

dialog: millett & marcuse

On April 25, 1975, Kate Millett met Herbert Marcuse, Angela Davis' former philosophy professor and author of *UniDimensional Man* and numerous other books of socialist theory, for a Dialog on Feminism and Socialism. The dialog was arranged by Dr. Mary Walshok, 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 Marcuse to respond to their opening statements. Revelle Cafeteria was packed with 500 students and community people; the dialog had been sold out for a month.

Kate Millett has an enjoyable Irish wit, but in this dialog 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's to oppress the rest of us." Kate carried the evening--both in her serious analysis and with her humor.

In a 1974 speech at Stanford Marcuse "came out" as a feminist. He had been influenced by female students. At the end of that long theoretical presentation on the necessity for what he termed "feminist socialism," Marcuse added:

"And here is my concluding personal statement. You may, if you wish, interpret it as a statement of surrender or a statement of commitment. I believe that we men have to pay for the sins of a patriarchal civilization and its tyranny of power. Women must become free to determine their own lives not as 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 and suffering (mental and physical)..."

Millett read her prepared statement first. (What follows is not exact quotation except when within quotation marks, but is faithful to the style of the original. No tape recording was allowed.)

millett statement

feminism vs. socialism

"I'm calling this a dialog between feminism and socialism...The women's movement has enough identity to open this dialog." She went on 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 male over female, to eradicate patriarchy in all of its manifestations. The point of origin in feminism is women, of whatever class and race. Feminism presupposes the emancipation of all classes. Second, socialism's leading theoreticians (men) have often swept away "the woman question." It might, as even Marcuse points out, be possible to discriminate against women under socialism.

Patriarchy is neither universal nor endemic. The earliest form of life was the communal 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 the oppression of women is not eternal, not part of nature, not inevitable.

Under 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. Patriarchy's chief institution is the family. 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 for centuries before the rise of capitalism. However high a woman's class origins, she may be stripped of them in an hour. Socialists have refused to regard women as a (separate) class and caste. Socialist theory has centered on a mythical worker, invariably male. Women's labor has been discounted because they worked at home. The oppression 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 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 UNTHINKABLE to discuss this kind of subjection for millenia in terms of race. Millett quoted Marcuse as saying that, originally, when society was being built up by brawn "the defense of the established society required strength... women were disqualified." Millett countered that, before the imposition of patriarchy, women invented agriculture, weaving and pottery, thus making it possible for nomadic tribes to settle down. This was the first revolution in the means of production.

If one assumes the rule of force in nature (as male socialist have done), then women can only be liberated by the largesse of men "whether bourgeois gallantry or socialist compensation." (Get into the factory and save your soul!) Socialist societies exploit women in factories almost as much as under capitalism. The doctrine is that now technology compensates for women's weak musculature. Or 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 falling birth rates caused alarm, the state needed more workers, so goodbye abortion and means of contraception.

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

Marcuse sees the women's movement as feeding into the struggle against capitalism because of the particular historical conditions at this time. Millett said that one could talk of "political opportunism," the women's movement viewed for its usefulness--again--in another struggle. "Liberation is not conferred by a set of circumstances, not by gadgets, not by affluence, not by the patronizing remarks of socialists. Feminists, and I do mean women," women who feel women's oppression experientially, "in the gut", have found socialist perceptions of their oppression "remote, abstract and insultingly objective." Women, in struggling against their oppression, are involved in throwing off a lifetime's condition (by implication 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 changes she sees needed: An end to traditional socialization, the complete abolition of sex roles and the complete economic independence of women. An end to traditional sexual inhibitions and taboos (homosexuality, adolescent, pre- and extra-marital sexuality). Probably there would be no marriage; rather there would be voluntary arrangements. The end of heterosexual hegemony. But, objects a mythical friend, wouldn't all these changes be possible under capitalism? "End sexism and keep capitalism? Who'd want to?" was her response.

Millett called for an end to the supposedly masculine traits of domination and violence to be replaced by cooperation and compassion. 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 all socialist parties because these parties are male-dominated no matter how good their line on women is or how dedicated the women within the organization are.

She asserted that the Marxist economic model was too narrow. "There are many freedoms Marx never dreamed of." The last twenty years have broadened out analysis to include freedom from imperialism, bureaucracy, ecological disaster. With gay liberation, racism, women's oppression recognized, "Liberation is bigger, grander than it was. We are in process. We are becoming fully and finally human. Let there be many of us. Let us become companions, comrades."

marcuse 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 order as the women's movement does...is willy-nilly a political movement.

What is the radical potential of the women's movement within the political struggle against capitalism? The women's movement adds another dimension. Not just the number of women rebelling, not just one class, but by activating rebellious forces which transcend class needs which creates an explosion of needs and goals incompatible with capitalism.

Marcuse noted the unequal distribution to the sexes of allegedly different qualities--"masculine/feminine." We need to extend "feminine" qualities to all, to end aggression, brutality and repressive attribution and exploitation of allegedly feminine qualities. The repression 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 of production. The home also becomes permeated with society's hierarchal features. The female is the normal human being; the male's human characteristics are repressed. Men become reified (made things) by their participation in the production process. Female qualities must be introduced as qualities of the production process...The domestic sphere would no longer be antithetical to the sphere of production. Aggressiveness, brutality, patriarchal hierarchy would be replaced by 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 Marxian theory placed a high priority on the development of the production process. This tends to become self-propelling, subordinating living to "earning a life." 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 Marxian 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.

panel & audience

response

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.



socialism/feminism

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 32¢ a day. You have to consider women as you do many other minorities; now there is a hatred for women because white males now have to compete with browns, blacks, women. Women are traditionally scab labor; we lessen the male's value on the market because we will work for less. I've always felt sorry for someone who wasn't the son of a Rockefeller; 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 brutality as trained in by football, drill training. Academic women need to look at the salaries they are paying their maids; many "feminists" are willing to pay their maids \$18 a day (exploitative wages).

Walshok brought up that the "tenderness" qualities of women support and maintain capitalism by loving and feeding her man so that he can be a more effective capitalist.

Millett 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 such as lack of assertion.)

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

Millett replied although women are trained into humane values, they are rendered useless because they are helpless to implement them beyond their domestic ground. (The domestic ground is where the male chauvinist capitalist goes to have a tolerable level of human experience--enough to maintain him, not enough to change him.)

romanticizing the female

Mary Walshok turned to Marcuse and stated she felt he was "romanticizing the female." Then she asked "How, 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 repressing giving herself as a woman desirable attributes by labeling them "romanticism." (This was Marcuse's worst moment; it reminded me of the Freudian no-win situation--if you don't have the quality the theory prescribes, you're repressing it.) The struggle against capitalism is not the same as the struggle against male domination. It is possible for women to become equal under modified capitalism, but they would become masculinized. The changing of male-female characteristics 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 promulgated through male institutions (the Church) or by male theorists. (This was the first, but

not the last, hostile reaction by a female member of the audience to having feminism defined by any male, Marcuse included.)

A male in the audience asked a long question about Marcuse's theory that "anything erotically liberating is liberating."

Marcuse and Millett agreed that Playboy is commercialized pseudosexuality, and is counterrevolutionary. 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.



socialism/feminism

thrill of slavery

Millett 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 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'." (beyond hell)

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 dialog lasted about two hours.

by linda brown