Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory

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Sexuality is to feminism what work is to marxism: that which is most one's own, yet most taken away. Marxist theory argues that society is fundamentally constructed of the relations people form as they do and make things needed to survive humanly. Work is the social process of shaping and transforming the material and social worlds, creating people as social beings as they create value. It is that activity by which people become who they are. Class is its structure, production its consequence, capital its congealed form, and control its issue.

Dedicated to the spirit of Silly Ronaldo in us all.

The second part of this article, which will appear in a forthcoming issue of Signs as "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: Toward Feminist Jurisprudence," applies the critique developed here to theories of the state and to legal materials. Both articles are parts of a larger work in progress. The argument of this essay on the relation between marxism and feminism has not changed since it was first written in 1973, but the argument on feminism itself has. In the intervening years, the manuscript has been widely circulated, in blandual musings, for criticism. Reflecting on that process, which I hope publication will continue (this is "an agenda for theory"), I find the following people, each in their way, contributed most to its present incarnation: Sonda E. Alvarado, Douglas Bennett, Paul Brest, Ruth Colker, Robert A. Dahl, Karen E. Davis, Andrea Dworkin, Alice Earmode, Jane Flax, Bert Garofolo, Elbert Govee, Karen Haney, Kent Harvey, Linda Kaumr, Nan Kebleman, Duncan Kennedy, Bob Laing, Martha Roger, Michelle Z. Rosaldo, Anne C. Simon, Susan Silverstein, Valerie A. Tebell, Rona Williams, Gaye Williams, Jack Winkler, and Laura N. The superb work of Martha Freeman and Liz Anne Carter was essential to its production.
Implicit in feminist theory is a parallel argument: the molding, direction, and expression of sexuality organizes society into two sexes—women and men—which division underlies the totality of social relations. Sexuality is that social process which creates, organizes, expresses, and directs desire, creating the social beings we know as women and men, as their relations create society. As work is to marxism, sexuality to feminism is socially constructed yet constructing, universal as activity yet historically specific, jointly comprised of matter and mind. As the organized expropriation of the work of one for the benefit of the rest defines a class—workers—the organized expropriation of the sexuality of one for the use of others defines the sex, woman. Heterosexuality is its structure, gender and family its concealed forms; sex roles its qualities generalized to social persons, reproduction a consequence, and control its taste.

Marxism and feminism are theories of power and its distribution: inequality. They provide accounts of how social arrangements of patterned disparity can be internally rational yet unjust. But their specificity is not incidental. In marxism to be deprived of one's work, in feminism of one's sexuality, defines each one's conception of lack of power per se. They do not mean to exist side by side to ensure that two separate spheres of social life are not overlooked, each of the two groups are not obscured, or the contributions of two sets of variables are not ignored. They exist to argue, respectively, that the relations in which many work and few gain, in which some fuck and others get fucked, are the prime moment of politics.

What if the claims of each theory are taken equally seriously, each on its own terms? Can two social processes be basic at once? Can two groups be subordinated in conflicting ways, or do they merely crosscut? Can two theories, each of which purports to account for the same thing—power as such—be reconciled? Or is there a connection between the fact that the few have ruled the many and the fact that those few have been men?

Confronted on equal terms, these theories pose fundamental questions for each other. Is male dominance a creation of capitalism or is capitalism one expression of male dominance? What does it mean for class analysis if one can assert that a social group is defined and exploited through means largely independent of the organization of production, if in forms appropriate to it? What does it mean for a sex-based analysis if one can assert that capitalism would not be materially altered if it were sex integrated or even controlled by women? If the structure and interests served by the socialist state and the capitalist state differ in class terms, are they equally predicated upon sex inequality? To what extent their form and behavior resemble one another, could this be their commonality? Is there a relationship between the power of some classes over others and that of all men over all women?

Rather than confront these questions, marxists and feminists have usually either dismissed or, in what amounts to the same thing, subsumed each other. Marxists have criticized feminism as bourgeois in theory and in practice, meaning that it works in the interests of the ruling class. They argue that to analyze society in terms of sex ignores class divisions among women, dividing the proletariat. Feminist demands, it is claimed, could be fully satisfied within capitalism, so their pursuit undercuts and deflects the effort for basic change. Efforts to eliminate barriers to women's personhood—arguments for access to life chances without regard to sex—are seen as liberal and individualistic. Whatever women have in common is considered based in nature, not society; cross-cultural analyses of commonalities in women's social conditions are seen as ahistorical and lacking in cultural specificity. The women's movement's focus
upon attitudes and feelings as powerful components of social reality is criticized as idealist; its composition, purportedly of middle-class educated women, is advanced as an explanation for its opportunism.

Feminists charge that Marxism is male defined in theory and in practice, meaning that it moves within the world view and in the interest of men. Feminists argue that analyzing society exclusively in class terms ignores the distinctive social experiences of the sexes, obscuring women's unity. Marxist demands, it is claimed, could be (and in part have been) satisfied without altering women's inequality to men. Feminists have often found that working-class movements and the left underrepresent women's work and concerns, neglect the role of feelings and attitudes in a focus on institutional and material change, delegitimize women in procedure, practice, and everyday life, and in general fail to distinguish themselves from any other ideology or group dominated by male interests. Marxists and feminists thus accuse each other of seeking (what in each one's terms is) reform—changes that appease and amusingly without addressing the grounds of discontent—where (again in each one's terms) a fundamental overthrow is required. The mutual perception, at its most extreme, is not only that the other's analysis is incorrect, but that its success would be a defeat.

Neither set of allegations is groundless. In the feminist view, sex, in analysis and in reality, does divide classes, a fact Marxists have been more inclined to deny or ignore than to explain or change. Marxists, similarly, have seen parts of the women's movement function as a special interest group to advance the class-privileged: educated and professional women. To consider this group coextensive with "the women's movement" precludes questioning a definition of contested interests and resistance which gives disproportionate visibility to the movement's most broadly based segments. But the interests and resistance of women's interests have not always been class conscious; some have exploited class-based arguments for advanced, even when the interests of working-class women were thereby obscured.

For example, in 1866, in an act often thought to inaugurate the first wave of feminism, John Stuart Mill petitioned the Parliament for women's suffrage with the following partial justification: "Under whatever conditions, and within whatever limits, men are admitted to suffrage, there is not a shadow of justification for not admitting women under the same. The majority of women of any class are not likely to differ in political opinion from the majority of men in the same class." Perhaps Mill means that, to the extent class determines opinion, sex is irrelevant. In this sense, the argument is (to some persuasively) narrow. It can also justify limiting the extension of the franchise to women who "belong to" men of the same class that already exercises it, to the further detriment of the excluded underclass, "their" women included.

This kind of reasoning is confined neither to the issue of the vote nor to the nineteenth century. Mill's logic is embodied in a theoretical structure that underlies much contemporary feminist theory and justifies much of the marxist critique. That women should be allowed to engage in politics expressed Mill's concern that the state not restrict individuals' self-government, their freedom to develop talents for their own growth, and their ability to contribute to society for the good of humanity. As an empirical rationalist, he resisted attributing to biology what could be explained as social conditioning. As an individualist, he found most sex-based inequalities inaccurate or dubious, inefficient, and therefore unjust. "The liberty of women as individuals to achieve the limits of self-development without arbitrary interference extended to women the meritocratic goal of the self-made man, condemning what has since come to be termed sexism as an interference with personal initiative and laissez-faire.

The hospitality of such an analysis to marxist concerns is problematic. One might extend Mill's argument to cover class as one more arbitrary, socially conditioned factor that produces insufficient development of talent and unjust distribution of resources among individuals. But although this might be in a sense materialist, it would not be a class analysis. Mill does not even allow for income leveling. Unequal distribution of wealth is exactly what laissez-faire and unregulate personal initiative produces. The individual concept of rights that this theory requires on a juridical level (especially but not only in the economic sphere), a concept which produces the tension between liberty for each and equality among all, pervades liberal feminism, substantiating the criticism that feminism is for the privileged few.

The marxist criticism that feminism focuses upon feelings and attitudes is also based on something real: the centrality of consciousness raising. Consciousness raising is the major technique of analysis, structure of organization, method of practice, and theory of social change of the women's movement. In consciousness raising, often in groups, the

3. Accepting this definition has tended to exclude from "the women's movement" and make invisible the diverse ways that many women—notably black—and working-class women—have moved against their determinants.

impact of male dominance is concretely uncovered and analyzed through the collective speaking of women's experience, from the perspective of that experience. Because marxists tend to conceive of powerlessness, first and last, as concrete and externally imposed, they believe that it must be concretely and externally undone to be changed. Woman's powerlessness has been found through consciousness raising to be both internalized and externally imposed, so that, for example, femininity is identified as women as well as desirability to men. The feminist concept of consciousness and its place in social order and change emerge from this practical analysis. What marxism conceives as change in consciousness is not a form of social change in itself. For feminism, it can be, but because women's oppression is not just in the head, feminist consciousness is not just in the head either. But the pain, isolation, and thingification of women who have been pampered and pacified into nonpersonhood—women "grown ugly and dangerous from being nobody for so long"—is difficult to the materially deprived to see as a form of oppression, particularly for women whom no man has ever put on a pedestal.

Marxism, similarly, has not just been misunderstood. Marxist theory has traditionally attempted to comprehend all meaningful social variance in class terms. In this respect, sex parallels race and nation as an undigested but persistently salient challenge to the exclusionary—or, if you will, conservative—prerogatives of class as social explanation. Marxists typically extend class to cover women, a division and subjection, yet, to feminism, is inadequate to women's divergent and common experience. In 1912 Rosa Luxemburg, for example, addressed a group of women on the issue of suffrage: "Most of these bourgeois women who act like hussies in the struggle against 'male prerogatives' would trot like docile lambs in the camp of conservative and clerical reaction if they had the suffrage. Indeed, they would certainly be a good deal more reactionary than the male part of their class. Aside from the few who have taken jobs or professions, the bourgeoisie do not take part in social production. They are nothing but co-consumers of the surplus product their men extort

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...from the proletariat. They are parasites of the parasites of the social body." Her sympathies lay with "proletarian women" who derive their right to vote from being "productive for society like the men." While a blind spot analogous to Mill's within her own perspective, Luxemburg defends women's suffrage on class grounds, although in both cases the vote would have benefited women without regard to class.

Women as women, across relations and apart from nature, were simply unthinkable to Luxemburg, as to most marxists. Feminist theory displays much the same question. What is class for women? Luxemburg, again like Mill in her own context, subliminally recognizes that women derive their class position, with concomitant privileges and restrictions, from their associations with men. For a feminist, this may explain why they do not unite against male dominance, but it does not explain their dominance, which culls across class lines even as it forms peculiar to classes. What distinguishes the bourgeoisie woman from her domestic servant is that the latter is paid (if barely), while the former is kept (if contingently). But is this a difference in social productivity or only in its indices, indices which themselves may be products of women's undervalued status? Luxemburg sees that the bourgeoisie woman of her time

8. Rosa Luxembourg, "Women's Suffrage and Class Struggle," in Selected Political Writings, ed. Dick Howard (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), pp. 210-21. It may or may not be true that women as a group were more conservatively or more domestically oriented than men on a traditional left-right spectrum. The apparently accurate suspicion that they do may have accounted for left antifeminism on women's suffrage as much as any principled view of the role of women in a politics of radical change.

9. Ibid., p. 220.

is a "parasite of a parasite" but fails to consider her commonality with the proletarian woman who is the slave of a slave. In the case of bourgeois women, to limit the analysis of women's relationship to capitalism to their relations through men is to see only its vicarious aspect. To fail to do this in the case of proletarian women is to miss its vicarious aspect.

Feminist observations of women's situation in socialist countries, although not conclusive on the contribution of marxist theory to understanding women's situation, have supported the theoretical critiques. In the feminist view, these countries have solved many social problems, women's subordination not included. The criticism is not that socialism has not automatically liberated women in the process of transforming production (assuming that this transformation is occurring). Nor is it to diminish the significance of such changes for women: "There is a difference between a society in which sexism is expressed in the form of female infantilism and a society in which sexism takes the form of unequal representation on the Central Committee. And the difference is worth dying for." The criticism is that these countries do not make a priority of working for that which distinguishes them from nonsocialist societies. Capitalist countries value women in terms of their "merit" by male standards; in socialist countries women are invisible except in their capacity as "workers," a term that seldom includes women's distinctive work: housework, sexual service, childbearing. The concern of revolutionary leadership for ending women's confinement to traditional roles too often seems limited to making their labor available to the regime, leading feminists to wonder whose interests are served by this version of liberation. Women become not free as men to work outside the home while men remain free from work within it. This also occurs under capitalism. When women's labor or militancy suits the needs of emergency, she is suddenly man's equal, only to regress when the urgency recedes. Feminists do not argue that it means the same to women to be on the bottom in a feudal regime, a capitalist regime, and a socialist regime; the commonality argued is that, despite real changes, bottom is bottom.

Where such attitudes and practices come to be criticized, as in Cuba or China, changes appear gradual and precarious, even where the effort looks major. If exercises of state and productive power overturn work relations, they do not overturn sex relations at the same time or in the same way, as it came analysis of sex would (and in some cases did) predict. Neither technology nor socialism, both of which purport to alter women's role at the point of production, have ever yet equalized women's status relative to men. In the feminist view, nothing has. At minimum, a separate effort appears required—an effort that can be shaped by revolutionary regime and work relations—but a separate effort nonetheless. In light of these experiences, women's struggles, whether under capitalist or socialist regimes, appear to feminists to have more in common with each other than with leftist struggles anywhere.

Attempts to create a synthesis between marxism and feminism,


the persuasion of the marxist, women become a caste, a stratum, a cultural group, a division in civil society, a secondary contradiction, or a non-monogonist contradiction; women's liberation becomes a pre-condition, a prerequisite of society's general emancipation, part of the superstructure, or an important aspect of the class struggle. Most commonly, women are reduced to some other category, such as "women workers," which is then treated as coextensive with all women. Or, in what has become near reflex, women become "the family." As if this single form of women's confinement (then divided on class lines, then on racial lines) can be presumed the crucible of women's determination. Or,


the Marxist meaning of reproduction, the iteration of productive relations, is phrased in an analysis of biological reproduction, as if women's bodily differences from men must account for their subordination to men; and if this social analogue to the biological makes women's definition material, therefore based on a division of labor after all, therefore real, therefore (potentially) unequal. Sexual if noticed at all, is, like "every day life,"11 analyzed in gender-neutral terms, as if its social meaning can be presumed the same, or ecuval, or complementary, for women and men.22 Although a unified theory of social inequality is proffered in the strategies of subordination, staged progression, and assimilation of women's concerns to left concerns, at an uneven

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combination is accomplished. However sympathetically, "the woman question" is always reduced to some other question, instead of being seen as the question, calling for analysis on its own terms.

Socialist-feminism stands before the task of synthesis as if nothing essential to either theory fundamentally opposes their wedding—indeed as if the union had already occurred and need only be celebrated. The failure to contain both theories on equal terms derives from the failure to confront each in its own ground: at the level of method. Method shapes each theory's vision of social reality. It identifies its central problem, group, and process, and creates as a consequence its distinctive concept of politics as such. Work and sexuality as concepts, then, derive their meaning and primary from the way each theory approaches, grasps, interprets, and inhabits its world. Clearly, there is a relationship between how and what a theory sees: is there a Marxist method without class? a feminist method without sex? Method in this sense organizes the apprehension of truth; it determines what counts as evidence and defines what is taken as verification. Instead of engaging the debate over which came (or comes) first, sex or class, the task for theory is to explore the conflicts and connections between the methods that found a meaningful to analyze social conditions in terms of those categories in the first place.23

23. Marxist method is not monolithic. Beginning with Marx, it has divided between an epistemology that embraces its own historicity and one that clings to portray a reality outside itself. In the first tendency, all things, including social analysis, is ideological in the sense of being shaped by social being, the conditions of which are external to any theory. The project of theory is to create what Lukács described as "a theory of history and a consciousness of consciousness" (George Lukács, "Class Consciousness," in History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Theory [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1969], p. 47). Theory as a social activity engaged in the life situation of consciousness. See Karl Marx, “Epistemology and Politics: An Inquiry into Their Relation” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1974). In the second tendency, theory is textual in the extent to which it is correct. Real processes and thought processes are distinct: being has primary over knowledge. The real can only be unified with knowledge of the real, in dialectical contradiction, because they have previously been separated. Nicolastri, Political Power and Social Change (London: Verso, 1978), p. 14. Theory as a form of thought is methodologically set apart both from the illusions endemic to social reality—ideology—and from reality itself, a world defined as thinglike, independent of both ideology and theory. Ideology here means, thought that is socially determined by both ideology and theory. Ideology here means thought that is socially determined by both ideology and theory. Ideology here means thought that is socially determined by both ideology and theory.
Feminism has not been perceived as having a method, or even a central argument, with which to contend. It has been perceived not as a systematic analysis but as a loose collection of factors, complaints, and issues which, taken together, describe rather than explain the misfortunes of the female sex. The challenge is to demonstrate that feminism systematically converges upon a central explanation of sex inequality through an approach distinctive to its subject yet applicable to the whole of social life, including class.

Under the rubric of feminism, woman's situation has been explained as a consequence of biology and of reproduction and mothering, social organizations of biology, as caused by the marriage law or, as the separation itself becomes problematic. The second tendency gravitates around the inalienability to be a scientist; the first, to claim to capture as the flux of history. The first is more fruitful in feminism; the second has become the dominant tradition.

24. Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1976). Her existential theory emerges, in order to criticize, social meaning with biological determinism in "automated destiny." "Here we have the key to the whole mystery. On the biological level a species is maintained only by creating itself anew; but this creation results only in repelling the same life in more individuals. But man assuages the repetition of life when transcending life through Existence; he transcends this creative value that deprives pure repetition of all value. . . . Her misfortune is to have been biologically destined for the repetition of life when even in her own view life does not carry within itself its reason for being, reasons that are more important than life itself." (p. 59). She does not ask, for example, whether the social value placed upon "repetition of life," the fact that it is seen as inevitable rather than generative, or the fact that women are more identified with it than are men, are themselves social artifacts of women's subordination, rather than existential derivatives of biological fact. Studious Firestone and Bibring, for example, use the contrivance of sex for changing in a dialectical analysis, but nevertheless take sex itself as preexistent: "Unlike economic class, sex springs directly from a biological reality; men and women were created different, and not equally privileged. . . . The biological family is an inherently unequal power distribution." (The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Radical Revolution [New York: William Morrow & Co., 1972], p. 9). Her solutions, however, are consistent: "The freeing of women from the tyranny of their reproductive biology by every means available, and the diffusion of childbearing and the child-rearing role to the society as a whole, men as well as women" (p. 206). Susan Brownmiller (In Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape [New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970]) expresses a biological theory of rape within a social critique of the centrality of rape to women's subordination: "Not only are women's structural capacity to rape and women's corresponding structural vulnerability as yet insufficient to the physiologic of both acts as the primal act of sex itself. Had it not been for this accident of biology, an accommodation requiring the backing together of two separate parts, penis and vagina, there would have been neither cooperation nor rape as we know it. . . . By anatomical fiat—the inescapable construction of the genital organs—the human male was a natural perpetrator and the human female served as his natural prey." (pp. 4, 6). She does not seem to think it necessary to explain why women do not engulf men, an equal biological possibility. Criticizing the law for confusing intercourse with rape, she finds them biologically indistinguishable, leaving one wondering whether she, too, means sex in the biological.


26. I take Mills' "The Subject of Women" (n. 4 above) to be the original articulation of the theory, generalized in much contemporary feminism, that women are oppressed by "patriarchy," meaning a system originating in the household wherein the father dominates, the structure then reproduced throughout the society in gender relations.

27. In her "Note Toward a Theory of 'Patriarchy'" Kate Millett comprehends "sex as a status category with political implications," for which politics refers to "power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another. . . . Patriarchy's chief institution in the family" (Sexual Politics [New York: Ballantine Books, 1969], pp. 93, 94).


29. Nor does it grow directly from Lacanian roots, although French feminists have contributed much to the developing theory from within that tradition.


The discovery that the female archetype is the feminine stereotype exposed "woman" as a social construction. Contemporary industrial society's version of her is docile, soft, passive, nurturant, vulnerable, weak, precarious, childlike, incompetent, insensitive, and domestic, made for child care, home care, and husband care. Conditioning to these values permeates the upbringing of girls and the images for education thrust upon women. Women who resist or fail, including those who never did fit—for example, black and lower-class women who cannot survive if they are soft and weak and incompetent, assertively self-respecting women, women with ambitions of male dimensions—are considered less female, lesser women. Women who comply or succeed are elevated as models, tokenized by success on male terms or portrayed as consenting to their natural place and dismissed as having participated if they complain.

If the literature on sex roles and the investigations of particular issues are read in light of each other, each element of the female gender stereotype is revealed as, in fact, sexual. Vulnerability means the appearance/reality of easy sexual access; passivity means receptivity and disabled resistance, enforced by trained physical weakness; softness means predisability by something hard. Incompetence seeks help as vulnerability seeks shelter, invoking the embrace that becomes the invasion, making exclusive access for protection . . . from the same access. Domesticity nurtures the consequent progeny, proof of potency, and ideally waits at home dressed in saran wrap. Woman's infantilization evokes pedophilia; fixation on dismembered body parts (the breast, the leg) evokes fetishism; idolization of virility, necrophilia. Narcissism inflicts that woman identifies with that image of herself that man holds up: "Hold still, we are going to do your portrait, so that you can begin looking like it right away." Masochism means that pleasure in violation becomes her sensuality. Lesbians violate the sexuality implicit in female gender stereotypes as not to be considered women at all.

Socially, femininity means femininity, which means attractiveness.


34. Clowers (n. 1 above), p. 892.
desired, or whether it was forced: was it sex or violence? Across and beneath these issues, sexuality itself has been divided into parallel provinces: traditionally, religion or biology; in modern transformation, morality or psychology. Almost never politics.

In a feminist perspective, the formulation of each issue, in the terms just described, expresses ideologically the same interest that the problem it formulates expresses concretely: the interest from the male point of view. Women experience the sexual events these issues codify as a cohesive whole within which each resonates. The defining theme of that whole is the male pursuit of control over women's sexuality—men not as individuals nor as biological beings, but as a gender group characterized by maleness as socially constructed, of which this pursuit is definitive. For example, women who need abortions see contraception as a struggle not only for control over the biological products of sexual expression but over the social rhythms and mores of sexual intercourse. These norms often appear hostile to women's self-protection even when the technology is at hand. As an instance of such norms, women notice that sexual harassment looks a great deal like ordinary heterosexual intimidation under conditions of gender inequality. Few women are in a position to refuse unwanted sexual initiatives. That consent rather than nonconsent is the line between rape and intercourse further exposes the inequality in normal social expectations. So does the substantial amount of male force allowed in the focus on the woman's resistance, which tends to be disabled by socialization to passivity. If sex is ordinarily accepted as something men do to women, the better question would be whether consent is a meaningful concept. Penetration (often by a penis) is also substantially more central to both the legal definition of rape and the male definition of sexual intercourse than it is to women's sexual violation or sexual pleasure. Rape in marriage expresses the male sense of entitlement to access to women they marry; incest extends it. Although most women are raped by men they know, the closer the relation, the less women are allowed to claim it was rape. Pornography becomes difficult to distinguish from art and ads once it is clear that what is degrading to women is compelling to the consumer. Prostitutes sell the willingness that pornography advertises. That most of these issues codify behavior that is neither countersystemic nor exceptional is supported by women's experience as victims; these behaviors are either not illegal or are effectively permitted on a large scale. As women's experience blurs the lines between deviance and normality, it obliterate the distinction between abuses of women and the social definition of what a woman is. 39

38. Each of these issues is discussed at length in the second part of this article “Forward Toward Feminist Jurisprudence,” forthcoming.


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These investigations reveal rape, incest, sexual harassment, pornography, and prostitution as not primarily abuses of physical force, violence, authority, or economics. They are abuses of sex. They need not and do not rely for their coerciveness upon forms of enforcement other than the sexual; that those forms of enforcement, at least in this context, are themselves sexualized is closer to the truth. They are not the erosion of something else; eroticism itself exists in their form. Nor are they perversions of art and morality. They are art and morality from the male point of view. They are sexual because they express the relations, values, feelings, norms, and behaviors of the culture's sexuality, in which considering things like rape, pornography, incest, or lesbianism deviant, perverse, or blasphemous is part of their emergent potential.

Sexuality, then, is a form of power. Gender, as socially constructed, embodies it, not the reverse. Women and men are divided by gender, made into the sexes as we know them, by the social requirements of heterosexuality, which institutionalizes male sexual dominance and female sexual submission. 40 If this is true, sexuality is the linchpin of gender inequality.

A woman is a being who identifies and is identified as one whose sexuality exists for someone else, who is socially male. Women's sexuality is the capacity to arouse desire in that someone. If what is sexual about a woman is what the male point of view requires for excitement, have male requirements so warped its terms as to have become them? Considering women's sexuality in this way forces confrontation with whether there is any such thing. Is women's sexuality its absence? If being for another is the whole of women's sexual construction, it can be no more escaped by separation, men's temporary concrete absence, than eliminated or qualified by permisiveness, which, in this context, looks like women emulating male roles. As Susan Sontag said: "The question is what sexuality are women to be liberated to enjoy? Merely to remove the laws placed upon the sexual expressiveness of women is a hollow victory if the sexuality they become free to enjoy remains the old one that converts women into objects... This already 'freer' sexuality mostly reflects a


spurious idea of freedom: the right of each person, briefly, to exploit and dehumanize someone else. Without a change in the very norms of sexuality, the liberation of women is a meaningless goal. Sex as such is not liberating for women. Neither is more sex. Does removing or revising gender constraints upon sexual expression change or even challenge its norms? This question ultimately is one of social determination in the broadest sense: its mechanism, permeability, specificity, and totality. If women are socially defined such that female sexuality cannot be lived or spoken or felt or even somatically sensed apart from its enforced definition, so that it is its own lack, then there is no such thing as a woman as such, there are only walking embodiments of men's projected needs. For feminism, asking whether there is, socially, a female sexuality is the same as asking whether women exist.

Methodologically, the feminist concept of the personal as political is an attempt to answer this question. Relinquishing all intangible, natural, transcendent, and divine authority, this concept grounds women's sexuality on purely relational terrain, anchoring women's power and accounting for women's discontent in the same world they stand against. The personal as political is not a simile, a metaphor, and not an analogy. It does not mean that what occurs in personal life is similar to, or comparable with, what occurs in the public arena. It is not an application of categories from social life to the private world, as when Engels (followed by Bebel) says that in the family the husband is the bourgeois and the wife represents the proletariat. Nor is it an equation of two spheres which remain analytically distinct, as when Reich interprets state behavior in sexual terms, or a oneway infusion of one sphere into the other, as when Lasswell interprets political behavior as the displacement of personal problems into public objects. It means that women's distinctive experience as women occurs within that sphere that has been socially lived as the personal—private, emotional, interiorized, particular, individuated, intimate—so that what it is to know the politics of women's situation is to know women's personal lives.

The substantive principle governing the authentic politics of women's personal lives is pervasive powerlessness to men, expressed and reconstituted daily as sexuality. To say that the personal is political means that gender as a division of power is discoverable and verifiable through women's intimate experience of sexual objectification, which is definitive of and synonymous with women's lives as gender female. Thus, to feminism, the personal is epistemologically the political, and its epistemology is its politics. Feminism, on this level, is the theory of women's point of view. It is the theory of Judy Grahn's "common woman" speaking Adrienne Rich's "common language." Consciousness raising is its quintessential expression. Feminism does not appropriate an existing method—such as scientific method—and apply it to a different sphere of society to reveal its preexisting political aspect. Consciousness raising not only comes to know different things as politics; it necessarily comes to know them in a different way. Women's experience of politics, of life as sex object, gives rise to its own method of appropriating that reality: feminist method. As its own kind of social analysis, feminism marks a break from the political ideology of male domination.

42. The same question could be asked of lesbian sadomasochism: when women engage in ritualized, sexual dominance and submission, does it express the male structure or subvert it? The answer depends upon whether one has a social or biologic definition of gender and sexuality and upon the content of these definitions. Lesbian sex, simply related, is something between women, does not by definition transcode the eradication of dominance and submission and their social equilibration with masculinity and femininity. Buchfemine as sexual (not just gender) role playing, together with parallels in male sadomasochism's "top" and "bottom," suggest to me that sexual conformity extends far beyond gender object messages. For a contrary view see Pat Collins, Sappho's Statue: The Book of Lesbian Sexuality (Tallahassee, Fla.: Naiden Press, 1980); Gayle Rubin, "Sexual Politics, the New Right and the Sexual Fringe," in What Color Is Your Handbook: A Lesbian S/M Sexuality Reader (Berkeley, Calif.: Sapphire, 1978), pp. 23-35.
44. Reich (n. 22 above). He examines libido, for example, as a question of how the masses can be made to desire their own repression. This might be seen as a precursor to the feminist question of how female desire itself can become the test for self-analization.
46. The aphorism "Feminism is the theory; lesbianism is the practice" has been attributed to T.K. Grace Atkinson by Anne Koedt, "Lesbianism and Feminism," in Radical Feminism, ed. Anne Koedt, Ellen Levine, and Anita Rauh (New York: New York Times Book Co., 1973), p. 294. See also Radchenko, "The Woman Identified Woman," Bibliotheca, pp. 21-22; T.K. Grace Atkinson, "Lesbianism & Feminism," Assume Oxygy: The First Collection of Writings by the Political Pioneer of the Women's Movement (New York: Links Books, 1974), pp. 23-24; Jill Johnston, Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973), pp. 107, 185, 278. This aphorism accepts a simplistic view of the relationship between theory and practice. Feminism reconceptualizes the connection between being and thinking such that it may be more accurate to say that feminism is the epistemology of which lesbianism is an anomaly, but see n. 60 below on this latter distinction as well.
49. In addition to the references in n. 1, see Sandra Lee Barth, "Toward a
within yet outside the male paradigm just as women's lives are, it has a distinctive theory of the relationship between method and truth, the individual and social surroundings, the presence and place of the natural and spiritual in culture and society, and social being and causality itself.

Having been objectified as sexual beings while stigmatized as ruled by subjective passions, women reject the distinction between male and female—that the division between subjective and objective postures—above the means to comprehend social life. Diagnosed from objectivity, having been its prey, but excluded from it's world through relegation to subjective inwards, women's interest lies in overthrowing the distinction itself. Proceeding connotatively and analytically at the same time, consciousness raising is at once common sense expression and critical articulation of concepts. Taking situated feelings and common detail (common here meaning both ordinary and shared) as the matter of political analysis, it explores the terrain that is most damaged, most contaminated, yet therefore most women's own, most intimately known, and most open to reclamation. The process can be described as a collective "sympathetic internal experience of the gradual construction of the system according to its inner necessity," as a strategy for deconstructing it.

Through consciousness raising, women grasp the collective reality of women's condition from within the perspective of that experience, not from outside it. The claim that a political politics exists and is socially fundamental is grounded in the claim of feminism to women's perspective, not from it. Its claim to women's perspective is its claim to truth. In its account of itself, women's point of view contains a duality analogous to that of the marxist proletariat: determined by the reality the theory exploits, it thereby claims special access to that reality. Feminism does not see its view as subjective, partial, or undetermined but as a critique of the purported generality, disinterestedness, and universality of prior accounts. These have not been half right but have invoked the wrong whole. Feminism not only challenges masculine partiality but question the universality imperative itself. A perspective is revealed as a strategy of male hegemony.

"Representation of the world," de Beauvoir writes, "like the work itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view which they confuse with the absolute truth." The parallel between representation and construction should be sustained. The construction of the world from their own point of view, which then becomes the truth to be described. This is a closed system, not anyone's confusion. Power to create the world from one's point of view is power in its male form. The duality epistemological stance, which corresponds to the world it creates, is ob

51. This distinguishes both feminism and at least a strain in marxism from Freud. "My self-analysis is still interrupted and I have realized the reason. I can only analyze myself with the help of knowledge obtained objectively (as an outsider). Genuine self-analysis is impossible, otherwise there would be no "neurotic illness" (Sigmund Freud Letter to Wilhelm Fliess, #21, October 15, 1897, quoted in Mitchell, Psychicoanalysis as Feminine Politics: The Interje in Psychoanalysis and Feminist Theory, ed. by Louise Lamming and Women, p. 127 above), pp. 61-62.) The implication is that interspection is not analytically dispositive to Freud, the collective self-knowledge of feminism might be collective interspection. Although it is interspersed, it is still an insider to itself.


54. This does not mean all men have male power equally. American black men, for instance, have substantially less of it. But to the extent that they cannot create the world from their point of view, they find themselves unmanned, curtailed, literally or figuratively. This supports rather than qualifies the sex specificity of the argument within resolving the relationship between racism and sexism, or the relation of either to class. Although historically achieving more attention, race and nation are otherwise analogous in the sex in the place they occupy for, and the challenge they pose to, marxist theory. If the results of history and activity is class and class conflict, what, other than false consciousness, is to move the historical force of sexism, racism, and nationalism? Similarly, positing a super-class unit with true meaning, such as "black people," is analytically parallel to positing a super-class (and super-racial) unit "women." Treating race, nation, and sex as separate included problems has been the major response to marxist theory to such challenges. Any relationship between sex and race tend to be left entirely out of account, since they are considered parallel "crises." Attempts to confront the latter issue include Adrienne Rich...
jectivity: the ostensibly noninvolved stance, the view from a distance and from no particular perspective, apparently transparent to its reality. It does not comprehend its own perspectivity, does not recognize what it sees as subject like itself, or that the way it apprehends its world is a form of its subjugation and presupposes it. The objectively knowable is object. Woman through male eyes is sex object, that by which man knows himself at once as man and as subject.55 What is objectively known corresponds to the world and can be verified by pointing to it (as science does) because the world itself is controlled from the same point of view.56


55. This suggests a way in which masculinity and femininity may be reciprocally inhumane, without, for the moment, continuing the deep divisions between them. Marxism comprehends the object world's social existence: how objects are constituted, embedded in social life, injured with meaning, created in systemic and structural relation. Feminism comprehends the social world's object existence: how women are created in the image of, and as things. The object world's social existence varies with the nature of production. Suppose that whereas the sexes are unequal, women are objects, but what it means to be an object varies with the productive relations that create objects as social. Thus, under primitive exchange systems, women are exchange objects. Under capitalism, women appear as commodities. Thus, women's sexuality as object for men is visible. Marx's analysis of commodity forms is an analysis of commodification, where the meaning of sex is an objectivity. If women have universally been sex objects, it is also true that matter as the acted upon in social life has a history. If women have always been things, it is also true that things have always been the same meaning. Of course, this does not explain sex inequality. It merely observes, once that inequality exists, the way its dynamics may interact with the social organization of production. Sexual objectification may also have a separate history, with its own periods, forms, structures, technology, and, potentially, revolution.

56. In a sense, this realization collapses the epistemology into which distinction altogether. What is purely an ontological category, a category of 'being' free of social perception, is not the selfother distinction. Ultimately, the feminist approach turns social inquiry into political hermeneutics: inquiry into ismian meaning, one in which the selfother participates. A feminist political hermeneutics would be a theory of the answer to the question. What does it mean? In other words, it comprehends gender in a social division of labor. Useful general treatments of hermeneutical issues (which necessarily proceed if feminism, if a specific problematic of women, did not exist) include Joel Bleeker, Comparative Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as Method, Philosophy and Critique (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980); and Jean-Gal et Gonner, Philosophical Hermeneutics, trans. by J. L. Linge (Berkley: University of California Press, 1976); Rosalind Coward and Julian Eltis, Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State

Combining, like any form of power, legitimation with force, male power extends beyond the representation of reality to its construction: it makes women (as it were) and so verifies (makes true) who woman "is" in its view, simultaneously confirming its way of being and its vision of truth. The eroticism that corresponds to this is the use of things to experience self.57 As an erotic pornography model put it, "You do it, you do it, and you do it; then you become it."58 The fetish speaks feminism. Objectification makes sexuality a material reality of women's lives, not just a psychological, mental, or ideological one.59 It obliterates

Language and Materialism: Developments in Sociology and the Theory of the Subject (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976). Many daily approaches the ontological issues when they suggest that an ontological theory without a understanding of sex rules cannot be "really ontological," that "human God and the Father" toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), p. 121. But built in this work, and more powerfully in Geopolitical: The Metatheorities of Radical Feminism (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), the extent of the creativity of women's reality by male sexuality, therefore the extent and nature of women's change, is situated in the context of its radical and gradual. Consider her investigation of stutte, a practice in which Indian women are supposed to throw themselves upon their dead husband's funeral pyre in grief (and to keep pure), in which daily focuses upon demystifying its alleged voluntary aspect. Women are revealed drugged, pushed, breathed, or otherwise coerced by the familiar and frightening prospect of widowhood in Indian society (Italy, Gelbogd, pp. 113-35). Neglected—both in the women involved in and to the implications for the entire paradigm of sexism in India—are women's deepest victims: women who want to do it when their husbands die, who volunteer for self-immolation because they believe their lives are over when their husbands die. See also Duncan's review, "Struc- ture of Blackstone's Commentaries," Buffalo Law Review 26, no. 2 (1979): 211-19.

57. Derrida (p. 30 above), p. 124. Explicitness is the aesthetic, the allowed sensibility, of objectified erotion. Under this norm, written and pictured evocations of sexuality are compulsively literal. What is to be addressed through it is to renew events "objectively," i.e., verbally and visually to represent who did what to whom. On the "ethics of total explicitness" as stylization, explored in the context of the "foremost insight of the modern novel: the interweaving, the symbolic and structural interchange between economic and sexual relations," see George Steiner, "Ethics and Illusion," in On Difficulty and Other Essays (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 100; "Crisis of discourse" (in George Eliot's work) acts as a literalization but as a "logical" fiction in which the character can achieve the paradox of autonomous life" (p. 7). This connects the lack of such liberating privacy for women—in life, law, or letters—with women's lack of autonomy and authentic erotic vocabulary.

58. Linda Lawrence, Ordinal Values (Mich.: Chilton, 1968). The same may be true for class. See Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cohll, The Hidden Injuries of Class (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1972). Marxism teaches that exploitation/interaction has historically produced resistance/revolution. Women's experience with sexual exploitation/interaction teaches that it also produces resistant/radicalism in both men and women. The question is not to explain why women resist in their condition but why they do so antigas, not by men.

the mind/matter distinction that such a division is premised upon. Like the value of a commodity, women's sexual desirability is fetishized: it is made to appear a quality of the object itself, spontaneous and inherent, independent of the social relation which creates it, uncontrolled by the forces that require it. It helps if the object cooperates: hence, the vaginal

valued in the following description of women's depiction in art and the media: "According to usage and conventions which are at fun being questioned but have by no means been overcome, the social presence of a woman is different in kind from that of a man... A man's presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you or for you. By contrast, a woman's presence expresses her own ardent self, and defines what can and cannot be done to her... To be born a woman has been to be born, within an isolated and confined space, into the keeping presence of men. The social presence of women has developed as a result of their longevity in being under such tutelage within such a limited space. But this has been at the cost of a woman's self being split into two. A woman must continuously watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself... She must to see the surveryor and the surveyed within her too; and yet she herself always both elements of her identity as a woman. She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is critical importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life. Her own sense of being in herself is supposed by the sense of being appreciated as herself by another. One might simply this by saying: men act upon women; women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only the relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is the surveyed, female. Thus she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of violence to a single."


distinction between objectification and alienation because women have not authored objectifications, we have been them. Men have been the authors, the actees upon, to be subdued by the acting subject seeking to embody himself in the social world. Belief is not just an illusion in the reified; it is also their reality. The alienated who can only grasp self as other is no different from the object who can only grasp self as thing. To be man's other is to be his thing. Similarly, the problem of how the object can know herself as such is the same as how the alienated can know its own alienation. This, in turn, poses the problem of feminism's account of women's consciousness. How can women, as created, "thingified in the head,"25 complicit in the body, see our condition as such?

In order to account for women's consciousness (much less propagate it) feminism must grasp that male power produces the world before it disturbs it. Women's acceptance of their condition does not contradict its fundamental unacceptability if women have little choice but to become persons who freely choose women's roles. For this reason, the reality of women's oppression is, finally, neither demonstrable nor refutable empirically. Until this is confronted on the level of method, criticism of what exists can be undercut by pointing to the reality to be criticized. Women's bondage, degradation, damage, complexity, and inferiority—together with the possibility of resistance, movement, or exceptions—will operate as barriers to consciousness rather than as means of access to what women need to become conscious of in order to change.

Male power is real; it is just not what it claims to be, namely, the only reality. Male power is a myth that makes itself true. What it is to raise consciousness is to confront male power in this duality: as total, on one side and a delusion on the other. In consciousness raising, women learn they have learned that men are everything, women's their negation, but that the sexes are equal. The content of the message is revealed true and false at the same time; in effect, each part reflects the other transvaluated. If "men are all, women their negation" is taken as social criticism rather than simple description, it becomes clear for the first time that women are men's equals, everywhere in chains. Their chains become visible, their inferiority—their inequality—a product of subjectification and a mode of its enforcement. Reciprocally, the moment it is seen that this—life as we know it—is not equality, that the sexes are not socially equal, womanhood can no longer be defined in terms of lack of maleness, as negativity. For the first time, the question of what a woman is seeks its ground in and of a world understood as neither of its making nor in its image, and finds, within a critical embrace of woman's fractured and alien image, that world women have made and a vision of its wholeness.


67. In the second part of this article, "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: Toward Feminist Jurisprudence" (forthcoming in Signs), I argue that the state is male in that objectivity is its norm.
failure of workers in advanced capitalist nations to organize in the socialist sense with the failure of left revolutions to liberate women in the feminist sense.

Feminism stands in relation to Marxism as Marxism does to classical political economy: its final conclusion and ultimate critique. Compared with Marxism, the place of thought and things in method and reality are reversed in a seizure of power that penetrates subject with object and theory with practice. In a dual motion, feminism turns Marxism inside out and on its head.

To answer an old question—how is value created and distributed?—Marx needed to create an entirely new account of the social world. To answer an equally old question, or to question an equally old reality—what explains the inequality of women to men? or, how does desire become domination? or, what is male power?—feminism revolutionizes politics.

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