices reflect the language the children have heard and know. But the story is not simply a mimicry of experiences, the authors understand the tensions and feelings of mothers, who are exasperated and tired, and children, who get into temper tantrums and who can’t get enough.

The protagonists of The Tidy House are two working class couples — Jason and Jamie, the parents of a small boy named Carl, and Jo and Mark, who are childless at the beginning of the story. The story contrasts two theories of child raising. Jo, who is childless at the beginning of the story, believes in pampering children and indulges Jamie’s little boy, Carl. Jamie’s relationship with her son Carl is much harsher and the interaction between Jamie and Carl often ends with Carl getting smacked and crying. But when Jo and Mark, the childless couple, finally have children, the section is entitled, “The Tidy House That Is No More A Tidy House.” Thus, although Jo wants children of her own, when they appear they are seen as a burden and a nuisance. Carl, who is seen by Carla, Lindie, and Melissa as spoiled and troublesome, is portrayed somewhat more sympathetically when his younger brother, Darren, is born. When there are fights between them, Carl always gets the blame, since he is older.

When he was four
he and Carl were always fighting
but Darren never got the blame
and Carl always got sent to bed.
Carl hated him
and because he was not spoilt anymore
and neither was Darren
Darren was lucky.
‘Though I’m not,’ thought Carl.

But generally Carl is presented as a spoiled and bothersome being, someone who wears his mother down. Although the effect of their children on the lives of Jo and Mark is not spelled out, the tensions between the two brothers, Carl and Darren, gets out of control of the authors. The boys get into tempers, push each other over, are smacked, cry. By this time it seems that for Carla, Lindie, and Melissa, this story has no resolution, the tensions within it are insoluble, and they abandon it, with the tidy house no longer tidy, children a burden, mothers both loving their children and oppressed by them, fathers appearing to give toys to children or to take tea or in bedrooms at night cajoled into having sex and making babies.
Carolyn Steedman, the girls’ teacher, has written a book which both explores the immediate circumstances surrounding the writing of “The Tidy House,” and draws upon histories of children’s writing, a discussion of theories of working class language, and the history of working class childhood in order to place this particular story in the context of that culture and experience. The book includes a printed text of the story, a transcription of a tape made of a discussion with Carla, Melissa, and Lindie, and a facsimile of the story as the girls wrote it. In the first section of the book, Steedman provides a description and analysis of the circumstances of the writing of “The Tidy House.”

Steedman argues that the text of the “The Tidy House” should be seen less as a metaphorical or symbolic creation than an exploration of a social world and children’s own feelings about their own and future reality. In writing this story, Carla, Lindie, and Melissa were able to see themselves as both children and mothers at the same time, and as Steedman comments, were “thus able to articulate contradictory feelings about their future impossible for children who cannot use written language.” Thus, for example, all of the children in “The Tidy House” are boys, and this allows the authors, the three little girls, to identify with the mothers, a role they see themselves as filling as they grow older. At the same time, these fictional creations are children like themselves, and the authors can play out their own present experiences and relationships in the novel. The girls show their ambivalence about future motherhood in the depiction of the harassed mothers in the text of “The Tidy House” and also in their taped discussion as they were writing the story. “If you never had no children, you’d be well off wouldn’t you?” Or speaking of one of their fictional mothers: “Probably hates kids...I think all mums do, don’t they?” Throughout the text of “The Tidy House” the theme of the limitations and sadness of women’s lives is held in a kind of tension with the theme of the house as a nest and refuge and the mother as the central figure and comforter. Steedman argues that in writing this story the children create an artifact that can represent the contradictions of their own lives, and they are thus able “to briefly hold those contradictions together and to examine them.”

Steedman’s analysis of the text of “The Tidy House” rests on her conviction that working class children possess both a language and a culture that contains critical possibilities. The text that the children have written reflects the material oppression and limitations of working class life and in particular the intense contradictions of the lives of women and girls. But at the same time the writing of this text reveals an awareness and access to language on the part of these working class girls that has possibilities
for critical consciousness and political action. Throughout her analysis, Steedman emphasises the subtlety of the girls’ use of language and the strength and clearness of their vision. Thus, while Steedman examines the text of “The Tidy House” for “evidence of the huge mythologies of love and sex that inform our culture and of the way in which working class girls become working class women,” she continues to emphasise the importance of the critique that the text reveals. Steedman is concerned with exploring the subjective realities of working class girls’ lives and in revealing both their oppression and their resistance. Underlying her discussion is a commitment to the idea that individual children in speaking and writing are not simply repeating and reproducing an existing ideological and cultural world, but through their manipulation of it and through the production of meaning they are participating in the ongoing production of a culture. Central to her analysis is a belief in the power of children’s writing as a means of understanding. In her view, children’s writing must be viewed quite differently from adult writing; its purpose is not to have an effect on the reader, but to clarify and illuminate for the writer. As she comments about Carla, one of the writers of “The Tidy House”, “What the manipulation of words on the page enabled her to do was to gain some sort of access to the meaning of her life.” Thus Steedman argues that writing provides the “imaginative transformation of reality” that can reorder past experience and manipulate future possibilities in an active way.

In her discussion of the girls’ experience, Steedman turns to a variety of historical sources to find evidence of these continuing themes of the meaning of gender and class experiences. She examines the historical uses of children’s (and most frequently little girls’) writing, which has been used by adults to perpetuate a sentimental and comforting view of a world of childish innocence. However, Steedman argues, certain texts written by children in the past reveal children actively manipulating inherited values and attempting to make sense for themselves of their social world at their own level of understanding. But these texts are almost universally from middle class children. In order to recover the historical experiences of working class children, and in particular, working class girls, Steedman examines two sorts of historical materials: the transcribed words of mid-nineteenth century working class girls in the accounts of the English social reformer, Henry Mayhew, and the reports of the Children’s Employment Commission of 1862, and, more briefly, studies of the history of working class housing. Through these sources, the inner lives and social world of working class girls takes shape. The continuity of themes in the lives of nineteenth century working class girls and the story of Carla, Lindie, and Melissa is clear: women are seen as comforters in a hostile social world and their houses are refuges from the threat of displacement or homelessness in a harsh economic world. What becomes clear in the text of “The Tidy House,” however, is that for Lindie, Carla, and Melissa, the house is a place of confinement as well as comfort, and their story is an attempt to understand the meaning of their
mother’s lives and their own lives in relation to the domestic world of the house and the home. This text reveals the deep contradictions and ambivalences of these girls toward their mothers’ lives, sexuality, and their own futures as mothers and wives. The concerns of this story — with houses, children, sex — reveal these children’s identities as girls. The issues of significance for them, the kind of control over their own lives or the kind of power they can employ reflect their place in a structure of gender as well as class relationships. A recognition of a cultural world which intertwines gender and class does not of course mean that these definitions of gender and class identity should be embraced uncritically. We should not assume that these girls will in fact follow out the futures they now envision and become heterosexual, married, mothers. But we do need to see how deeply children already exist in a culture of gender and that both boys and girls are as profoundly shaped by gender as they are by class. The central problem then becomes being able to distinguish oppression from strength, to sort the limiting and dehumanizing effects of sexism from the powerful and positive aspects of women’s culture.

As a practicing classroom teacher, I am faced every day with the contradictions of students’ own lives. While students exist in varying sets of relationships according to their own gender, race, and class, all students express the tensions between the imposed meanings that shape their interpretation of the social world and their own common-sense experience and the active knowledge they have from being in the world. It is this tension between accepted reality and the world of possibilities that The Tidy House evokes for me. Just as my students live relationships of racism, sexism, and classism, so they still have the ability to reflect upon their own experience and thus gain some control of both their own oppressive practices and their own oppression. For me, The Tidy House is most valuable because of both Steedman’s awareness of the oppressive qualities of the girls’ lives and her respect for them as human beings able to write about and critique their own experiences.

At times Steedman seems to exaggerate the critical nature of the writing of “The Tidy House,” in fact the extent of the changes of consciousness of political and personal understanding that the process of writing a text like “The Tidy House” encourages is not clear. It would clearly be a mistake to argue that these children have achieved an articulated critique of their own class and gender position. But what the text does illustrate are the possibilities inherent in the act of writing and the ability of working class children to understand their own lives through language.

Unlike the critical studies of United States schools that emerged in the 1970s, The Tidy House is not primarily a condemnation of the effects of schooling on working class children or of existing practices in schools. These earlier studies often focused on the role of schools in reproducing existing class structures and assumed that schools function solely as institutions to transmit dominant, bourgeois language and culture in a rather mechanical process. The Tidy House is particularly relevant to these arguments about the role of schools in the process of class formation because it provides us with the text produced in a state school by precisely those children whose language and culture are said to be rejected by the schools. While this example does not negate the argument that the texts and practices of public schools may often discredit working class language and culture, it does show that this process is not inevitable or mechanical. Instead, we see the possibilities inherent in the classroom for both teachers and students to examine their own experiences and to create meaning. What we see in the creation of the text of “The Tidy House” is class and gender identity in process and the very creative and sophisticated use of written language to explore issues of power and needs through the creative use of the imagination.
In the face of the existing pessimism about schools and the process of schooling, *The Tidy House* reminds us that schools are peopled by children and teachers with rich and complex lives. By understanding the historical and social circumstances and personal experiences of children, we can begin to move toward creating the means for them to develop their own critique of their lives. And it is vital to remember that the structure of their experience, what Steedman calls “a history of attitudes and feelings” is deeply affected by the fact of these children’s gender as well as their class. This respect for the actual lives of children must be our starting place in teaching and understanding the possibilities for learning in schools. From this point we can begin a critique of what is positive and what is destructive and limiting in existing class and gender cultures. While *The Tidy House* reveals the constraints and oppression in the lives of working class girls, it also reveals them as individuals struggling to understand those structures and thus potentially to transform them.

This central understanding that schools are sites not just of the imposition of an hegemonic ideology, but also of the production of meaning and culture by students who are active subjects should lead us to realize again (which we seem to have forgotten) that good schools must be struggled for. It is not an accident that the New Right raises issues of censorship and control of the curriculum. Critics on the right recognize clearly that by their very nature schools are dangerous, since they encourage reading and writing, two creative and potentially transformative activities. I want to emphasize two points here: first, that teachers and schools are not so uniformly oppressive as they are sometimes made out to be, nor are they simply mechanically reproducing class, race, and gender inequality; and second, that children are not simply the passive recipients of an hegemonic ideology which the schools transmit to them, but that they can resist the imposition of meaning and can produce their own meanings. I am not arguing here that all opposition to school authority is politically informed resistance (although it may have more potential than we have perhaps contemplated), that acts of vandalism in the schools, for example, are coherent, articulate political statements, or that dropping out of school because of a realization that school is offering a false promise of success, material prosperity, or whatever, is a progressive political act either collectively or in-
Feminism and the left

For years, the left has been telling the women’s movement what its politics should be. Now, three women who have long been active in both movements are telling the left what it must learn from feminists.

Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright, in *Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the making of socialism*, suggest that many progressive groups fail because of their oppressive internal structure. The women’s movement, on the other hand, has found important new ways to approach political theory and practice. These feminist methods can be integrated into political organizing, say these women. In fact, they must be integrated, and they show how it can successfully be done.

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it is important to be clear about the distinction between politically informed resistance and expressions of frustration or despair that lack a conscious and critical resistance. what I am arguing though is that schools are not closed sites, that they still offer the opportunity for critical teaching and learning. They provide the opportunity to turn children's deeply felt but unarticulated opposition into more conscious criticism through a politically informed literacy. We need to recover schools and struggle for them. otherwise we are left in a rather ridiculous position of theoretical despair and political paralysis about schools, while in our personal lives we go about the business of trying to help our and other children learn in a humane and critical way.

footnotes

2. Ibid., p. 146.
3. Ibid., p. 39.
4. Ibid., p. 29.

Kathleen Weiler is a high school teacher in the Boston area and works with the Radical Teacher collective.
THE TRAINS

"A small group of protesters at trackside yesterday in Billings, Mont., watched the slow passing of a snow-white 'death train' believed to be carrying 100 hydrogen bombs to the Trident nuclear submarine base at Bangor, Wash."

—Boston Globe — 3/21/83

the trains
they pack you on
before they open the gas
and pluck your one gold tooth
from your one stiff mouth

the trains
the railroads
that bring united banana
the slick yankees
unwrapping their blueprints for progress
the soldiers who always know
where to find you

the trains
the ties of tracks
that are flat wordless gravestones
for the ones who pounded them
into the dusty ground
of their skin

this spring
death was sighted
in a long white train
pressing slowly through Montana plains.
a long white train
that does not whistle
does not stop
for flashing red lights
or the soft bodies of protesters
who run out
like time.
a long white train
carries the last freight
anyone will ever unload.

shocked trees beside the tracks
their leaves stand on end
birds fall like cries
in the air thick as glass

Cindy Schuster
NO PROPER ROLES:
Women and the Military

Loie Hayes


I have often felt that feminism was merely an adjective to my anti-militarism, a token of the extra victim status of women. The primary fuel for my anti-militarist work has always been my gut reaction to the brutality of war. As a feminist I learned about the role of the military budget in the feminization of poverty, about its hierarchical structure of abuse encouraging a rape mentality. Was this the extent of the connection? Is it as simple as men getting the glory and women getting the cutbacks?

I’ve been reading and re-reading Cynthia Enloe’s Does Khaki Become You? It hasn’t been easy to take in the details of how thoroughly the institution and ideology of the military have infiltrated the lives of women around the globe: prostitution at “rest and recreation” bases in Thailand, the isolation of a young officer’s wife in West Germany, a 95 per cent incidence of severe eyesight deterioration among electronics munitions assemblers in the Phillipines, lesbian sailors having to perform heterosexually to escape “witch-hunts” in San Diego, rape as “standard operating procedure” in Vietnam, and nurses everywhere dreaming of unstoppable rivers of blood. It was when I found myself talking at a Central America solidarity demonstration about Asian women at those “r and r” bases that I realized how deeply Cynthia’s book had impressed me.
In Khaki Enloe argues that without the collaboration of patriarchy, the military’s ability to overwhelm a society’s priorities would fail. In all militarized societies men are required to submit to the humiliation of military indoctrination, the insanity of becoming killers, the agony of dismemberment and death. To persuade individual men to continue to participate in this insane practice of mass violence, the financial and social powers which need military protection cannot simply rely on the token benefits of military identification: uniforms, medals and pensions. A much more fundamental social agreement must be exploited. The assumption of men competing against each other in the economic or military sphere, while women wait patiently in their separate, peacetime, home spheres needing, expecting and rewarding men’s competition is central to the structure of the military.

Khaki exposes the traditional attitude of military elites who try to minimize the importance of women’s supportive roles. To the generals we are all just “camp followers,” prostitutes, to the masculine fighting unit, essentially marginal and always a potentially dangerous drag on the efficient execution of the “mission.” Cynthia argues that women have never been marginal and that we are indeed dangerous to the mission of militarization. An army travels on its stomach — and in its uniforms and bandages, with the emotional outlet of its brothels, and with the moral approval of its letters from home. If the material and ideological assets granted the military institution by sexism could be withdrawn, the armies of the world would be left standing naked, weaponless and fundamentally confused about their rationale. Enloe urges this dangerous power be put to use by the feminist and anti-militarist movements.

Within the military structure, Enloe identifies a basic gender/manpower conflict which the military has always wished to ignore. Recruitment of women has accelerated in the post-draft, all-volunteer military forces. With the decrease in available white men, women were seen as an important reserve army — an alternative to black male soldiers who the military has traditionally viewed as politically untrustworthy. Black women are not even seen as black but as part of the female quota. But more women soldiers raises ideological problems of re-defining “combat” to preserve the image of “our boys” dying in defense of “the little woman” at home.

In addition to direct involvement of women within the armed forces, Khaki examines militarist use of women in the defense industry. With the expanding strategic reliance on high technology weapons, the military’s industrial dependence has shifted toward electronics and the “nimble fingers” of low-waged female workers in the third world countries.

In June 1982, 25,000 mostly female electronics workers staged a walk-out in a Philippines “Export Processing Zone”. The Marcos regime was forced to make concessions which did not favor the multi-national munitions industries which dominate such zones. Cynthia gives this example of female resistance as well as others: divorced wives of officers organizing to retain their entitlement to their ex-husband’s retirement benefits, women engineering students searching for non-military employment, feminist anti-rape demonstrations during
war-glorification holidays. *Khaki* addresses women with the need to see the military as one of the most powerful yet vulnerable institutions of male supremacy.

One of *Khaki*’s major purposes is to incite women’s anger so as to begin that withdrawal of female energy for the preparation and maintenance of warfare capacity. Enloe works to expose women’s essential disenfranchisement within the male-defined ideology of militarism: the centrality of exclusive male “combat,” the extraordinary bonding between “captains of industry” and “captains” in the armed forces, the father-son hierarchy which is recreated between officers and rank and file soldiers.

But how do we as activists, both women and men, attempt to emasculate the military? Do we do that work together or separately? Do we focus on women, either directly or indirectly involved with the military, or focus on the population as a whole? *Khaki* urges us to never forget the roles women have played in the military and the power women have to expose the military’s weaknesses. But, feminists can become lost in a moral analysis which equates everything male with everything violent. Cynthia notes the despair which comes from such a presumption of fundamental and biological malevolence.

Militarism must be confronted as an economic waste, as a moral aberration and also as a patriarchal institution incompatible with a society of equality and freedom. An economic, “guns versus butter,” analysis is most useful in bringing national security jargon back into the realm of ordinary life. This is important especially in contrast to the traditional peace movement moralizing which often seems privileged and unrealistic in comparison to defense workers’ job needs. In arguing for an emphasis on the patriarchal character of the

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military, Cynthia asks feminists to put aside questions of "original cause." She sees much more leverage to be gained by confronting the observable processes that make the military ongoing through generations. These are processes which are completely dependent on a sexist and racist social order and which are designed according to "someone's calculations of interest and benefits." For those who want to exploit the military's weaknesses, it is important to decrease the benefits and increase the risks that the military must confront when it turns to women for support.

Without assurance that women will play their 'proper' roles, the military cannot provide men with the incentive to enlist, obey orders, give orders, fight, kill, re-enlist, and convince their sons to enlist. Ignore gender... and it becomes impossible to adequately explain how military forces have managed to capture and control so much of society's imagination and resources.

Loie Hayes works at Gay Community News and is active in the women's peace and anti-militarism movement.

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**The Non-Jewish Jew**

by

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THE LOW INCIDENCE OF
POETRY IN LEFT JOURNALS
(Three questions)

A Polemic to a Village Voice writer (and with apologies to Ron S.)

1. Why does the American Left not see the poetry in their lives?
   In a culture of resistance, lack of imagination is a common crime.
   You can’t open a journal and not see preoccupation with what’s
   wrong
   and fear that we’re so small that we can’t dare
   for fear
   of alienating the great invisible popular front

2. Why in a community that places such importance in organizing
   and analysis
   and education
   is there still great difficulty in talking to one another?
   Talking out loud on the subway is left to children,
   troubled or
   inebriated folk
   or that rare instance of shared anger or grief that breaks down
   roles and mutes the incessant din of public transport
   blocking out the occasional full stares that undress and
   sometimes search

3. Why do movement people go to so many meetings that start late?
   A Chinese woman commented that before the revolution there was
   a plague of landlords, afterwards
   a plague of meetings
   and we thought it might be different, no wonder
   we’re reduced to hidden agendas, rotating chairs
   and minute taking

1. Because they like to think in complete sentences.
2. Because it’s difficult to be heard over the noise of radios, TVs and
   uncontrolled airplanes.
3. Because they never synchronize their watches.

John Demeter
Abortion as "Violence Against Women": A Feminist Critique

Editors' Note: The following essays by Rosalind Petchesky and Carol Joffe are responding to "The Male Ideology of Privacy: A Feminist Perspective on the Right to Abortion" by Catharine MacKinnon which appeared in Radical America Vol. 17, No. 4 (July-August 1983). The author's reply is also included.

There are three grains of truth in Catharine MacKinnon's article on abortion ("The Male Ideology of Privacy: A Feminist Perspective on the Right to Abortion," Radical America 17, July-Aug. 1983): 1. Abortion has to do with sexuality and gender, and not just "reproduction." 2. Women's need for abortion has to do with their control within/over "a net of relations" and not just with control over "our bodies singular." 3. Roe v. Wade — legalizing abortion in 1973 — failed to provide most women with that control insofar as the "right to privacy" guarantees no woman a "claim on public funding" (or access to decent services).

These are important things to say and for all those who support "abortion rights" to hear. Unfortunately, MacKinnon fails to explain or even develop any one of these points, including the argument about "privacy" as "male ideology" which her title promises. Her syllogism, "Reproduction is sexual, men control sexuality, and the state supports the interest of men as a group" (p. 27), reduces the state to a monolithic and feminist legal campaigns to futility. Moreover, MacKinnon seems unaware that the critique of Roe v. Wade's "privacy" doctrine as one that denies the state's obligation to provide funds and services totally contradicts the main premise of her polemic: that abortion is "violence against women."

This premise, and the assumptions about the heterosexual contexts of abortion underlying it, are disturbing and problematic. They raise the following questions:
— Is abortion a form of "violence against women" or a necessary though minimal basis of women's survival and self-determination?
— Is "privacy" only a "male ideology" or is it also, at times, a code, a tactic, and a necessary defensive stance that women and other subordinate groups invoke against state and male intervention?

The identification of abortion with "violence against women" first appears (among recent radical feminist texts) in Adrienne Rich's Of Woman Born, and is taken up again by MacKinnon. I have critiqued Rich's statement on historical grounds, since it denies both the historical agency of women in struggling to secure safe, legal abortions and the importance of abortion as a tool of women's self-determination. MacKinnon's theory of abortion as something male oppressors "do to" women and its legalization in 1973 as a male plot is a false reading of history. In fact, there is more evidence to show that not only conservative but liberal men opposed abortion's legalization during the late 1960s and early 1970s; only the pressure of women's massive illegal practice of abortion (supported by a few committed male doctors) created a situation of de facto resistance, and a public health crisis, that the state could no longer contain. Hence Roe v. Wade, however inadequate, grew out of a complex set of social forces in which women themselves played an active role. 2

Not only does MacKinnon write off feminist activists and struggles in the campaigns to legalize abortion. She also dismisses feminist ideas, failing to cite a single feminist work, organization, platform, or argument in favor.
of abortion as an essential condition of women's reproductive freedom and of the struggle against heterosexism. Asserting (without evidence) that "most arguments for abortion under the rubric of feminism . . . [are] gender-neutral," she lumps together all pro-choice or pro-abortion feminists with "liberals" (unidentified), litigators, and Judith Jarvis Thomson (an academic philosopher who once compared the unwillingly pregnant woman to an imaginary world-famous-violin-player unwilling strapped to a person with kidney failure). In other words, she ignores the many national and local feminist organizations in which lesbians have played an important leadership role, as well as the writings of feminists linking abortion to sexual freedom for women (for example, in Radical America alone, articles by L. Gordon, E. Willis, and R. Petchesky).

Let's follow through the logic of the notion that abortion is a form of "violence against women." Although neither Rich nor MacKinnon spells out what she means by this, a few possibilities come to mind. It could mean that the act of abortion itself is a kind of violence, or physical violation, as implied in the description of it as "an undesired, often painful, traumatic, dangerous, sometimes illegal, and potentially life-threatening procedure" (p. 26).

In the first place, this description — which would delight the "right-to-life" movement — is an irresponsible distortion. Abortion in the first trimester (when some 96% of all abortions in the U.S. occur), under conditions of legality, is not dangerous; for the women who seek it — 75% of them teenagers or young unmarried women without resources — it is often far less traumatic, painful, or unwanted than childbearing — the only alternative at that point. The misery associated with the experience of abortion for many (not all) women has to be explained in terms of its real causes: the shame and guilt still imposed by a patriarchal, misogynist culture (e.g., fear that your parents will find out); the delay imposed by legal restrictions such as parental consent or notification requirements; the lack of funds for poor women, now forced to pay for abortions through private means; the social and economic conditions preventing childbirth in cases where a child is desired; the alienation and impersonality of most clinical settings. These surrounding conditions, not abortion made fully and safely accessible, impede women's reproductive and sexual freedom. And they do so most harshly for poor women, women of color and teenage women.

But MacKinnon does not seem particularly interested in the realities of either abortion or the women who seek it. Nor does she care to deal with the particular historical and social circumstances in which millions of women have opted for abortion even if it meant risks to their health, reputation, or very life. For she is too concerned with making what is at bottom a moral point: to portray abortion as a grim fateful consequence of, rather than a means of negotiating, heterosexual sex.

In fact, the "abortion as violence" position revolves less around the act of abortion itself than it does around the act of heterosexual sex. The sexual politic that defines institutionalized heterosexuality as "compulsory," and its specific manifestations in everyday life as normally
entailing male violence, underlies the proposition that abortion too, by extension, is "violence against women." Putting the best possible interpretation on it, this view seems to say that "compulsory heterosexuality" creates a political and social climate of which unwanted pregnancies are the characteristic expression: the heterosexual woman borne down, pitiful, "caught" in sexual domination and its unwanted fruits. This view is the mirror image of its opposite — the notion that sex is always voluntary and gender-neutral, the freely chosen activity of "couples"; and it is just as false. It ignores many facts about abortion and its heterosexual context in the contemporary U.S., facts that comprise our knowledge because abortion has been legitimized — i.e., deprivatized — and more women are now able to talk openly about it. Among these facts, so incongruous with the "violence against women" theme, are the following (based on published surveys of women abortion patients):

1. That the conflicts surrounding heterosexual relations in the abortion situation frequently have more to do with men's nonresponsibility around issues of birth control and children than they do with women's reluctance around sex with men. To confuse women's resentment of male "nonresponsibility" with forms of "male sexual violence" against women is just muddy thinking.

2. That the complexity of contemporary heterosexual relations allows for the simultaneous existence of male nonresponsibility (a form of power), female sexual desire, and female power over the abortion decision. For example, in some surveys it was most often the woman who wanted, and got, the abortion, the male partner who resisted. (But she also wanted sex with that man, and regretted when it came to an end.)

3. That, above all, unwanted pregnancies occur — and will continue to occur — not "because of" heterosexual sex, violent or otherwise, but because of noncontraception; and women fail, neglect or refuse to use contraception for a whole variety of reasons that may have little to do with male coercion, violence, or even their sexual relations with any particular men.

Let's recall that the great majority of women who get abortions in the U.S. today (unlike some other historical periods and countries) are young unmarried women, many of them living in parental (often matrifocal) households, many poor. Sometimes these women do not use contraception out of conformity to the "nice girl" mandate of patriarchal society. But just as often, noncontraception grows out of the sporadic nature of their sexual encounters; inadequate information about reproductive physiology; romantic notions about spontaneous and "unmessy" sex; or the desire for "a baby to love." And this is not even to mention the situation, also frequent, where safe, reliable contraception is not practically available — either because of cost, health problems, lack of information, or the failures of contraceptive technology. If these attitudes and structural constraints are the fallout of a patriarchal heterosexist culture as it affects very young women — and I believe they are — they nevertheless get played out through a complex grid of power relations in which the conflict between young women and male "partners" is only one dimension. Included in this grid are also conflicts between generations — parents and children; mothers and daughters as well as
fathers and daughters; single mothers whose teenage daughters get pregnant just as they themselves are struggling to get out from under a life of dependence and childrearing. Why pregnancy becomes a terrain for asserting separation, adulthood, is certainly a complicated issue, but our understanding of this problem, as feminists, is not well served by rhetoric about male violence.

Nor can we understand the power relations between service providers and women clients—relations that so crucially affect access, information, and options in regard to contraception and abortion, especially for very young and poor women—if we see the state and its agencies reductively, as the “instrument” of “men.” In fact, the “gate keepers” to reproductive services are more often women, who as counselors, nurses, physicians, and agency bureaucrats mediate state reproductive policies—sometimes progressively.4 (Thus, for example, a large part of the credit for holding back the insidious “Squeal Rule” must go to state and local social welfare officials as well as family planning clinics, who refused to comply with the rule and openly voiced their opposition.)

These women professionals, bureaucrats, and service workers operate from within the state, suggesting a more complicated picture than MacKinnon’s Male Bastion guarding the Male Bedroom. In fact, it is likely that many of the young women who get abortions in the present context have relatively little contact with men, either as fathers or as regular “boyfriends” or as doctors. For good reasons, one suspects that access to safe, legal abortion over the past decade has increased young women’s potential independence from men, and that is why the right wing opposes it.

Underlying these remarks is clearly my conviction that women play an active role in constructing their experience (including heterosexual experience); they do not just react passively as victims. This is not a mere “sentiment”; it determines how we understand history and social change, the role we give to human consciousness and social movements. To argue that abortion is an expression of women’s conscious resistance to gender oppression and patriarchal constraints on reproduction/sexuality is hardly “gender neutral.” On the other hand, to argue that legal abortion is a form of “violence against women” that the male-dominated state has concocted for its own male designs in effect neutralizes any organized resistance to attacks on legal abortion. For why struggle to secure something that’s violence against us? Rather, the state should be protecting us from it; perhaps, as the conservatives believe, it should “protect” us from not only the consequences but the experience of heterosexuality. This same logic seems to inform her view of pornography as an assault against women that requires a criminal ordinance.

One final word on the issue of privacy. It is surely the case that Roe v. Wade’s privacy doctrine obscures and to an extent legitimates restrictions on women’s reproductive freedom, on at least two fronts. First, the concept of “a woman’s right to choose” falsely suggests that, given a “choice” of abortion, women’s sexual and reproductive lives magically become a realm of self-determination. Second, we get...

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“private choice” instead of the state’s guarantee of access to decent services for all women, so that — especially under the Hyde Amendment — physicians and the private market determine who shall have the choice and who shall not. Unfortunately for MacKinnon’s argument, the view of abortion as “violence against women” totally undercut this perception about the limits of “privacy.” Rather than putting the emphasis on access—which requires state intervention in an affirmative sense, funding, resources, and safe facilities—it would logically invoke the state’s police power. Rather than replacing the dubious “individual right” with a more positive “social
right,’” MacKinnon’s perspective would reduce abortion to a “feminist” variant of the wages of sin.

For all my own reservations about the political inadequacies of “privacy rights,” it is another one of MacKinnon’s reductionisms to see them flatly as an ideology that “serves men.” The courts in a capitalist patriarchal society will, not surprisingly, coopt the idea, turning it back into “doctors’ rights” or the “free marketplace.” But the notion of a woman’s integrity over her own body, sexuality and reproduction against the encroachments of either state or individual men remains a powerful, moving vision, though obviously not a reality under present conditions. If MacKinnon thinks feminists can afford to give that up, I’m not sure what alternative she has in mind. What, for example, should be the feminist litigator’s defense for the women whose husband tries to enjoin her from getting an abortion on the ground of his rights of paternity? I do not understand where MacKinnon’s framework leaves us in this instance, nor how she can deny that in real-life contexts privacy becomes not only a “male ideology” but a survival need for women, a basis of their dignity.

**FOOTNOTES**


2. Petchesky, Ch. 3.


4. For an excellent account of women as providing the bulk of the labor in the social welfare sector (both public and private), see Steven P. Erie, Martin Rein, and Barbara Wiget, “Women and the Reagan Revolution: Thermidor for the Social Welfare Economy,” in Families, Politics, and Public Policy, ed. Irene Diamond (New York: Longman, 1983), pp. 102-108. The scrupulous research of these authors suggest that “the state” encompasses a myriad of nonprofit and “private” agencies that rely for their existence on public funding.


**Comments on MacKinnon**

Carol Joffe

MacKinnon’s article offers a useful way to understand the link between Roe v. Wade and Harris v. McRae, the Supreme Court decision which decided against public funding of abortions for poor women. As have other critical legal theorists, the author provides a good analysis of the limitations of the privacy defense of abortion, the ultimate limitation being the inability to withstand the logic of Harris.

Nevertheless, the article is marred by a number of disturbing features, which have as a common point the author’s apparent disregard for the real life experiences of women. First, MacKinnon reveals no awareness of the myriad, complex factors which lead women to choose abortion. To simplistically see abortion, as MacKinnon does, as a “consequence of sexual intercourse under conditions of gender inequality, that is, as an issue of forced sex” no doubt describes the condition of some women, but leaves out the reality of others, and hence, as theory — feminist or otherwise — her argument is highly problematical.

In fact, abortions are constantly sought by women who willingly, — enthusiastically — entered into sexual intercourse, hoping conception would occur; abortions in these cases might take place if prenatal diagnosis subsequently reveals a deformed fetus, if the woman’s partner dies during pregnancy or if the relationship dissolves, if the woman and/or her partner suffer significant economic disruption — or for a host of other reasons which can transform an initially wanted pregnancy into an unwanted one. Similarly, abortions are constantly sought by women who willingly entered into sexual intercourse, assuming conception would not occur because they or their partners were using birth control, but nonetheless experienced contraceptive failure. These kinds of examples do not negate MacKinnon’s insistence on the inadequacy of the “privacy” defense of abortion, but they do reveal the limitations of her exclusive focus on “forced sex.” The limitations of this approach are most strongly seen, perhaps, in those pregnancies which are terminated after a prenatal diagnosis. While “forced sex” may or may not have played
a part in these pregnancies, certainly far more germane issues raised by these cases are, on the one hand, the social implications of the decision to avoid giving birth to an impaired individual, an issue that has already created strains between disabled feminists and reproductive rights activists. These points reveal both how right and how wrong MacKinnon is about abortion: abortion can only be fully understood in its social manifestations, but the complexities it raises go beyond the realm of sexual coercion. The reality is that, whatever advances are made on the gender equality front, some abortions will always be needed by some women. And thus the quote from Adrienne Rich, with which the article begins — “In a society where women entered sexual intercourse willingly, where adequate contraception was a genuine social priority, there would be no ‘abortion issue’” — must be seen as both naive and irresponsible.

Second, MacKinnon’s statement that “the struggle for reproductive freedom, since Freud, has not included a woman’s right to refuse sex,” misses some of the most interesting developments now underway within birth control and abortion clinics. In the past few years, there has been a growing tendency of counselors to encourage young women clients to “say no” to unwanted sexual overtures. Indeed what started as somewhat of a subversive movement among workers whose official jobs were merely to dispense contraception has increasingly moved into the mainstream of family planning culture: recently the president of Planned Parenthood announced the organization’s largest selling pamphlet was “It’s Ok to say No.”

Finally, it is deeply disturbing to see Roe v. Wade dismissed as merely “facilitat(ing) women’s heterosexual availability.” No doubt, for some men, and for some male institutions, such as the Playboy Foundation, this is the basis for support for legalized abortion. But in presenting this partial truth as the whole truth, MacKinnon is offering a puritanical analysis of sexuality that precludes the possibility that women are autonomous sexual actors. (This view is remarkably consistent with the New Right’s statements on abortion; see, for example, B. Ehrenreich, In the Hearts of Men, chap. 10). Furthermore, she is demeaning the experience of the thousands of women who saw legal abortion as their struggle, and whose lives, in fact, have been immeasurably changed because of legal abortion. The outrage of Harris v. McRae does not negate the victory, incomplete as it is, of Roe v. Wade.

Reply By MacKinnon

Beneath their distorted renderings of my argument, a real issue does divide Joffe and Petchesky from me. That issue is not that I think “abortion is violence against women” and they don’t. I don’t. I never said I did. It is not “the main premise” or any other kind of premise of my article, which may be why Petchesky could not find where I “spelled out what [I meant] by it” and had to guess. The issue between us is also not that I think feminist legal campaigns are futile and they don’t, because I don’t, nor does my position (or activities) amount to that. Our difference is not that they recognize and respect the complexities of the circumstances under which women need abortions and care about those women, and I don’t. Perhaps we do disagree about the extent to which the abortion issue would be what it is, if the need for abortions were to arise primarily because women genuinely desired to get pregnant and then changed their minds. But none of us thinks abortion is something “male oppressors ‘do to’ women” nor that its legalization in 1973 was a “male plot.” Nor — the climactic moments of both critiques notwithstanding — does our disagreement center on a single quotation from Adrienne Rich.

We disagree about sex. Petchesky says I am “concerned with making what is at bottom a moral point: to portray abortion as a grim fateful consequence of, rather than a means of negotiating, heterosexual sex.” Joffe says my analysis of sexuality “precludes
the possibility that women are autonomous sexual actors.” I criticize sexuality as a sphere of inequality; they defend it as if it is a sphere of equality. Or, since when are powerless people acting under conditions of inequality termed “autonomous”?

What do you call those who see a political critique as “at bottom a moral point”? Who trivialize an analysis of the systematic disparity created by the powerful acting in their own interest as a “plot” “concocted for [their] own . . . designs”? Who reduce an analysis of the regularities of institutionalized power to the sneer “monolithic”? Who treat “negotiating” under unequal conditions as an exercise of freedom? To be more direct by analogy, what do you call those who argue that workers “negotiate” labor contracts as if that means their power equals that of management? What do you call those who see analyzing capitalism as systematic, analyzing it as a “plot”? Who calls workers “autonomous . . . actors”? Who sees strikes not as “a grim fateful consequence” of, but rather as “a means of negotiating” labor-management relations? Either gender is a systematic inequality in power or it is not. Either sexuality is a form of its practice or it is not. Why are people who are (one supposes) radical on every other subject, liberals on the subject of sex?

Liberalism is not a name you call something you don’t like; it is a specific philosophical approach, and currently the ruling ideology. From the standpoint of the left, liberalism is that which takes conditions of constraint and necessity and — by exaggerating and taking credit for whatever latitude or exceptions or resistance have been struggled out — calls that freedom. It takes preclusion of choices and calls that voluntariness; it takes social determination and calls that free will; it takes any substantive critique of unequal social conditions — of who is concretely doing what to whom — and calls that “conservative.” It turns a critique of victimization into a critique of the victim rather than the victimizer; it turns powerlessness into a form of power. Criticizing forced sex as sex only becomes “puritanical” in the sense of being “anti-sex” if you embrace the premise that forced sex is sex. (Similarly, a critique of male supremacy is only “anti-male” (to refer to last year’s version of this debate) if you equate maleness with male supremacy.) Liberalism’s peculiar genius is to make things appear as though there really is something for everyone, as though equality is already basically achieved. Radicals, I thought, knew that the point of presenting inequality as if it is really equality in need of a little marginal adjustment is to prevent basic change.

As a matter of fact, although I did not say that feminists can “afford to give [it] up,” and although I chose not to discuss the point, I do have in mind an alternative to the liberal concept of privacy: sex discrimination, which prohibits unequal treatment on the basis of gender. Yes, privacy was “a code, a tactic,” and in 1973 possibly even “a necessary defensive stance.” But I am saying it is also not ours, not true, and it backfired on women in Harris v. McRae for determinate and predictable reasons — because it is liberal and liberalism is a species of male ideology. To Petchesky and Joffe: why do you defend it? Why don’t you see that issues of male ideology are women’s survival issues? And — this is my real question to all who take your stance on the sexuality issue — how can you settle for so little?

Catharine A. MacKinnon

* However, documented rumor has it that at least several of the Justices of the U.S. Supreme Court were willing to invalidate criminal abortion statutes on general grounds of women’s rights. Woodward and Armstrong, The Brethren.
LETTERS  Responses to Evron’s “Uses of the Holocaust”

We would like to encourage readers to send us brief responses to our articles and comments on important political issues. We will print as many as we can of those which seem of general interest to our readers.

To the editors:

As welcome as thoughtful coverage of the Middle East is, the material in the July-August (1983) issue of RA was so distorted as to be counter-productive. The problem begins with the introduction where you refer to the “...Israelis’ own genocidal policies towards Palestinians.” Whatever else can be said about those policies — wrong, stupid, brutal, self-defeating — they are decidedly not genocidal. Words do have meaning. They are reduced to empty concepts if we use the same epithet to describe every situation we don’t like. If what the Israelis are doing is genocide, then so are 847 other things going on today. And to falsely accuse the victims of true genocide as perpetrators of such reeks of anti-Semitism. It fits in with a common practice on parts of the Left to go out of the way to apply Nazi language to Israel.

It escapes me how thinking of the Jews as unique victims “weakens understanding of racism.” The facts stand. It does not weaken our struggle to note major differences various types of racial oppression have taken. Who cares which test group has more cavities? The important thing is to fight the common enemy. We don’t need to create false commonalities to resist temptations of moral superiority.

To say that “U.S. Zionist politics has served as a screen hiding the existence of anti-Semitism” is a case of blaming the victim. Anti-Semitism is hidden because the polite anti-Semites, those in power, want to keep it that way. There really isn’t room in the space allotted to reply adequately to Evron. Thus I can only outline the major problems: Evron ignores the implications of the fact that Nazi preoccupation with the “Jewish question” was remarkable precisely because it often was in conflict with German economic and military interests. The Jews were not murdered in order to take their resources or their land, but simply to wipe them off the face of the earth. Period. Evron also seriously errs by confusing what actually occurred during the Holocaust with the rhetoric and assumed intentions of the Nazis. It simply won’t wash to equate what might have happened to others. History is composed of events, not frustrated designs.

The most disturbing aspects of Evron’s article are the attitudes exhibited on page 19 where he states “... Arab hostility is directed rationally enough against the Israelis ...and not against all Jews... (although the support most Jews extend to Israel does tend to spread the hostility to all Jews).” What is rational about hostility towards all Israelis? Wasn’t one of the things we always noted about the Vietnamese during the war the fact that they differentiated between the American government and the American people, between pro- and anti-war Americans? What the hell does Evron think that agreements by American companies not to send Jewish personnel to Arab countries is all about? More important, from a Jewish perspective, however, is the Uncle Tom/ “Judenrat” attitude of the second part of his statement. If only we’d be good Jews, nice Jewish boys and girls, the goyim will leave us alone. It’s the bad Jews who cause all this trouble for us good Jews. Wrong! Anti-Semitism is no more the fault of Jews than blacks are the cause of American racism. And I doubt if Radical America would let through a line which implied that the disproportionate number of blacks in prisons justified hostility to all blacks.

Steve Fankuchen,  
Editor, SHMATE magazine

Dear Editors:

I agree with Radical America that there needs to be more in-depth analysis of anti-Semitism and of the situation of Jews in general. I do not feel that the article “The Political Uses of the Holocaust” by Boas Evron featured in Radical America, (Vol. 17, no. 4) does this.

Instead of illuminating the important issues of the Holocaust and its symbolism for the state of Israel the author relies on arguments which reinforce traditional left stereotypes. The Holocaust is intimately connected with the creation of the state of Israel.
Repugnance at Nazi genocide was a major factor in European and United States support for the state; indeed, this is one of the last major instances of Soviet-U.S. agreement in the developing cold war. That the Soviets were the first to give Israel full diplomatic recognition is now conveniently forgotten.

Do we have to minimize the Holocaust and its meaning in order to attack present-day Israeli policies? The Holocaust was primarily directed against Jews. That non-Jews, including Gypsies, prisoners of war, leftists of other nationalities, and homosexuals were swept up into the jaws of the machine should not diminish this. It is disingenuous to argue that once finished with Jews, the Nazis would have turned their death camp machinery on the Slavs. Much of the destruction of European Jewry happened after the German defeat at Stalingrad in January 1943, which was the turning point of the war. The totally fanatic desire to destroy the Jews can be seen by the continued diversion of labor, materials and rolling stock to this task even at the expense of the war effort.

It is possible (although debatable) that other national/religious groups (especially the Slavs) were threatened as were the Jews. The groups cited as next in line for extermination had the requisite resources (including a large territory, population and national-state in the case of the USSR) to fight back, albeit at enormous cost. When the Nazis turned their attention to non-Jewish civilians, they often met opposition which forced them to retreat. The very gassing of German mental patients cited by Evron was stopped by Hitler in 1941 after a series of critical sermons by the Catholic Bishop von Galen. The gassing of the Jews sparked no similar sermons.

The barbaric occupation policies of the Nazis in the East (far short of genocide but brutal nevertheless) aroused a peasant population some segments of which had initially welcomed the German invaders. Once roused, it was the Soviet Slavs who were largely responsible for the final defeat of the Nazis.

While one could certainly argue that a territorial entity in Palestine could have been crushed by the Nazi military machine (further speculation: the Nazis never got that far), one wonders what the existence of such an entity in the 1930s and war years would have done for the desperate Jews of Europe trapped by rising anti-Semitism and restrictive immigration policies in the United States as well as other countries.

To make one simple distinction between Jews and non-Jews also ignores the complexity of non-Jewish responses to the Holocaust. These run the gamut from active resistance to passive acceptance to active collaboration. We know that some nations (the Danes, the Belgians, the Bulgarians) were able to shield many of their Jewish citizens. Some national groups with particularly strong anti-Semitic histories (the Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Croatians) formed national brigades within the SS and were among the most brutal in their treatment of the Jews.

To attribute the rise of the Nazis to the collapse of Europe minimizes the potent force of anti-Jewish racism, one of the oldest forms of prejudice and one which is still used by governments on the right and left to manipulate their populations. That a large Jewish population is not even necessary to invoke old hatreds can be seen in Poland where anti-Jewish racism has been used several times since the war, most recently in an attempt to stigmatize Solidarity.

While the Holocaust itself is minimized and trivialized, Holocaust imagery is used rampantly by the Left to characterize Israeli policies. Indeed the RA editors themselves use the word genocide to describe Israeli actions in Lebanon. If the Israeli government is wrong to equate the PLO with the Nazis, critics of Israel are equally wrong in equating the Israelis with the Nazis. Indeed it would be useful to take such imagery out of the current Middle East debate. If the Palestinians are not Nazis, neither are the Israelis. If the Israeli government has its political uses for the Holocaust, does it add clarity to create an alternative but equally simplistic political use for the Holocaust?

There has been a long debate within the women's movement about anti-Jewish racism. Nowhere is this mentioned by RA editors, although several books and numerous articles have appeared in recent years. Is this another case of the invisibility of the women's movement?

If RA really wanted to extend the debate and encourage useful dialogue, the editors could much more fruitfully have chosen some of this work instead of printing an article which in its distortion of the Holocaust and European history of that period inhibits clear thinking on a complex issue.

In struggle,
Rochelle Ruthchild
Somerville, Mass

Dear Editors,

The cover-up continues and you're aiding it. In your lead article, "Holocaust," the author asserts on page 8 that other groups were also victimized. He proceeds to list them, omitting — for whatever reason — a group that's still often omitted: Gay men. The "Men of the Pink Triangle" were systematically rounded up, detained, and ultimately murdered. The estimates of the men so victimized run as high as a quarter of a million.

Your printing that article without recognizing the issue and raising it to the author — no matter how 'important' he is — serves only to continue the cover-up about this important aspect of the Holocaust.

The least you can do is to print an apology in the next issue. That's the least I expect and must insist on it.

Yours in struggle,
Michael J. Smith, Editor
Black and White Men Together
San Francisco, Calif.
To the Editors:

Paul Novick, editor of the *Morning Freiheit*, the independent Jewish Marxist newspaper, wishes it to be known that he broke with the Communist Party in 1969, not in 1977, as readers of my article on Michael Gold might have concluded. His reasons for this break concerned not only Israel, but also and especially anti-Semitism in Poland and elsewhere in Eastern Europe.

And while I’m on the subject of anti-Semitism, I hope you don’t mind if I add a protest against another article in the same issue, the article by Boaz Evron on the Holocaust. I was rather surprised to see that this fellow is “an Israeli philosopher.” He seems not to know his Jewish history very well. He writes that the Holocaust against the Jews was an importation of European crimes against Third World peoples back into Europe. In fact there is a tradition of European mass exterminations of Jews that reaches back many centuries, to the Crusades, and which in all this time has never gone for more than a century or so without being revived.

I was troubled by Boaz’s logic too. He writes that Western propagandists have emphasized Nazi crimes against the Jews to the exclusion of Nazi crimes against other peoples — in order to legitimate West Germany as a European nation; and that Eastern propagandists have emphasized Nazi crimes against the general population to the exclusion of Nazi crimes against Jews — in order to legitimate East Germany as a European nation. I don’t understand this. It’s not understandable. I have the impression that Boaz is just ranting.

I would like to add a plea for scientific precision — moral accuracy and historical accuracy — in all discussions of the Middle East. Boaz’s article strikes me as an egregious example of the opposite, and so too does one phrase in the editors’ introduction. This is the remark about “Israel’s own genocidal policies against Palestinians.” Israel has of course been responsible for several horrible massacres. But doesn’t it strike you as significant that the officials directly responsible for the most recent of these massacres were demoted or sacked, not promoted and honored? Israel’s frequently bloody and generally awful expropriation of Palestinian land is many things; but it’s not a policy of exterminating the Palestinian population. It can’t be compared, for instance, to the Syrian policy on religious dissidents, as in Hama. One can understand why a demagogic orator on behalf of the Palestinians would stoop to the word “genocide,” in order to whip up the audience. But from Marxists, whose bias should be toward scientific precision, the word is not excusable.

The word “genocide” also carries connotations that I’m sure you would wish to avoid. A genocidal country is one with no right to exist. The forces of the world should descend on such a country and partition it — as happened to Germany — or should acquiesce to a neighboring country seizing control — as happened in Cambodia. If Israel truly were genocidal, then it too would have no right to exist. The majority of countries in the world would probably agree with this, but that is a fact which only brings us back to the general subject of anti-Semitism.

Paul Berman

Dear Editors,

I must absolve the editors of RA from the charge of indifference to the plight of the “gays” under the Nazis. They did indeed suggest to me to include it in my article, and I declined, writing to them, *inter-alia*: “…Neither were homosexuals hunted down, to the best of my knowledge, with the same thoroughness as the Jews and the Gypsies. I must confess, however, that I never read up on the fate of the homosexuals, and my knowledge of the subject is quite scanty. By this token, however, I cannot have my name appear over a statement about a subject I know so little about.” I may perhaps add here that Nazi SA leader Ernst Roehm and some of his chief SA cronies were homosexual. They were indeed murdered by Hitler, but not because of that but because of political reasons. This may perhaps mean that being a Nazi and being a homosexual were not necessarily mutually exclusive.

I am quite surprised that RA presented me as a “philosopher.” I am a journalist, although my academic training has been in philosophy, as well as history. Still, Mr. Berman’s knowledge of Jewish history is quite spotty, to say the least. There were three massacres of European Jews prior to Hitler, and not, as he claims, every century: the massacres of the Jewish communities of the Rhineland during the First Crusade in the 11th century; the massacre of Jews in the wake of the Black Death in the 14th century; and the massacre of Ukrainian Jews during the Cossack uprising of the 17th century. And the very use of the word “extermination” is problematic and misleading. It connotes a total, systematic annihilation of a population — the sort of thing which was perpetrated by the Church on the Albigensian heretics in Provence in the Middle Ages, or by Hitler in our time. I doubt whether even the Cossack rebellion amounted to that. Pogroms and massacres, while horrible in themselves, do not constitute “extermination.” The Druzes and the Maronites in Lebanon did commit massacres and pogroms of each other, as well as on the Palestinians in their midst, in the present agony in that land, without it adding up to “extermination.” Even the famous Russian pogroms against the Jews in 1881-1882 never claimed more than a few hundred lives. Mr. Berman should then be more careful of his “facts.”

As regards Mr. Berman’s misunderstanding of my logic — he has been the first person who failed to understand that part of the article, which has been reprinted several times in Europe and America over the last three years, nor does he try to explain
wherein is my logic faulty — so perhaps his own mental processes are defective. I do, by the way, agree that the term “genocide” should not be applied to Israeli policies towards the Palestinians. Such a loose use of language tends to blur all distinctions and definitions. In this I am thoroughly in agreement with both Mr. Berman and Mr. Frankuchen.

Boas Evron

RESPONSE

The response to Boas Evron’s article has confirmed our hope in publishing it — that it would open a further discussion on the pages of RA about the Middle East and anti-Semitism. These responses and our own reactions to the article and the comments about it have led to some of the most passionate and intense discussions which this board has had in years. Our internal debates, and the spillover reading and talking generated by them, have caused some of us to change our opinions radically and have entered all of us into a process which is still continuing.

Rather than address all the points raised by our respondents, we will only comment on three main areas. First, we want to clarify and defend our use of the word “genocide” in the Introduction. Second, we will review the complexities of the connections between Zionism and anti-Semitism. Finally, we wish to briefly discuss Nazi persecution of gays and its importance to an understanding of sexual politics.

Genocide

A basic theme to all the letters is that we were incorrect and unwise to label Israeli politics as “genocidal” because they are not equivalent to the Nazi destruction of the Jews. However, for us, a strict identification of genocide with the Nazi assault against Jews blocks political understanding of the current and historical situation in the Middle East.

First, the definition of genocide cannot escape historical and political context. Soon after the word was coined, a UN conference on Genocide was convened in 1947 to forge a definition which not only captured the enormity of the Nazi policy, but identified — for the future — the kinds of assaults which put a people’s survival at risk. No one sought to limit the term to a plan of “literal extermination” because such a definition was considered too narrow to be effective. Of course, the conference was inevitably political. The US and other Western states protested the inclusion of “cultural groups” as targets of genocide, concerned that this would implicate colonial and neo-colonial strategies. The Soviets ruled out the inclusion of “political groups,” for fear that class warfare would be branded genocidal. If there was a progressive impulse that informed the conference it was not to hold the word “genocide” as a memorial to Jewish suffering, but rather to extend it so that future total assaults would have a name that could alarm and mobilize.

It was this impulse which motivated the US Left to use the term “genocide” to describe our own state’s policies — in the historical suppression of Native Americans and in the war against the Vietnamese. We still see this usage as morally and politically responsible because it provided insight into the nature of these aggressions as practices which denied the resources needed for the maintenance of a people’s identity. Yet neither policy strictly resembled the Nazi assault on Jews. The US, unlike fascist Germany, adhered to discernable self-interested limits: some Native Americans were allowed to survive on reservations; defeat ultimately was accepted and negotiated with the Vietnamese. Nevertheless, the Left’s charges had meaning and merit. The term was appropriate for naming the breadth of US aggression — that no segment of the targeted people was exempt, that the slaughter of civilians, poisoning of water and land, desecration of national and sacred monuments were not accidents, but were carefully implemented. The use of “genocide” to characterize these aggressions was necessary to alert people to the depths of the assaults, to warn that continued atrocities were inevitable, and to mobilize outraged concern.

Similarly, current Israeli policy against the Palestinians is genocidal because it is directed toward the systematic destruction of a culture, a set of institutions, and a people, if not the wiping out of every individual Palestinian. In occupied Palestine, Arabs are not hunted down and executed, and they are given certain legal and human rights. It is important to recognize that the dynamic of Israeli hostility to the Palestinians is different from Nazi anti-Semitism, and to analyze further the implications of this difference. Yet by using the word “genocidal” we hope to challenge and expose the process of transformation by which policies move from being miserable and brutal to destroying economic, social, cultural, and political resources of a people.

If genocide is only the Nazi Holocaust, then voices and experiences of new victims dim or become suspect, falling into a babble of myriad, often gruesome charges and counter-charges. When the Palestinians (or Native Americans) lay claim to the notion of genocide they jar and threaten old conceptions of the world. Their effort to take power over these words is part of a general process by which powerless groups attempt to redefine their situation as one means of changing it. Western leftists should avoid an elitist effort to tell oppressed people that their suffering somehow falls short, because it does not equal that of fascism’s greatest victims. To do so, as Evron noted in his piece, is to set Israeli policy up as unquestionable, as forever justified because of the “greatest injustice ever known.” In general, then, we are especially disturbed when leftists consider the historical experiences of Jews to somehow override the current reality of Palestinians.
Yet, while we want to restate strongly our critique of Israel's expansionist policies, there is disagreement on the R4 board. We all agree that the tactics of the Israeli Defense forces during the invasion of Lebanon in 1982 must be seen as genocidal. The devastation that still exists in formerly Palestinian neighborhoods in Beirut testifies to the massive slaughter of noncombatants. Residents of Beirut, Christian and Arab alike, speak with awe at the methodical precision of the bombing and shelling of Palestinian areas. They speak to the effectiveness of Israeli intelligence which pinpointed Palestinian families and apartment houses and destroyed them, sparing non-Palestinian lives and property as an object lesson. Thus there is no question that the Israeli militarists planned and executed a mass killing of Palestinian Arabs.

Still, some of us feel that genocide is an appropriate — if provocative — term in regard to the Lebanon invasion, but do not make such harsh judgments of earlier history. Others feel that the origins of the Israeli state in Zionist ideology open the entire history of Israeli policy to charges of racism and genocide. Still others want us to be more precise about applying the term to specific policies. Here the important period is the mid-1960s, when Palestinian national identity became more widely recognized and when both major Israeli parties began to identify national security with post-1967 borders and with the destruction of all resistance to expansion. The implementation of Israeli policy in both dimensions had clear genocidal implications for Palestinians, whose national identity then became even more associated with opposition to all Israeli policy. Since the 1967 expansion, it has become clear that every expression of Palestinian nationalism has been seen as a threat to Israel and been targeted for attack. Our differences are not, then, mere academic quibbling over terms. For us, and for the rest of the Left, they imply different responses to Palestinian demands as well as to Israeli and US policy. Because of the importance of resolving these debates, we are actively soliciting articles which continue the discussion.

Finally, we want to register a protest against the call for "balance" and "fairness" in matters of genocide. Such a broadly worded demand ignores the current geopolitical power differences between Israelis and the Palestinians. It also disregards the immediate, objective danger which Palestinians experience, in Israel itself and — especially — in the West Bank, Gaza, and Lebanon. We cannot be numb to their suffering, or blind to the policies that have caused it. The only responsible course for US leftists is the continued exposure of Middle Eastern realities, denunciation of Israeli and US policy, and support for the Palestinian resistance.

**Anti-Semitism**

Another important discussion emerging from our earlier introduction regards the links between Zionism, anti-Semitism, the Holocaust, and support of Israel. In that earlier piece we telescoped a number of internal discussions saying "In the US Zionist politics has served as a screen, hiding the existence of anti-Semitism, just as, vice versa, the failure to confront anti-Semitism in Western countries promotes a channeling of all Jewish consciousness and emotion
into Zionism.” While we can understand how such compressed statements can lead to misunderstanding, we still think that the points we were trying to make are important, little explored outside the women’s movement, and in need of further elaboration.

Some of us on the RA board have been surprised by how many from the generation of the 1960s and younger have in the past five years rejoined our parents’ generation in their embrace of Zionism as the expression of Jewish politics. (Jewish politics here refers to both a recognition of oppression and an assertion of a Jewish identity.)

Many have even adopted the position that anti-Zionism is anti-Semitism. This refrain recalls a debate almost a hundred years old: the question of creating a nation versus transforming societies so that all people can live in freedom. For groups which have formed to expose the existence of anti-Semitism in the US culture and to challenge it, we question how supporting Zionism furthers that end. We believe rather that Zionist politics has blocked both an understanding of and confrontation with anti-Semitism.

We say this because we view Jewish assimilation into US society and Zionist politics as two sides of the same coin. A serious challenge to anti-Semitism demands disturbing the social order. We cannot accommodate the way things are and eliminate the threat of anti-Semitism. While there is real fear on the part of Jews of explicit anti-Jewish reprisals for making a serious challenge to cultural norms, there is also a stake in the existing way of life that deters many from taking such risks. For young progressive Jews, our rebellion and activism in the social movements of the past decades was, in part, against our parents’ assimilation; we rejected our parents’ goals of “success” within the prevailing structures. We challenged the values and ideology of US society which they had adopted: hard work/upward mobility assumptions, consumerism, the emphasis on family life, the belief that the promise of America was realized.

The movements that carried such rebellion called for an open society, and sought broader ties of solidarity among the diverse constituencies in motion. But the loss or weakness of social movements that had once been the basis for this solidarity has narrowed our goals and fragmented our notions of community. Sustaining a cultural critique of US society when alternatives fade from mind becomes increasingly difficult. We think there is a connection between this loss of a critique of US culture (or a reassertion into it) and the ease with which many younger Jews have come to identify with Israel and Zionism.

When Zionist politics are posed as the resolution of anti-Jewish bigotry, the implicit premise is that no society but a Jewish one is open to Jews: only in a Jewish state will Jews be secure. With these arguments, the Holocaust is always in the background. The past is abstractly posed as a future possibility — annihilation by one’s neighbors. As Evron argued, both in Israel and in the Diaspora, the Holocaust is used to insulate Israeli policy from serious opposition. He exposed the meaning of this defense: the Holocaust is discussed not in order to explain the past but rather to manipulate the present. Any explanation of the past and present in their specific historical context is suspended. We are left without a serious understanding of anti-Semitism, without a commitment to unmask how a culture (Germany) which Jews had claimed as their own turned on them with extraordinary violence. Such explanations are not taken up by organizations like the Anti-Defamation League. While monitoring overt anti-Semitic acts (from refusing Jews participation in various kinds of organizations or businesses or schools, to Nazi Party and Ku Klux Klan actions) is relevant, such activity sidesteps the deeper cultural norms and psychological factors which maintain anti-Jewish views. The focus on Israel as the answer for the diaspora Jews — as the ultimate security and source of identity — has substituted for a challenge to American culture, for creating an open society.

We are arguing that over the past forty years or more Zionist politics have not included a serious challenge to US society, have not demanded analysis of how anti-Jewish bigotry is reproduced by the US culture, and have been hostile to activism aimed at creating a truly open society. Zionist politics is part of Jewish assimilation, part of becoming invested in the economic and social arrangements of the status quo.

If the Jewish establishment has failed, the Left, for very different reasons, has had a difficult time taking anti-Semitism seriously. The fact that anti-Semitism doesn’t fit any of the available models of a materially based oppression is key here. Anti-Semitism, unlike racism, has not functioned to keep Jews as Jews economically marginal; that is, they have not been formed into an economic underclass. Because it lacks an economic dimension, many leftists have treated anti-Semitism as though it were not real or not relevant.

Secondly, because those who have focused on anti-Semitism have often done so in a context of identity politics, the Left has distanced itself from such issues. The Left has been suspicious of politics based on ethnic identity. It has viewed them as reactionary, a false return to a historical moment when such an identity had a material base in community and culture — a base which has been eroded by the development of the capitalist market and mass culture. (The erosion of that base is perhaps not unconnected to the embrace of Israel as the source of Jewish identity). While there are real political debates about how to understand anti-Semitism, the failure of the Left to have sharpened the debate has contributed to the difficulty many have had feeling on firm ground in their criticism of Israel.

The tension between the goal of an open society
versus a Jewish state has existed for almost a century. The socialist promise of an open society underrated the tenacity of anti-Semitism. Even as “Jewish identity” loses its material base, becomes more abstract, less rooted, the antagonism to Jews survives. The Left has been defeated twice — by the Holocaust and by the failure of socialism to create open societies. In the tragic failure of the Left, Zionism gains support. Yet the old left-wing critique remains: in accepting evacuation over building a new order Zionism “surrenders to anti-Semitism.” If the past is no longer to haunt the future, the failure of both socialism and Zionism to uproot anti-Semitism must be confronted. As Rochelle Ruthchild indicates, there is within feminism the beginnings of a discussion which points in new directions. As strangers in their own countries, feminists, with the goal of building women’s solidarity with other women, have challenged commitments to the nation-state. ¹ We hope to open the pages of Radical America to such discussions.

Gays and the Holocaust

When Evron refused to include gays as victims of the Holocaust, we decided to acknowledge this absence in our introduction. Our failure to do this, as M. Smith writes, ratified the coverup. We apologize. Yet the significance of including gays as victims of the Holocaust is not simply to recognize all those who suffered Nazi extermination policy but also to shed light on Nazi ideology. Evron, still resisting any significance to the rounding up of gays, identifies Roehm, an SS officer as a homosexual — indicating that the Nazi Party accepted homosexuality within its male society. Yet these contradictions are central to the recent research on fascism and sexuality. The problematic for Nazism, as George Mosse has argued, was that its mass appeal lay in the claim to uphold respectability, order, normalcy, and stability — while at the same time the male bond which cemented Nazi society encouraged a homo-erotic culture. This central tension within Nazi ideology — the need to preserve respectability while constituting a male society which threatened the family and “normal” sexuality — resulted in a series of paradoxes. At the same time that many prominent Nazis were homosexuals, Nazi deputies were introducing legislation to institute homosexual castration. Nor was this a peripheral contradiction. Homosexuality was an insistent counterpoint to “respectability,” and the claim to the mantle of respectability demanded that persecution of homosexuals be kept in the public eye.²

The Editors

1. See Elly Bulkin, in Yours In Struggle: Three Feminist Perspectives on Anti-Semitism and Racism by Elly Bulkin, Minnie Bruce Pratt, and Barbara Smith (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Long Haul Press, 1984)
It is now more than twenty years — a generation — since the birth of the New Left. Student activists in the New Left generally felt little continuity with what had recently been the largest and most influential group on the American left — the Communist Party. By the late 1960s, however, New Left journals — this one in particular — began to devote increasing attention to that Old Left experience. Many of the earliest writings were sharply critical: “we could have done a better job in the same situation” was often the implicit message. But by the mid-1970s, the tone of such writings had decisively shifted. As the New Left collapsed, veterans of that movement began to soften their harsh assessments of other radical veterans. This new, more respectful attitude found concrete expression in a flood of oral history projects, oral autobiographies, and oral history films in which New Leftists recorded verbatim the lessons of their radical predecessors.

This political reassessment has also found an outlet in scholarly studies of Communist Party history by sixties radicals who have gone into the academic world. Which Side Were You On? by Maurice Isserman is perhaps the best of these books published to date. It is a fine study of Communists during World War II — scrupulous in scholarship yet also written in an engaging narrative style.

Isserman takes a dialectical approach to the history of American Communism; he views that history as a process and looks at what the party was becoming as well as what it was. More concretely — and this is perhaps the chief contribution of this study — Isserman suggests that we “think of the history of the party from 1930 to 1956 as a continuum, and as the history of a single generation.” (p. xii) The generation which Isserman has in mind is that of the large number of men and women (most commonly second-generation New York Jews) who joined the CP in the early years of the Depression, helped to organize the jobless and the CIO, fought Franco in Spain and Hitler in Europe, suffered the ravages of the Red Scare, and finally quit the party in droves around 1956. (A “red diaper” baby himself, Isserman is literally the child of this very generation.) By combining social and political history, this generational analysis enables Isserman to avoid the trap that most studies of American Communism have fallen into — the tendency to depict Communists as “passive agents of a politics imposed on them from without rather than human beings who held and discarded illusions, learned some lessons from their mistakes and failed to learn others.” (p. x)

From a contemporary left perspective the record of the party during the war years presents itself mostly as a series of embarrassments, tied together by a consistent willingness to drop yesterday’s touted “line” in response to today’s direct or indirect message from Moscow. Isserman unflinchingly chronicles these unsavory episodes. At the same time he argues, contrary to most previous authors, that the party did not abandon the struggle for black people’s rights during the war. And more generally, he maintains that the party allowed a greater degree of internal debate and dissent in those years than is usually conceded.

But Isserman’s primary concern is not with what the party did right or wrong at this or that moment during the war years. Rather he urges that we consider the general direction in which the party — or at least a particular generation of its members — was moving. In Isserman’s view, since the 1930s the winds within the party were blowing toward that group of popular front policies which came to be called “Browderism” after the CP’s leader, Earl Browder. “These policies,” he writes, “represented, if in imperfect fashion, the political lessons that thousands of Communist militants had drawn from their experiences during the Depression and the war.” (p. 2)

Isserman admits that Browder himself was “an arrogant and uncompromising party dictator.” It is not so much Browder that Isserman wants to
defend, but rather the generation of young Communists whose own slowly emerging political conclusions — on the need to appraise American conditions realistically, and a strong emphasis on democracy — found temporary expression in the wartime coalition policies of Earl Browder. The repudiation of those policies in 1945, he argues, "destroyed what might have been the last, best chance the Communists would have to sustain a socialist movement in the United States, and it led shortly to a political vacuum on the left which has not been filled in the more than three decades since." (pp. 2-3)

Given the centrality of this generation to Isserman’s argument, it is disappointing that we do not learn more about such leading members of it as John Gates, Steve Nelson, Joseph Starobin, and Joseph Clark. Generally, these men make only cameo appearances in a book in which center stage is occupied by Earl Browder and the actions of the party's political committee. Although these young Communists figure prominently in the book’s analysis, they figure less centrally in its narrative. And we learn relatively little about how they differed from other groups and generations within the party which did not reach the same conclusions. Isserman has given us a glimpse of one generational-social group of the party during one brief period of its history. What is needed now is a fuller socio-political history of the party, which examines with equal care, subtlety, and sympathy the political conclusions learned by other groups and generations. At the same time, as those of us who came to political maturity in the 1960s begin to raise a new generation of — one hopes — red diaper babies, it may be equally important to begin to undertake a generational and political analysis of our own history in the New Left. In either task, Isserman’s book will serve as an important guide and inspiration.

— Roy Rosenzweig

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The Editors

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