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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 of 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 economistic 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.

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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 corresponding English text from [here](#).]

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