dialog: millett & marcus

On April 25, 1975, Kate Millett met Herbert Marcus, Angela Davis' former philosophy professor at San Francisco State University. He had also been a prominent figure in the American left and had written numerous other books of socialist theory, for a Dialogue on Feminism and Socialism. The dialogue was arranged by Dr. Mary Kaslowski, Director of Women's Programs for University Extension, who with Patricia Allen, a sociology instructor at a Los Angeles junior college, sat on a panel with Millett and Marcus to respond to their opening statements. Reveille Cafeteria was packed with 500 students and community people; the dialogue had been sold out for a month.

Kate Millett had an enjoyable Irish wit, but in this dialogue she came across as more scholarly—somewhat as if she were at an Oxford Debating Society. Her tone was clipped, British. Once she cut short a man in the audience with, "Come, come. We aren't debating the right of tyrants to be tyrants..." or Rockefeller to express the rest of us." Kate carried the evening—both in her serious analysis and with her humor.

In a 1974 speech at Stanford Marcus "came out" as a feminist. He had been influenced by female students. At the end of that long theoretical and polemical session, the audience was left with the feeling that Marcus identified as "feminist socialist," Marcus added: "And here is my concluding personal statement: You may, you wish, interpret it as a statement of surrender or a statement of conceding incompetence, but we believe it is a statement of the sins of a patriarchal civilization and its tyranny of power. Women must become free to determine the role of the wife, not as mother, not as mistress, not as girlfriend, but as individual human being. This will be a struggle permeated with bitter conflicts, torment (mental and physical).

Millett read her prepared statement first. (What follows is not exact quotation except where it is literal.) It is an interesting analysis. But is it faithful to the style of the original. No tape recording was allowed.)

millett statement

feminism vs. socialism

"I'm calling this a dialogue between feminism and socialism. The women's movement has enormous mandates, and quite well. On went to discuss the quarrels feminism has with socialism. First, the goal of socialism is to eliminate the tyranny of the rich over the poor, the tyranny of class. The goal of feminism is to eliminate the tyranny of the rich over those who are oppressed by the society, to eradicate patriarchy in all its manifestations. The point of origin in feminism is women. Marcus referred to "feminist" as presupposing the emancipation of all classes. Second, socialism's leading theoreticians (men) have often swept away the 'woman question.' It might, as even Marcus points out, be possible to discriminate against women under socialism."

Patriarchy is neither universal nor endemic. The pre-capitalist stage of life was the matriarchal family. The institution of patriarchy is in the nuclear village culture of the neolithic period, inaccurately referred to as matriarchy. Rather, it was an equilibrium between the sexes. There was no marriage. This time period has been well described by socialist anthropologist Evelyn Reed in her book Human Evolution. It is important to remember that patriarchy's oppression of women is not eternal, not part of nature, not inevitable.

In the present culture, men are dominant through training and habit. They control the economy, law, religion, the state and its agents (such as the Army). They have a monopoly of sexual violence. Patriotry's survival is the survival of patriarchy endures as a power system because it is so well entrenched as to be invisible. All societies are sexist today.

It is "quaint and naive" to imagine that capitalism is the sole oppressor of women. Women were oppressed before the rise of capitalism. Moreover, a woman's class origin is independent of her sex, so that she is oppressed in a way other than in an hour. Socialists have refused to regard women as a (separate) class caste. Socialism theory has centered on a mythical worker, invariably male. Women's labor has been dis-counted because they worked at home. The oppres-sion of women has been slighted by male theoreticians. The worker suffers, women do not. And yet the most burdened and exploited proletarian male had a servant to come home to--his wife.

socialist blind spot

The reason for this blind spot in socialism is that socialism is an ideology developed within patriarchy, and by men. Marx, Bebel and others have held that patriarchy was endemic to humanity: man rules because women are physically inferior, debilitated by reproduction. It would be UN-THINKABLE to discuss this kind of subjection for millennia in terms of race. Millett quoted Marx as saying that, originally, when soci-ety was being built up by a "tribe of women", women were disfigured. Millett countered that, before the imposition of patriarchy, women invented agriculture, weaving and pottery, thus making it possible for nomadic tribes to settle in one place. This was the first revolution in the means of production. If one assumes the rule of force in nature (as a feminist), then women can only be liberated by the largeness of men that will put an end to the problem of patriarchal compulsion. (Get into the factory and save your soul! Socialist societies exploit women in factories almost as much as under capitalism.

The discourse is that the new technology compensates for women's weak musculature. The male doctor says, "You won't be a slave to your debilitating biology any more. Here is the pill. Or here is abortion." The problem is that men give and they take away--as in Eastern Europe where they both sexes have caused alarm, the state needed more workers, so goodbye abortion and means of contraception.

Kate took issue repeatedly with Marcus' statement that "the women's movement is a product of the reaction...in our emancipation is contingent on 'good times, fat days.'" What becomes, then, of the women's move-ment in the depression we are heading into? Is it to be postponed for another period of affluence?

Millett sees the women's movement as feeding into the socialist movement, because of the particular historical conditions at this time. She could talk of political opportunism, the women's move-ment viewed for its usefulness—again, in another struggle. "Liberation is not conferred by a set of circumstances, not by gadgets, not by influence, not by the patronizing remarks of socialists. Feminists, and I do mean women, women who feel women's oppression experiencially, in the gut", have found socialist percep-tions of their oppression "remote, abstract and insultingly objective." Women, in strug-gling against their oppression, are involved in thoroughgoing class consciousness (by in-terpreters impossible to understand unless you have experienced it).

patriarchy is total

Given socialism's near obsession with the economic, socialists fail to recognize that patriarchy is a total system. It affects every existing structure of society through its institutions.

"Call it a sexual revolution." Here Kate espoused the kind of sex-negative, puritanism before the rise of capitalism. As opposed to traditional socialization, the complete abatement of sex roles and the complete economic independence of women for tradi-tional sexual inhibitions and taboos (homosexuality, adolescent, pre- and extra-marital sexuality). Probably there will be no marriage; rather there would be voluntary arrange-ments. The end of heterosexual hegemony. But objects a mythical person, wouldn't all these changes be possible under capitalism? "End sex-ism and keep capitalism? Who'd want it?" was her response.

Millett called for an end to the supposedly masculine traits of domination and vio-lence to be replaced by cooperation and com-passion. She pointed out that patriarchy "values" the latter qualities so highly that it assigns them to women, the underclass.

Millett rejoiced in groups of autonomous socialist feminist women springing up around the country. It is particularly essential that women have autonomy from socialist parties because these parties are male-dominated. Just because the women in the organization are. She asserted that the Marxist economic model was too narrow. There are many free-doms Marx never dreamed of. The last twenty years has heralded a new independence in the women's movement for freedom from imperialism, bureaucracy, ecolo-gical disaster. With gay liberation, racism, women's oppression recognized, "liberation is beginning to sound less far away. We are in process--we are becoming fully and finally human. Let there be many of us. Let us become compan-ions, comrades.

marcus statement

women's movement

another dimension

The ultimate aims of women's liberation can only be achieved in a socialist society... Any movement that aims at structural changes within the entire material and intellectual organization of the world must eventually be a fully-fledged political movement.

The point of the political struggle of the women's movement within the political struggle against capitalism! The women's movement adds an entirely new dimension. Not just the women class, not just the women rebellion, not just one class, but by activating revolutionary gains for all people, which creates an explosion of needs and goals incompatible with capitalism.

Marcus noted the unequal distribution to the sexes of allegedly different qualities--"masculine/feminine." We need to extend "fem-inine" qualities to all, to end aggression, brutal-ity and repressive attribution and exploita-tion of allegedly feminine qualities. The re-presession of women is rooted in the method of production. Allegedly feminine qualities are the inherent human qualities that could not be developed in the present means of production were transferred and localized in the private domestic sphere and exiled from the public sphere. The opposite would also become permeated with society's hierarchal features. The female is the normal human being; the male's human characteristics are repressed. Men be-come mised (made things) by their participation in the production process. Female qualities must be introduced as qualities of the production process. (But we would no longer be antibithetical to the sphere of production. Agressiveness, brutality, patriarchal hierarchy would end to work in solidarity for the enhancement of life.

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in theory & practice

Are there in the actual development of Marxism in theory and in practice elements which continue male domination? The answer to that question is yes. Male authoritarianism among many groups of the New Left is a scandalous matter of fact. There are two areas of potential antagonism (between Marxism and feminism): (1) the praxis of the class struggle, essential to Marxists, seems to deny the oppression of women. Women suffer surplus repression in the division of labor within the home and in sexual relations. These conditions are not necessarily altered by class struggle. (2) Later Marxist theory placed a high priority on the development of the production process. This tends to become self-propelling, subordinating living to "earning a living." Ecological considerations are calling into question how "developed" the production process should become. Awareness is spreading that socialist institutions are socialist only to the extent that they alter all human relations, not just economic ones. Can we speak of a feminist socialism in contrast to Marxist socialism? The negation of male domination would invalidate the attribution of these (feminine) qualities to women only. Men also are in bad need of liberation.

Allen characterized the Millet-Marcuse meeting as a "performance of two elites, two stars." She then criticized the audience: "only an audience makes stars." She pointed out that the audience at the event was over three hundred while those sympathizers of the labor movement in Los Angeles who met to help the female workers at Sheik Lingerie organize usually numbered four.

Allen broadened the look at the women's movement to include women all over the world. "Our washing machines come off the backs of third world men and women. Some women in Thailand earn 20c a day. You have to consider women as you do many other minorities; now there is a large factory for white males now have to compete with browns, blacks, women. Women are traditionally subservient; we lessen the male value on the market because we will work for less. I've always felt sorry for some one who wasn't the successful exporter; white men have to struggle too under capitalism."

I reject the notion that women are tender. Look at the female Gestapo officers in Germany. We need to look at people as human beings all with capacities for tenderness. The competitiveness in women/women relationships is analogous to male/male competition in football, drill training. Academic women need to look at the salaries they are paying their men; many feminists are willing to pay their own a day (exploitative wages).

Walshok brought up the "tenderness" qualities of women's support and maintain capital by loving and feeding her man so that he can be more effective capitalists.

Millet said that masculine and feminine are master class and under class traits and as such are a mixed bag. Women are docile and obedient as well as understanding and efficient. (In other words, the good qualities the woman has are cancelled out by other qualities which render them useless as lack of assertion.)

Millet said yes, but men in business are not supposed to be tender.

Millet replg...although women are trained into humane values, they are rendered useless because they are helpers to their homemaking and they earn more. Their total family income is less than the middle class white male's single income. Thus there is a greater gap between the salaries of middle class men and their wives than of working class men and their wives.

romanticizing the female

Mary Walshok turned to Marcuse and stated she felt he was romanticizing the female. Then she asked, "Now, in achieving economic and social equality are we going to make that leap of consciousness that transforms male and female characteristics?"

Marcuse responded that Walshok was repres sing giving herself as a woman desirable attributes by labeling them "romantic." (This was Marcuse's worst moment; he reminded me of the fraudulently if one doesn't have the quality the theory prescribes, you're rejecting it.) The struggle against capitalism is not the same as the struggle against male domination. It is possible for women to become equal to men, and they would become masculinized. The changing of male-female hierarchy is done by incorporating the negation of present male qualities into the process of production. If you change the way the job is done, it changes the mentality.

A woman in the audience said that ascribed female traits are given respect only when proselytized through male institutions (the Church) or by male theorists. That was the first, but not the last, hostile reaction by a female member of the audience to this term use defined by any male, Marcuse included.)

A male in the audience asked a long ques tion about Marcuse's theory that "anything eroticistically liberating is liberating."

Marcuse and Millett agreed that Playboy is commercialized pseudo-eroticism, and is count errevolutionary. Marcuse added that he failed to equate posing for a Playboy centerfold with the day in-day out exploitation of a blue collar worker in a factory.

performance of stars

Pat Allen (an instructor of sociology at a Los Angeles junior college, a union member and a socialist) first summarized U.C.S.D. professors and students as spoiled elitists and designated herself as a "member of the proletariat." "All I meet with is male chauvinism and it hurts! The chauvinism of blue collar men is easier to deal with. The working class male realizes his wife's salary pays the mortgage and wishes she earned more. Their total family income is less than the middle class white male's single income. Thus there is a greater gap between the salaries of middle class men and their wives than of working class men and their wives.

panel & audience response

thrill of slavery

Millet countered that what massage parlors offer is not eroticism, but the thrill of instant slavery. It's not his sexuality but his domination that a man is expressing. If a woman can do a blow job for five guineas in England, a week's wages in the factory-it still says something that being a masseuse is the only way she can make that kind of wages.

A man in the audience countered Marcuse, saying that if after reading Studs Terkel's Working he learned that modeling for PLAYBOY is hard work, it is work. Millett "won" the argument by saying she had done both factory and massage-type work. "The factory was hell, but the massage parlor was "special.""

In answer to a question about the future of the nuclear family, Marcuse responded that The Communist Manifesto goes much further than Communists would go now. It said not to worry about the dissolution of the family. He said that the bourgeois family is already weakened by TV and peer groups. The real overcoming of the bourgeois family cannot be by a negation of more or less lasting exclusive relationships (Marcuse coming out for monogamy).

Someone in the audience asked Millett why women didn't get it together before now if it isn't dependent on historical conditions. Millett said, "First of all, I did not say the women's movement is not dependent on historical conditions; I said it was not dependent on "affluent" capitalism. The women's movement in the U.S. has been going on for 130 years.

Marcuse was asked whether a revolution means repression. He said, "Yes. No class in power will voluntarily abdicate."

Millett said that no revolutionary aims worth spitting out are achieved by suppression of individual rights. The sort of cultural revolution we are talking about doesn't depend on the imposition of violence. The dialogue lasted about two hours.

by Linda Brown

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