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Women - the Longest Revolution (Online Article)

Historical Note

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Content

On 24 March 2024, the Nicosia chapter of the Platypus Affiliated Society organised a presentation-discussion titled "[Women - The Longest Revolution](#)" at the Home for Cooperation in Nicosia. The speaker was Phedias Christodoulides, a PhD student at Northwestern University. Below is his presentation in text form.

Introduction

The title of my essay, Women - the Longest Revolution, is taken from Juliet Mitchell's 1966 essay on the problem of women's emancipation and how it was addressed by the Left. The essay provides a useful basis and starting point for examining the relationship between socialism and the woman question and feminism in general. Mitchell's thinking on the subject represents a particular path that the 20th century left has not followed, and is therefore a critique of that history from which we can learn today.

The Woman Question and the Left

Mitchell begins her main argument in 'Women - the Longest Revolution' by pointing to the 'counter-revolution' in the socialist left in relation to women's empowerment up to the mid-1960s. That is, she notes the peculiar regression of leftist consciousness on the subject, saying: "The problem of the subordination of women and the need for their liberation was recognized by all the great socialist thinkers in the 19th century. It is part of the classical heritage of the revolutionary movement. Yet today, in the West, the problem has become a subsidiary, if not an invisible element in the preoccupations of socialists. Perhaps no other major issue has been so forgotten." [1] Why has this happened, she asks.

Mitchell interrogates the reasons why the woman question became of secondary importance in the socialist movement. She believes that there are deep, structural reasons for this and draws attention to one particular factor, namely, that the way the issue has traditionally been discussed by socialists has been problematic. All socialists recognized the problem of women's subordination to men, but

none proposed a satisfactory solution to it.

Mitchell then recounts the history of women in socialist theory. Fourier, the first utopian socialist, saw women's progress toward emancipation as the measure of the progress of societies as a whole: "The degree of emancipation of women is the natural measure of general emancipation." Marx followed Fourier in this spirit, but he went beyond Fourier by presenting female emancipation as the index of the degree to which humanity went from being animal to being human. In Mitchell's view, however, Marx retained "the abstraction of Fourier's conception of the position of women as an index of general social advance" as a symbol rather than as something concrete to be resolved: he neglected to deal specifically with the question of female oppression until his later writings, where he treats the issue primarily in terms of the reactionary character of the bourgeois family and its preservation under capitalism. Marx criticized the bourgeois family and called for its abolition, a process that has already begun, a process made possible while at the same time being undermined by the development of capitalism.

This matrix of thought was enriched and clarified by another writer, John D'Emilio, who wrote about gay emancipation. D'Emilio argued that in traditional or pre-bourgeois and even early bourgeois societies, economic reproduction took place primarily in the home, meaning that production and consumption largely took place within a household (or households) rather than through the mediation of the market. With the development of industrial capitalism, wage labour and the market replaced the centrality of the family economy - and this opened up social space for independence from the family (making things like homosexual identity possible, for example). Yet at the same time, as Marx says: "...marriage, property, the family remain unattacked, in theory, because they are the practical basis on which the bourgeoisie has erected its domination...the bourgeois gives the family the character of the bourgeois family, in which boredom and money are the binding link, and which also includes the bourgeois dissolution of the family, which does not prevent the family itself from always continuing to exist. Its dirty existence has its counterpart in the holy concept of it in official phraseology and universal hypocrisy..."

Juliet Mitchell points out, however, that Marx never really clarified what the demand for the abolition of the family in the socialist revolution would actually entail. Engels was more concerned with the issue, arguing that the gender division was the original class antagonism and that the enslavement of women to domestic work goes back to the establishment of private property and patrilineal inheritance. Women had to be loyal to their husbands to ensure that the offspring to whom their husband's property would go was his. This leads to the establishment of monogamy. Engels attributed the enslavement of women to their physical weakness in relation to men, which limits their ability to produce the same as the latter. Bebel, the leader of the socialist movement at its height in the 19th century, proclaimed that "woman was a slave before the slave existed" and added that her ability to bear children was also the foundation of her subjugation to man.

Despite these advances in consciousness within the classical workers' movement, it was taken for granted that the abolition of all classes under socialism would entail the abolition of the subordination of women to men, even by de Beauvoir. In the end, Mitchell concludes that the classical literature on women's oppression is too economic in its emphasis, failing to adequately engage with women's liberation except to claim that socialism will do it. Marx and Engels reduce the woman question to the question of the family and reduce the family to a mere condition of private property: "The liberation of women remains a normative ideal, an adjunct to socialist theory, not structurally integrated into it."

The 4 structures of the female condition

To correct this oversight, Mitchell proposes to radically differentiate and define the specific structures

of women's oppression, rejecting -as she puts it- its simple definition by the economy or its symbolic equation with the liberation of society as a whole. She argues that the condition of women is a concrete structure consisting of a unity of different elements or, a complex structure consisting of different simpler structures. These concrete structures, she argues, are Production, Reproduction, Sexuality and the Socialization of Children. The forced relegation of women to "female" labour along with woman's institutionalized role in the family as a mother who bears and raises children and as a sexual servant have been the defining structures of the family and the status of women historically. These structures developed unevenly, and the status of women historically is the result of the combined and uneven development of these structures. Each of these structures is distinct from the others and has formed a complex unity in different variations historically - so, for example, in some societies women performed 'male' work and in others men were expected to raise children. Each structure needs to be considered individually to get to the present complex module and see how it might change overall.

1. Production

The standard socialist narrative is that, because of the natural inferiority and reproductive function of women, the division of labour led men to do the more productive social work and tame nature, with women relegated to domestic chores. Mitchell notes that women's physical inferiority never prevented her from working as much as men; it only affected the kind of work she could do. For example, in many societies in tropical Africa, women do most of the work while men are idle. Also, domestic work can be as or more time-consuming and tedious than men's work. The importance of women's physical inferiority varies according to time and place: under capitalism, it has been largely annihilated in productive work.

According to Mitchell, another crucial factor explaining women's subordination to men was women's lesser capacity for violence/combat/warfare. In primitive societies, war was common and women did not make good warriors. This was a major factor in her subjugation: weaker than the man, forcing her to do what she wanted.

The problem with the classical socialist narrative is that if female oppression is explained by women's physical inferiority, then industrialisation and the prospect of advanced technology seems to promise equality as it makes this inferiority irrelevant to productive labour. This has not historically been the case, although especially in the West women's physical inferiority is no longer relevant to production. "Industrial labour and automated technology both promise the preconditions for woman's liberation alongside man's — but no more than the preconditions. It is only too obvious that the advent of industrialization has not so far freed women in this sense, either in the West or in the East...any reliance on this in itself accords an independent role to technique which history does not justify. Under capitalism, automation could possibly lead to an ever growing structural unemployment which would expel women —the latest and least integrated recruits to the labour force and ideologically the most expendable for a bourgeois society— from production after only a brief interlude in it. Technology is mediated by the total social structure and it is this which will determine woman's future in work relations. Physical deficiency is not now, any more than in the past, a sufficient explanation of woman's relegation to inferior status."

2. Reproduction

A major reason why women were excluded from the sphere of production was their demanding role in the sphere of reproduction. Motherhood, child rearing and household chores take up a lot of a woman's time and often prevent her from finding work. There is still a widespread belief that a woman's role in the home is her natural task, due to the apparent universality of her family role.

Mitchell criticises Marxists for their failure to explain what the abolition of the family would mean in practice, suggesting that the concept is essentially empty. In their historical explanations they did not know how to analyse the transhistorical fact of motherhood, and this left room for traditional conceptions of motherhood to survive.

For most people throughout history and up to the present day, society is unthinkable without the family: the family is completely naturalized. Mitchell analyses the role of women in the family. She argues that this role is complex, as it consists of three structures that need to be analysed separately: reproduction, sexuality and socialisation of children. These structures were historically linked and began to coexist in the family, but they are not necessarily related: for example, a woman can raise a child without having given birth to it through adoption, so the socialisation of children does not involve procreation. These three structures can be combined in different ways.

Reproduction appears as a transhistorical, biological event, but in reality, its nature can change over time. In particular, it can be controlled by methods such as contraception. In the absence of contraceptive methods, women had little control over whether or how often they would bear children: they were essentially slaves to their reproductive function. Contraception, invented in the 19th century, made it possible for the first time in history to change the way we reproduce. Women were now able to control their reproductive function if society allowed them to do so. The definition of a woman as a mother is a limited, merely physiological definition. Women do not need to be mothers, or just mothers, but they can and need to be social subjects and creators.

3. Sexuality

Mitchell: "Sexuality has traditionally been the most tabooed dimension of women's situation. The meaning of sexual freedom and its connexion with women's freedom is a particularly difficult subject which few socialist writers have cared to broach."

Marriage was and continues to be a form of private property in which the couple (originally only the man) has exclusive rights to the use of the other person's sexual function. Marx and other socialists recognized this, but did not analyze its significance for the transformation of the status of women under socialism. They did not talk specifically about how sexual relations would change and be like under socialism.

In bourgeois society, formal legal equality in marriage was achieved, as was legal equality in the employment contract. As in work, this equality is often merely formal and hides the inequality and exploitation that remains within marriage. However, formal equality is clear progress and can be a step towards further, more concrete progress. This is because this new situation is "defined by a new contradiction. Once formal conjugal equality (monogamy) is established, sexual freedom as such—which under polygamous conditions was usually a form of exploitation— becomes, conversely, a possible force for liberation. It then means, simply, the freedom for both sexes to transcend the limits of present sexual institutions." In other words, with monogamy being the dominant institution of sexual relations, sexual freedom has become the freedom to transcend the boundary of that institution and have sexual relations with more than one person without having to marry them. Focusing on England, Mitchell identifies a dialectical movement in history where Puritanism leading to monogamy leads to more sexual equality and also gives a positive connotation to the prospect of sexual freedom, whereas previously sexual freedom meant polygamy and was exploitative towards women.

Monogamy predates the concept of romantic love in the West by many centuries. Romantic love emerged in the 12th century as a phenomenon independent of and against legal marriage, as lovers were usually not married. In bourgeois society love was eventually assimilated into marriage and was

now expected to exist in marriage: marriage came to be seen as a free choice of a loving partner for life. However, there remains a tension between marriage and love due to the fact that marriage is a voluntarily chosen contract with one person, whereas love is an uncontrollable impulse that can arise for many people in a person's life. The idea that love occurs only once in a lifetime is an urban myth. Today in the West, sexual freedom before marriage has been naturalized, as has the possibility of divorce after marriage. Both developments have undermined the institution of marriage.

Ultimately, Mitchell concludes that “in the present context, could become conducive to the greater general freedom of women. Equally it could presage new forms of oppression. The puritan-bourgeois creation of woman as ‘counterpart’ has produced the precondition for emancipation. But it gave statutory legal equality to the sexes at the cost of greatly intensified repression. Subsequently like private property itself it has become a brake on the further development of a free sexuality. Capitalist market relations have historically been a precondition of socialism; bourgeois marital relations (contrary to the denunciation of the Communist Manifesto) may equally be a precondition of women’s liberation.” Continuing the parallelism with Marx’s dialectical thought, Mitchell argues that just as formally equal and free bourgeois market relations are both a precondition and an obstacle to overcoming capitalism, so legal equality in bourgeois marital relations and sexual liberation can be both a precondition and an obstacle to female emancipation. In other words, unlike the vast majority of the Left, it does not take for granted that the sexual liberation that began in the 20th century is necessarily and only positive towards female emancipation, nor that the institution of marriage is necessarily and only negative.

4. Socialization

Women have traditionally had the social role of raising children, although this has not been universal for all societies throughout history. It has been the norm, and because of their ability to breastfeed, women were more suitable parents than men in infancy.

When psychoanalysis discovered the enormous importance of infancy in shaping a person's character and personality, the extra emphasis that began to be placed on the proper upbringing of children led to a reaffirmation of the importance of motherhood in the 20th century. Motherhood is celebrated as essential for the healthy development of a child. The trend of having fewer children that emerged in the West meant that each child became comparatively more important and the emphasis on motherhood moved from reproduction to the socialization of children. The mother spends much less time getting pregnant and breastfeeding and much more time caring for and educating the child. Urban families are obsessed with raising their children. It does not have to be the mother who socialises the child: this role can be fulfilled by another person, e.g. a boarding school teacher, etc. Motherhood as the naturalised role of woman is oppressive, preventing her development as a free subject.

Family

The family as an economic unit has become relatively insignificant under capitalism. It has lost its function as a closed economic unit with a division of labour that ensured the survival of its members. It is economically redundant and therefore economically marginal. Most of its traditional functions, such as bringing up children, are increasingly being taken over by the state or society (public education, childcare), so that at least the family does not appear to be an integral part of capitalism. Mitchell's important point here is that the marginalisation of the family means that the change of production from capitalism to socialism will not affect the role of the family as the family has already been divorced from production. In this case and only in this case, the important distinction is not between capitalism and socialism, but between traditional and industrial societies.

In modernity, bourgeois ideology found a different way to support the family, in particular, and as we have seen above, the importance of the mother in the socialisation of children. The socialisation of children has been ideologically exploited to perpetuate the family as an institution and this continues to this day. It is not necessarily true, however, that mothers are the best at raising children. As de Beauvoir also noted, there is no maternal instinct and mothers who are encouraged in a purely maternal role tend to harm their children by unloading their frustrations, anxieties and hopes on the child. Their whole life becomes the child and this puts enormous pressure on the child. Increased awareness of the importance of early childhood should make us rethink what is the best way to bring up children, rather than taking the problematic institution of the family for granted.

Also, today the family increasingly appears as a refuge from an increasingly individualised, alienating and chaotic world. But, this is based on the absurd assumption that "the family can be isolated from the community, and that its internal relationships will not reproduce in their own terms the external relationships which dominate the society. The family as refuge in a bourgeois society inevitably becomes a reflection of it."

Traditionally, the socialist movement claimed the "abolition of the bourgeois family" as a necessary step for women's and sexual emancipation. Mitchell argues that "This slogan must be rejected as incorrect today. It is maximalist in the bad sense, posing a demand which is merely a negation without any coherent construction subsequent to it...The reasons for the historic weakness of the notion is that the family was never analysed structurally in terms of its different functions. It was a hypostasized entity; the abstraction of its abolition corresponds to the abstraction of its conception." The family was never structurally analysed and remained an abstract concept for socialists, hence their abstract, maximalist demands on the subject. The denial of the family does not point beyond it to anything else capable of replacing it.

Our main objective must be gender equality. The demand for gender equality undermines the concept of the family as it exists today as it is incompatible with it. We must demand the separation of the spheres of reproduction, sexuality and socialisation of children, which achieve an oppressive unity in the nuclear family. Instead of trying to legally abolish the family, it should be undermined and allowed to wither away.

The fundamental problem of the present system of marriage and family in bourgeois society is the fact that it is the only acceptable institutionalised form of relations between genders and different generations. However, human experience shows a huge variety of possible such relations. Thus, it is very repressive to accept only monogamous lifelong marriage and all children to be raised by their mothers. There is no good reason to persist with this monolithic system of human relationships as it marginalizes the majority of possible human relationships. Socialism should not be about abolishing marriage and the family, but about abolishing their status as the only acceptable institutions for human relations. Socialism will not abolish the family, but will diversify and expand the kind of relationships that are socially acceptable. We would have multiple institutions of which the family would be only one, e.g. single-parent education, children socialized by non-biological parents, extended kin groups, etc.

"It would be illusory to try and specify these institutions. Circumstantial accounts of the future are idealist and worse, static. Socialism will be a process of change, of becoming. A fixed image of the future is in the worst sense ahistorical; the form that socialism takes will depend on the prior type of capitalism and the nature of its collapse." Mitchell respects the Marxist prohibition against prefiguring the future: We cannot accurately predict what our relations will be like in the future. Socialism is a process of change and its concrete nature will depend on the concrete form that the revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat will take. An exact fixed plan of the future is therefore impossible.

The liberation of women will be part of the long passage from nature to civilization that constitutes history and society. What is history? The passage of humanity from nature to civilization, from animals to the free beings we can be.

What to Do

Like Marx, Mitchell stresses the revolutionary character of capitalism in world history as the dissolution of the basis of all traditional, 'natural', social relations and as opening up the possibility of socialism, and sees the most enduring revolution -that of Women- as closely linked to this world-historical transformation. Capitalism tends towards the dismantling of each of the structures of the family -procreation, socialization, sexuality, economic survival, etc.- as such, and the transformation of each so that it is no longer the 'natural' domain of women. However, Mitchell warns that without the radical transformation of all structures of women's oppression as an integral part of the socialist revolution, these progressive trends in the evolution of bourgeois societies may also equally lead to "new forms of neocapitalist ideology and practice". For example, she says, "one of the forces behind the current acceleration of sexual freedom has undoubtedly been the conversion of contemporary capitalism from a production-and-work ethos to a consumption-and-fun ethos."

Improvement in one structure of oppression can be offset by deterioration in another, and Mitchell provides examples of this by examining the left's struggles to historically overcome female subordination. The militant feminism of the suffragettes aimed for formal legal equality for women, but left her socioeconomic status essentially unchanged. Under Lenin, the Bolsheviks enacted broad social legislation aimed primarily at the sexual oppression of women with reforms such as free and automatic divorce and free abortion, and we also had their full equal integration into production. However, with the isolation and degeneration of the Russian revolution under conditions of economic regression, progress in the status of women there fell victim to the counter-revolutionary tendencies of the prevailing Stalinist bureaucracy, which by the 1930s had reintroduced inheritance, re-criminalised abortion (and in this case homosexuality), made divorce inaccessible, and promoted a cult for the Soviet mother that decried "free love" as a "bourgeois invention". In keeping with the bureaucracies that served the self-serving, over-productive agenda of building so-called "socialism in one country," "women still retained the right and obligation to work, but because these gains had not been integrated into the earlier attempts to abolish the family and free sexuality no general liberation has occurred." This regression was carried over into the Chinese revolution, where the liberation of women in production was fetishized alongside a "tremendous repression of sexuality and a rigorous puritanism."

Mitchell broadly agrees with socialists that the greatest obstacle to women's liberation is indeed their full and equal integration into production, since it is their exclusion from production and isolation in the family that underpins the myth that they are natural beings. Unlike the old socialists, however, she argues that not all women's issues should be reduced to economic issues. Economic demands must be accompanied by demands concerning the other three structures. (However, since then we have made great progress in integrating women into production, to the extent that it does not exist as a serious problem in the West.)

Mitchell believes that only in the West can women's emancipation be achieved in the first instance, and only if all four structures of oppression are transformed together. Each must be analysed to identify and attack the weakest link, in order to begin the process of a more general transformation of all four structures. The contradictions must be intensified to create a revolutionary situation. Mitchell's phrase "unity of rupture [unité de rupture]" refers to the moment when the contradictions so reinforce each other that they coalesce to contribute to the conditions for a revolutionary change. So, the first thing to do is to see what the state of the various structures is today. Mitchell does this for

her own historical context, which is different from ours.

She argues that the structure under most pressure and crisis, and therefore the weakest link in the chain, is sexuality and the institutions that exist to control it, such as marriage: “ Marriage in its classical form is increasingly threatened by the liberalization of relationships before and after it which affects all classes today. In this sense, it is evidently the weak link in the chain...In a context of juridical equality, the liberton of sexual experience from relations which are extraneous to it —whether procreation or propertycould lead to true inter-sexual freedom.” It is worth considering whether this is true today, and if not, what is true. E.g. there has been great progress in the entry of women into production since Mitchell's time. On the other hand, there has been no significant progress in the socialisation of children, family and motherhood: these institutions are not challenged. Perhaps sexuality is still the structure at its greatest crisis, but not as it was under Mitchell: marriage today has been naturalized by the women's and feminist movement and is not actually challenged as an institution.

Sexual liberation in the mid-20th century was not just a story of progress: it was part of a change in capitalist culture from the Protestant ethic of hard work to an ethic of consumption and entertainment. Capitalism promoted sexual hedonism as an antidote to the increasingly monotonous and alienated life under it. Sex began to be seen as something that made one feel alive, and it was no accident that a subculture of sex, drugs and rock'n'roll developed in the 1960s. Here sexual liberation has a reactive role: it serves as a taste of freedom by making an otherwise fully managed life under capitalism more bearable. Bourgeois society can afford premarital sexual relations, as well as divorce/second marriages, while keeping its basic institutions and nature intact.

These thoughts make it clear that while sexuality may be the sphere with the best potential for female liberation, it can also be fetishized and become an obstacle to true sexual and female liberation. Sexual freedom will not bring women's liberation on its own. Fourier and Reich were utopians precisely in thinking that sexual freedom would lead to social freedom per se. No. All four structures in which women participate must be revolutionized.

Mitchell rejects both reformism and voluntarism in sexual matters, noting that these are the dominant trends on the left today. Reformism simply amounts to lukewarm demands such as equal pay for women, more nursery schools, harsher penalties for rapists, etc.: it is liberal feminism that still dominates today and is completely divorced from a fundamental critique of the status of women. On the other hand, voluntarism equates to maximalist demands such as the abolition of the family and the elimination of all sexual restrictions such as age of consent laws. Being a voluntarist is strategically bad because no matter how correct your demands may be, they have no chance of garnering popular support in the present. “What, then, is the responsible revolutionary attitude? It must include both immediate and fundamental demands, in a single critique of the whole of women’s situation, that does not fetishize any dimension of it.”

Phedias Christodoulides

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[1] All quoted passages are taken from Mitchell's essay, specifically, from an unpublished translation by the Platypus Affiliated Society. [Translator's Note: For the purposes of this translation, all translated quotes have been replaced with their original English text from [here](#).]

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