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Women's Revolutionary Agency: Re-igniting the Marxist/ Feminist Debate

by

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled: **Women's Revolutionary Agency: Re-igniting the Marxist/Feminist Debate** submitted by **Sandra C. Rein** in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF ARTS.

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dedicated to Sandeep,
for his love, support
and friendship throughout

ABSTRACT

The relationship between Marxism and Feminism has been historically fraught with disagreement, dissent, and divorce. The result has been a collective failure to recognize an opportunity to engender a revolutionary subject through feminist thinking while maintaining an important Marxist critique of capitalism. The task, then, given this apparent failure, is to reformulate the revolutionary subject, to inquire into her "subjectivity" from within the feminist tradition without casting aside Marxism's own theoretical insights about the nature of capitalist exploitation.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

In 1985, Mexican intellectual, poet, and author, Carlos Fuentes, noted that "...revolutions, in the first place, are unique. They are born from concrete local circumstances and nothing on earth can create them artificially."[1] And, although one can hardly contest Fuentes' conclusion that revolution is both experienced locally and fundamentally defies artifice, it is also difficult to ignore the tomes of theory and empirical study written about these "unique" occurrences. Questions about revolution have consumed the earliest political philosophers and driven political strategists to distraction. So, one may wonder what new can be added to the discussions, debates, theories, and studies all focused on revolution– the answer, one already initiated by many feminist scholars, is that our understanding of socio-political phenomena has often been "filtered" through various "lenses" that have driven our research and our understanding away from those who must participate for the ultimate success of a revolution, that is, women. If we are to return to Fuentes' statement, we must begin to realize– from within theory and practice– that women often experience "concrete local circumstances" in ways that differ significantly from

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[1]Carlos Fuentes, Latin America: At War with the Past (New York: CBC Massey Lecture Series, 1985), p. 49.

men. And, that their experiences can and must be utilized to effect positive social change.

It may appear striking and unexpected that a successful revolution could be tied to women's participation; however, I will contend throughout that women are an essential ingredient to social change— that, in fact, social change cannot be positively achieved without the emancipation of women. I will further contend that this reality was not lost on socialist revolutionary theory, but it is the revolutionaries who have failed in the practical instances of real revolutionary potential to adequately deal with issues surrounding women's subordination. The important distinction, here, is that there has been a tendency for women's emancipation to be a forgotten goal after a successful transition in the power and governance of a state to the revolutionary leadership. Women's oppression has been subsumed in the greater "cause" and those who patiently wait for the changes "after" the revolution have historically been bitterly disappointed. Moreover, "traditional" Marxists have often dubbed "feminism" as a bourgeois distraction, designed to ultimately work against the successful organization of the working class. However, the failure of Marxism in both theory and practice to include women's participation in both the revolutionary movement and in the new socio-political structures resulting from

revolutionary change must be answered in both feminist *and* Marxist theory. One without the other can only provide an incomplete "lens" through which one may view social revolution; combined, enhanced, and even modified, both can lead to a concrete understanding of both women's subordination (as it exists under capitalism) and the potential social structures which can result from socialist revolution.

The general failure of socialist theory to theorize the need for women's direct involvement in revolutionary movements has eroded notions of both solidarity and strategic mobilization from revolutionary theory in general. This "failure" on the part of socialist theory has further opened the space for the increasing application of structural interpretations that ultimately leave revolutions devoid of any acting or thinking agent.[2] And, as such, questions about who participates in revolutionary movements have, at best, been asked as an afterthought to the more important matters that constitute "politics," that is, issues of state sovereignty, economic disruption, civil unrest, war, and elections. One can further argue, as does Carol Stabile, that the "new" intellectual pursuits loosely categorized as

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[2]For an example, see the structural explanation of social revolution provided by Theda Skocpol, States and Social Revolutions: a Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

postmodern and poststructural, represent a further "retreat from politics"[3] that overturns questions of agency in favour of "subjectivity," "textuality," and "symbolic language." One could despairingly ask if there is any such thing as "politics" any longer? And, is the revolution already lost?

Moreover, the so-called "decade of debate" among feminist and socialist political theorists in the late 1970s - early 1980s took us no closer to understanding how "women" should be included in Marxist revolutionary theory. Debates focusing on the "historical materialism" of women's oppression and the nature of domestic labour in relation to capitalism, while important, did not bring us any closer to an inclusive Marxism. In fact, for many feminist political theorists the issues which were once so important during the "decade of debate" have not merely been put aside, but completely abandoned— for many of these former socialist activists, the adherence to "classical" Marxism is to adopt a sexist, modernist view of society that is ultimately economistic or simply reductionist.

In response to the despair about political struggle and the abandonment of Marxist revolutionary theory, I will argue that although feminism and gender consciousness are necessary

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[3]Carol Stabile, "Postmodernism, Feminism, and Marx: Notes from the Abyss" in Monthly Review vol. 17, no. 3 (July/August 1995),pp. 90-1.

to provide a meaningful lens through which to approach revolution in both its theoretical and practical forms, Marxist thinking can not and should not be abandoned. Such an argument necessarily entails a development of a notion of what constitutes feminism and gender consciousness, as well as an examination of the postmodern and poststructural propositions as they relate to feminism and revolutionary practice. In the concluding sections, I will offer the argument that Marxism, as it may be derived from a "classical core", is in need of (at least) two theoretical revisions. The first revision is to adopt a strategic approach to gender consciousness which will provide a point of strategic entry through which mobilization of women as revolutionary agents is possible– or in more Arendtian terms, to cast women as "speakers of words and doers of deeds" in the public arena. And, the second revision is to reassert a full account of feminist materialism and its critique of capitalism from within a classical Marxist core.

In order to develop these "revisions" the following sections will specifically investigate the ongoing relationship between feminism and Marxism. Section I provides a selective literature review to provide an important context for the development and content of the "decade of debate." The literature reviewed in Section I has been selected as

representative rather than definitive works on the relationship between Marxism (or socialism more generally) and feminism. Section II seeks to further develop the theoretical ground covered by the notion of "feminism". The intention is to reveal the many forms that feminism may adopt while ultimately proposing a feminist framework for any dialogue with Marxism. Section II importantly situates the key issues of a feminist analysis which must be accounted for in any body of theory seeking an "end to oppression". Section III returns theory to the central tenets of classical Marxism. The goal is to free Marxism form the labels "economistic" or "reductionist" so that Marx's key insights to social change may be successfully reunited with feminist thinking. Finally, Section IV proposes gender consciousness as mechanism through which women may both come to see the relationship between capitalism and gender oppression and the revolutionary opportunity afforded by Marxist analysis.

I. THE DECADE OF DEBATE

Although I have asserted that there is a "lost decade of debate"[4] surrounding the question of the relationship between Marxism— or socialism more generally— and feminism, the intent was not to suggest that feminist academics and social activists have been silent on the issue of a feminist Marxism. The following brief literature overview is intended to provide the recent historical context for the debate between Marxism and feminism and encapsulate its evolution. It is also my intent to identify key issues facing the theoretical and practical discussions regarding the "merging" of feminist and Marxist analysis. Although a great many works are overlooked in this section, these authors are representative of the broad debates that emerged from feminist and socialist circles between 1966 - 1985. This "long" decade for all intents and purposes frames the key considerations and problems facing political theorists attempting to formulate a workable relationship between Marxism and feminism.

Despite a proclivity among many feminists to view Marx and Engels as stereotypical chauvinists, hopelessly tied to their own historical period (read: petty bourgeois morality), the early writings of both Marx and Engels bring to light what

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[4]Lise Vogel, Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory (London: Pluto Press, 1983),see introduction.

has been commonly referred to as the "woman question". As Carol Stabile notes, "For a younger generation of scholars, whose formative political experiences have been in various feminist movements, the rejection of Marxist-oriented political activism is based on a set of myths about the masculine virulence inherent in Marxism."[5] Many feminist authors have sought to either "illuminate" Marx or reformulate his notion of historical materialism in such a way as to include a meaningful critique of women's oppression. Generally, these works have fallen into three broad categories: (1)feminists have sought to develop new theoretical categories; (2) feminists have developed "dual systems" theories to merge patriarchy and capitalism; or (3) feminists have attempted to unify Marxist and feminist analysis.

In the first instance, revising Marxist theoretical categories involves asserting the need to adequately account for women's experience in the private sphere. Theorists attempt to provide an account of family life, gendered socialization, and the relationship of the reproductive sphere to the productive sphere. Feminists who propose new theoretical categories may not be rejecting Marxist analysis *per se*, but are instead seeking to uncover areas of women's

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[5]Stabile, p. 99.

(and their family) lives which are virtually uninterrogated by a Marxist approach which traditionally focuses attention specifically on the mode of production rather than issues surrounding reproduction.

Feminists who attempt to develop a "dual systems" approach are generally trying to account for patriarchy as an independent social system that operates alongside the current mode of production. Dual systems theory does not exclude the possibility that patriarchy mediates capitalism or *vice versa*, but does try to reinforce the notion that patriarchal social relations provide the foundation for the continued subordination of women in capitalist society. The dual systems theory is at best the representation of a tenuous relationship between feminism and Marxism. Notably, dual systems theory is intended not only to correct the so-called sex-blind categories of Marxist analysis, but it is also an attempt to answer deficiencies in radical feminism by asserting the notion that there is a material base to social relations.[6]

Finally, some feminist work attempts to unify feminist and Marxist analysis. The argument by such authors is that

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[6]Iris Young, "Beyond the Unhappy Marriage: A Critique of the Dual Systems Theory" in Women and Revolution: a Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism, ed. Lydia Sargent (Montreal: Black Rose Books, Ltd.,1981), p. 45.

feminist analysis is compatible with Marxism. Unifying a feminist approach with Marxism does not ignore some of the obvious oversights of Marx and Engels in regard to women's subordination, but instead argues that feminism has often been short-sighted in its rejection of what Lise Vogel calls the "revolutionary Marxist core."[7] Instead, a unifying approach builds the roots of women's oppression from within a historical materialist account, and retains the notion of class struggle as a fundamental theoretical and strategic consideration.

Before reviewing some of the feminist works that are illustrative of these broad categories, it is important to note that the participation of women was in no way "peripheral" to the early socialist movements/parties. Marx's own comment about women's participation makes this point evident: "'The woman has thus become an active agent in our social production,' Marx observed. It followed that women must be incorporated as active participants in political work. 'Anybody who knows anything of history,...knows that major social transformations are impossible without ferment among women.'"[8] Further, the strength of women's participation has

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[7]Lise Vogel, Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory, p.7.

[8]*Ibid.*,p. 71.

been acknowledged as an essential feature in the success of both the Russian and Chinese revolutions of the early 20th century.[9] Notably, issues now most often relegated to areas of lesser concern by the stigma of being "women's issues" played a fundamental role in the development of the Russian Communist Party's Constitutional and Social platform following the revolution. The party's commitment to universal suffrage, juridical equality, and women's participation in leadership roles stands as testament to the key importance consideration of women's subordination played in the development of a social program in Russia.[10] However, and this is often the most salient point for feminists trying to "salvage" a socialist analysis, the gains of the Russian revolution in areas of divorce law and family life were quickly over-turned (after Lenin's death) in the face of declining birth rates and the state's need for speedy industrialization. For the communist women of Russia the old cliche holds true: "as much as things change they stay the same."

Although women continued to play organizational roles within the international communist movement, the 1960s

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[9]See Mary Mullaney, Revolutionary Women: Gender and the Socialist Revolutionary Role (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1983) for a historical re-reading of women's revolutionary roles.

[10]V.I. Lenin, On the Emancipation of Women (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), pp. 19 - 21.

witnessed significant changes for "left wing" politics. By the late 1960s, the growth in popular social movements, including anti-war protest movements, student radical movements, and women's liberation, led to the identification of "new" left-wing thinking. The so-called New Left re-opened the door for a broader consideration of socialist- and, more specifically, Marxist- analysis of what was believed (hoped?) to be "late" capitalism. With the New Left there also came increased critiques not only of capitalism but also of Marxist thinking/organizing by feminist activists and academics. Building on the ground-breaking work of feminist writers from the 1950s- Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex[11], most notably- women began to question the validity and accuracy of the Marxist position of historical materialism and its explanation (or lack thereof) of women's oppression. Such criticism began in earnest- particularly in the English journals- with the publication of Juliet Mitchell's "Women: the Longest Revolution".[12]

In the face of sophisticated and often post-modern feminism, Mitchell's essay appears "tame" and even somewhat tentative in its conclusions. Mitchell's thesis is simple and

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[11]Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1952).

[12]Juliet Mitchell, "Women: The Longest Revolution" in The New Left Review no. 40 (November/December 1966), pp 1-20.

straight forward: "The position of women, then, in the work of Marx and Engels remains dissociated from or subsidiary to, a discussion of the family, which is in its turn subordinated as merely a precondition of private property. Their solutions retain an overly economistic stress, or enter the realm of dislocated speculation."[13] Mitchell came to the conclusion that the "masters" were in need of significant revision in order to provide a meaningful account of women's lived experiences.

For Mitchell, socialist theory provided an overly economistic explanation of women's oppression which effectively ignored the household in its consideration of the relations of production. Combined with this economism, Mitchell also argued that socialist theory reinforced notions of biological determinism; thus, the "real" problem within capitalism for women is their divorced role from production combined with exploitation as an occasional cheap wage labourer (the idea here is that women form a "reserve army" of industrial workers as well as filling part-time and casual employment positions). Further, Mitchell argues that the socialist "solution" in the abolition of the family displays a fundamental misunderstanding of the role the family plays in both the oppression of women, but also in identity

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[13] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

construction for women.

Mitchell's answer to these obvious deficiencies in Marxist thinking is to propose the existence of four theoretical structures; these are: Production; Reproduction; Sex; and the Socialization of Children. She argues that it is the interaction between these structures that form "a complex— not a simple— unity. This will mean rejecting the idea that woman's condition can be deduced derivatively from the economy or equated symbolically with society. Rather, it must be seen as a specific structure, which is a unity of different elements."[14] Mitchell's account of these structures is that the "content" will be different depending on the historical "moment" under consideration, but that their interaction provides an opening to understanding women's social, ideological, and psychic formation.

Having named the structures which form the "complex unity" of women's lives, Mitchell goes on to offer a "review" of the content of each structure. It is in this exposition of the "structural" determinants of the "woman question" that a multitude of weaknesses present themselves in Mitchell's four structures which show very little dynamism over the course of time. The only category that she acknowledges as being a "weak" link in the 1960s is the area of female sexuality: "The

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[14] *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

current wave of sexual liberalization, in the present context, could be conducive to the greater general freedom of women."[15] The lack of apparent dynamic change within and between Mitchell's structures leaves one with the impression that women's lives will always run the same course of subordination and oppression.

Secondly, Mitchell's analysis presents the notion that women exist in a "reproduction" sphere that is removed from the male productive sphere as a result of what she calls "social coercion"-- arguing that women's biology has led to an ideological expression of men's physical superiority in areas of productive work. Although Mitchell does challenge the notion that women are incapable of productive work, she does not really address the historic role that women have played in production. Moreover, the question of the place of domestic labour is left relatively unproblematized; Mitchell's argument would seem to indicate that there is a place within production for the consideration of domestic labour: "...the volume of work performed by women has always been considerable... . It is only its form that is in question. Domestic labour, even today, is enormous if quantified in terms of productive

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[15]*Ibid.*, p. 13.

labour."[16]

A third, and likely the most significant theoretical problem with Mitchell's work relates to her failure to operationalize the relationship that most obviously exists between the structures of Reproduction, Production, Socialization, and Sexuality. Although an intuitive response to Mitchell dictates that each structure impacts women's experiences, one is left unable to grasp how these structures ultimately create the "complex unity" Mitchell promises. Mitchell's analysis vacillates between a focus on material conditions (the "economic base') and the psychological socialization that occurs within the constraints of a bourgeois notion of family. However, Mitchell does not take us any closer to understanding the foundation of women's oppression, its relationship to capitalism, or the "shape" of a future socialist society.

Having noted some of the theoretical weaknesses of Mitchell's work, there is still a great deal to recommend her. In the first place, Mitchell is clearly setting out to ask about an absent area in Marxist thinking and socialist activism. The need to recognize women's experience and to provide a theoretical account of their experiences is further enhanced by Mitchell's closing discussion of the strategic

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[16]*Ibid.*, p. 6.

importance women play in both their own liberation as well as the overall success of socialism. Mitchell encourages the rejection of two beliefs that were gaining adherents on the left:

> Reformism: This now takes the form of limited ameliorative demands; equal pay for women, more nursery-schools, better retraining facilities, etc. In its contemporary version it is wholly divorced from any fundamental critique of women's condition or any vision of their real liberation (it was not always so). Insofar as it represents a tepid embellishment of the *status quo*, it has very little progressive content left.
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> Voluntarism: This takes the form of maximalist demands– the abolition of the family, abrogation of all sexual restrictions, forceful separation of parents from children– which have no chance of winning any wide support at present, and which merely serve as a substitute for the job of theoretical analysis, or practical persuasion. By pitching the whole subject in totally intransigent terms, voluntarism objectively helps to maintain it outside of the framework of normal political discussion.[17]

Instead of these approaches, Mitchell advocates a "responsible revolutionary attitude" that addresses the whole of women's experience: "In practical terms this means a coherent system of demands. The four elements of women's condition cannot be considered each in isolation; they form a structure of

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[17]*Ibid.*, p. 21.

specific interrelations."[18] The "coherent system of demands" covered by Mitchell include: women's access to industry, an equal educational system, flexibility in the "content" of the modern family, and women's control over their sexuality. As Mitchell clearly states: "...the most elementary demand is not the right to work [and] receive equal pay for work— but the right to equal work itself."[19] As Vogel notes, "[i]n the theoretical arena, Mitchell's central contribution was to legitimate a perspective that recognizes the ultimate primacy of economic phenomena, yet allows for the fact that other aspects of women's situation not only have importance but may play key roles at certain junctures."[20]

Perhaps emboldened by the emerging work of feminists on the "woman question," Sheila Rowbotham introduced her own take on the questions raised by Mitchell in her work Woman's Consciousness, Man's World in 1972. Written in what is often identified as the feminist "testimonial" style, Rowbotham introduces a deeply personal voice to the questions surrounding Marxist theoretical analysis and feminism. In tracing her own journey through socialist agitation and

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[18]*Ibid.*, p. 21.

[19]*Ibid.*, p. 22.

[20]Vogel, Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory, p. 17.

women's liberation, Rowbotham brings into view the "inaccessibility" women face as "comrades" and the virtual silence of theory, debate, and action around issues relating specifically to women. But, more importantly, perhaps, Rowbotham also draws out a responsibility on the part of women to act, to be political, to challenge the "myth of their own submission":

> To recognize that we are the victims of our own masochism is our political beginning. We can't begin to find our way without the help of other women and ultimately without help from men. We can only break the hold of masochism when we experience the collective self-assertion of a movement for liberation. But we only realize our new collectivity by connecting politically with other groups that are oppressed.[21]

Rowbotham's revolutionary praxis for women's liberation confronts the divisions among 1960s social movements and argues for a practical (as well as a theorized) approach to organization, strategic orientation, and— perhaps even— to outcomes. Rowbotham's call to liberation is tempered by her own distinction between patriarchy and capitalism. As she notes:

> The oppression of women differs too from class and race because it has not come out of capitalism and imperialism. The sexual division of labour and the

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[21]Sheila Rowbotham, Woman's Consciousness, Man's World (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 42.

> possession of women by men predates capitalism, patriarchal authority is based on male control over the woman's reproductive capacity, and even her person. This control existed before the development of capitalist commodity production.[22]

By proposing patriarchy as a system which predates capitalism, Rowbotham is able to argue that the contradictions of the capitalist system (wealth, property disparities, the alienation of the worker) present a historically unique opportunity for women's liberation: "Patriarchy, however, is contradicted by the dominant mode of production in capitalism because in capitalism the owner of capital owns and controls the labour power but not the persons of his labourers."[23]

Inherent within Rowbotham's analysis are also the potential seeds for a divided Left. Although her dual systems argument provides a way to explain women's oppression it does so by asserting an exploitative relationship between men and women outside of (irrelevant to?) class and race. The implication here (whether intended or otherwise) is that women's subordination cannot be addressed through the same "material" considerations as race and class. While some feminists would agree with this underlying "fact", Rowbotham's argument leads to the conclusion that women should/must

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[22] *Ibid.*, p. 117.

[23] *Ibid.*

organize separately from their male counter-parts in the cause of women's emancipation. This being said, the writings by Mitchell and Rowbotham do serve to highlight two central problems within the Marxist tradition. The first, and most apparent to feminist scholars, is the underdevelopment of a theoretical understanding of the nature of women's subordination as distinct from the working class. The second, and in many ways the more insidious problem, is the reluctance to expend theoretical effort on questions relegated to the "women's issues" ghetto. However, following the feminist critiques of Marxism's sex-blind economism, several scholars did attempt to introduce "new" theory based on Marx's own Capital in relation to domestic labour— leading to the now famous— or even better— infamous "domestic labour debate" of the 1970s.

The domestic labour debate was, to quote one of its earliest participants, Wally Seacombe, "...an attempt to generate Marxist answers to feminist questions."[24] Prompted by feminist critiques of Marxist analysis and its lack of theory and understanding in regard to woman's subordination and her role within the family, the domestic labour theory attempted to "fit" housework, unpaid domestic labour, within

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[24]Walley Seacombe, "Prospects for Marxist Feminist Synthesis" in The Politics of Diversity, eds. Roberta Hamilton and Michele Barrett (London: Verso, 1986), p.190.

the production oriented analysis introduced in Capital. Moreover, the earliest proponents of the domestic labour analysis were proposing that capitalism actually creates the conditions in which the "right to work" can be replaced by the "refusal to work."[25] The theoretical importance of such a shift is that it reduces the importance of "surplus value" as a theoretical tool and instead shifts attention to wageless, or non-productive labour[26] that occurs primarily through domestic labour. Strategically, proponents of "wages for housework," such as Mariarosa Dalla Costa, argued that housework does produce surplus value and domestic workers should receive wages for their work.[27] For feminists, the domestic labour debate held out the hope that women's subordination within the home could be incorporated in a broader, Marxist critique of capitalism.

It is difficult to assess the overall impact of the domestic labour debate for feminist or Marxist scholars. As Wally Seacombe acknowledges, "The pivotal questions become taxonomic: did domestic labour create value; was it productive, unproductive, indirectly productive, or were these

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[25] *Ibid.*, p.168.

[26] Non-productive only in the sense that it does follow the traditional formula of the labour theory of value.

[27] *Ibid.*, p.169.

categories simply inapplicable to domestic labour? Huge quantities of ink were spilled over definitional issues."[28] For Angela Miles, it was not only the constant replay of definitions that weakened the significance of the debate, but its very failure to ask the most fundamental question: why? As Miles notes, "In fact the authors *describe* women's oppression. They do not analyze it. They all acknowledge, in varying degrees, the specific 'dependence' and 'oppression' of women under capitalism...but...these observations lead to no theoretical questions about *why* this might be and how one can explain the fact that capitalist relations (and not only capitalist relations) have developed in such a way to ensure men's power over women."[29] Notably, Lise Vogel asserts that the "urgency" surrounding issues of domestic labour surfaced as a political response rooted "...in the fact that women today [1979] take an increasingly active role in revolutionary struggles around the world. Thus the debate about housework responds to political realities, although they misjudge the conceptual scope of the problem. The essential issue is the process of the reproduction of labour power, taken as a

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[28] *Ibid.*, p.192.

[29] *Ibid.*, p.172.

whole."[30]

Vogel serves as an important reminder that the issue of domestic labour is significant to women's lived experience and a consideration for revolutionary mobilization. Yet, it is difficult to argue against Miles' assertion that the "debate" failed to achieve its potential and instead occupies shelf space, occasionally dusted off as an example of the textual debates surrounding Marx's works. Bonnie Fox does remind us, however, that the debate itself was significant insofar as it raised awareness about the importance of women's domestic labour, highlighted the very real differences in men's and women's material circumstances and opened discussion about the need for women's autonomous political organization.[31] Moreover, Seacombe points out that the domestic labour discussions underlined a need for empirical work to be carried out, investigating the material conditions of women's lives and reviewing potential correlations between what he terms as "male-stream" sociology and neo-classical economics.[32] For Seacombe, grand theory must be tested against real experience

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[30]Lise Vogel, Woman Questions: Essays for a Materialist Feminism (New York: Routledge, 1995), p.31-2.

[31]Bonnie Fox, "Never Done: The Struggle to Understand Domestic Labour and Women's Oppression" in The Politics of Diversity, eds. Roberta Hamilton and Michele Barrett (London: Verso, 1986), p.182.

[32]Seacombe, Politics of Diversity, p.207.

and forced to live up to its assertions.

Just as the domestic labour debate arose as a response to a perceived deficiency in Marx's economic theory (or at the very least it represented a stretching of Marxist categories), the 1970s witnessed increased feminist focus on issues of gender acquisition and sex stereotyping. The foundation of much of the discussion regarding the female "psyche" arose from Freudian psychoanalysis. For feminists such as Nancy Chodorow, psychoanalytic theory provided a point of entry into understanding gendered identities and answering "why women mother." The publication of Chodorow's The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender in 1978 represents a complex analysis of what she terms "social organization of gender" and women's "mothering."[33] Relying on Freudian-founded psychoanalysis and a feminist concern for "reproduction" of female mothering, Chodorow's argument hinges on the contention that women:

> Because they are the same gender as their daughters and have been girls, mothers of daughters tend not to experience these infant daughters as separate from them in the same way as do mothers of infant sons. In both cases, a mother is likely to experience a sense of oneness and continuity with her infant. However, this sense is stronger, and lasts longer,

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[33]Nancy Chodorow, The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanlysis and the Sociology of Gender (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978), pp.8-9.

vis-a-vis daughters.[34]

The effect of Chodorow's application of Freudian psychoanalysis within a context of feminist concern over women's oppression is to cast women -- at least psychically -- as participants in their own oppression. In essence, Chodorow says it is "over-mothering" (this definitely hints of Althusser's over determination) of daughters that continues a specific, submissive gender identification by girls.

Although it may be one's first reaction to ignore, or even discredit, psychoanalytic feminism, it does serve to highlight two very important considerations. The first is that psychoanalysis draws attention to subjectivity; that is, how it is that people experience themselves, leading to the potential of individual, rather than class-based agency. The second consideration, highlighted by Chodorow herself, is an implicit recognition that psychoanalysis can not occur in isolation from material circumstances.[35] Moreover, Chodorow closes her arguement with a specific focus on strategic change:

> My account points precisely to where intervention should take place. Any strategy for change whose goal includes liberation from the constraints of unequal social organization of gender

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[34] *Ibid.*, p. 109.

[35] *Ibid.*, p.187.

> must take into account the need for a fundamental reorganization of parenting, so that primary parenting is shared between men and women.[36]

Thus, we are back to the domestic labour debate.

Given the debates around domestic labour, gender acquisition, and women's liberation, it is no wonder that the 1980s opened with an influential collection of essays edited by Lydia Sargent entitled Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage Between Feminism and Marxism. In her introduction to the collection, Sargent draws a picture of the "new left" that continues a sexual division of labour within political organizations, creating an environment that leaves women with the dual responsibility of educating their male comrades about the existence of sexism and, yet, still expects women to remain "loyal soldiers" of the revolutionary left.[37] For Sargent, the cause of sexism on the new left was/is two-faced: in the first place, male participants held and freely expressed sexist attitudes toward women's participation; and, in the second place, the theoretical foundation, that is Marxism, allowed for the continued "myth" that theoretical categories are sex-blind and that the goal -- that is the

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[36]*Ibid.*, p.215.

[37]Lydia Sargent, "New Left Women and Men: The Honeymoon is Over" in Women and Revolution: a Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism, Lydia Sargent (ed), (Montreal: Black Rose Books, Ltd., 1981), p.xiii.

achievement of a socialist society, will end all oppressive social forms, liberating each person through the end of class society. The participants of Sargent's discussion were clearly not convinced of this "theory" nor were they satisfied with the political organizations that continually ignored or limited women's political participation.

Sargent divides the collection into three sections: radical, socialist and Marxist feminism.[38] Although within each section there is a great diversity of voices ranging from anarchist to lesbian to radical contributions, for the purpose of examining Marxist feminism as theory and practice, several essays deserve mention in this literature overview as they form a foundation for the debate that was to characterize Marxist feminism throughout the 1980s. Heidi Hartmann's lead essay, "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union," argues that the "fit" between Marxism and feminism has been difficult due to the tendency of Marxist thinking to retain a strict (read exclusive) orthodoxy. Hartmann's analysis presents the need for a "dual systems theory" that is, a theory that recognizes both the nature of capitalism and the relationship between men and women:

> ...while Marxist analysis provides

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[38] *Ibid.*, p.xviii.

> essential insight into the laws of historical development, and those of capital in particular, the categories of Marxism are sex-blind. Only a specifically feminist analysis reveals the systemic character of relations between men and women. Yet feminist analysis by itself is inadequate because it has been blind to history and insufficiently materialist.[39]

When combined, these approaches lead to "A more progressive union of Marxism and feminism, [that], requires not only improved intellectual understanding of relations of class and sex, but also that alliance replace dominance and subordination in left politics."[40] For Hartmann, it was no longer sufficient to acknowledge that women occupy subordinate positions under capitalism; theory must address why it is certain people who occupy these positions:

> Marxism enables us to understand many aspects of capitalist societies: the structure of production, the generation of a particular occupational structure, and the nature of the dominant ideology. Marx's theory of the development of capitalism is a theory of the development of 'empty places.' Marx predicted, for example, the growth of the proletariat and the demise of the petit bourgeoisie. More precisely and in more detail, Braverman among others has explained the

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[39]Heidi Hartmann, "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union" in Women and Revolution: a Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism, Lydia Sargent (ed), (Montreal: Black Rose Books, Ltd., 1981), p.2.

[40]*Ibid.*, p.3.

> creation of the 'places' clerical worker and service worker in advanced capitalist societies. Just as capital creates these places indifferent to the individuals who fill them, the categories of Marxist analysis, class, reserve army of labor, wage laborer, do not explain why particular people fill particular places... .[41]

Faced with Marx's "empty spaces," Hartmann is forced to look past capitalism and Marxist analysis to a theory of patriarchal social relations to explain who it is that fills subordinate social positions. In Hartmann's analysis, patriarchy pre-dates capitalism and continues to structure oppressive social relations under capitalism.

Iris Young responds to Hartmann's dual systems theory in her essay: "Beyond the Unhappy Marriage: A critique of Dual Systems Theory." Young takes issue with Hartmann's conclusion that patriarchy should be understood as a distinct social system[42] by asserting that Hartmann's own view of material

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[41] *Ibid.*, p. 10.

[42] Young notes that dual systems theory can actually be expressed in two distinct ways. The first, attributed to Juliet Mitchell, is to propose "...patriarchy as a universal and formal ideological structure" (p. 46) which "...claims Freudian theory articulates...as a pre- or nonhistorical ideological backdrop to changes in the mode of production.... This version of dual systems theory inappropriately dehistoricizes and universalizes women's oppression" (p. 46). The second approach to dual systems theory, which Young attributes to Hartmann, "...emphasizes that patriarchy has a material base in the structure of concrete relations, and maintains that the system of patriarchy itself undergoes

(continued...)

conditions prove the existence of a single defining system: "It seems reasonable, however, to admit that if patriarchy and capitalism are manifest in identical social and economic structures they belong to one system, not two."[43] Instead of approaching women's oppression as a system separate from capitalism, Young argues in favour of what she terms the "division of labour analysis." Building from Marx's The German Ideology, Young stipulates that the division of labour "operates as a category broader and more fundamental than that of class."[44] By "gendering" division of labour, Young asserts that we are in a stronger theoretical position to understand why women are located in certain social positions; moreover, gender division of labour analysis corrects the universalizing and ghettoizing impulse of dual systems theory:

> ...by and large, however, socialists do not consider fighting women's oppression as a central aspect of the struggle against capitalism itself. The dual systems theory encourages this by insisting that women's specific oppression has its locus in a system

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[42](...continued)
historical transformation" (p. 47).

[43]Iris Young, "Beyond the Unhappy Marriage: A critique of Dual Systems Theory." in Women and Revolution: a Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism, Lydia Sargent (ed), (Montreal: Black Rose Books, Ltd., 1981), p. 47.

[44]*Ibid.*, p. 51.

> other than capitalism. As a result, within the socialist movements women's issues remain segregated, generally dealt with only by women, and the mixed socialist movement as a whole fails to take issues related to women as seriously as others.[45]

Young's critique of Hartmann's dual systems theory is convincing, asking that real consideration be given to the historical character of women's oppression and that the particular nature of women's social position not be divorced from a critique of capitalist social relations. Further, Young moves the analysis from merely being a question of theory to proposing the strategic importance of linking a critique of capitalism with women's experiences of oppression in both the home and workplace. In other words, Young brings home the point that theory will only mobilize women if it speaks to their lived, material, experiences. The proposition of a patriarchy outside of history is less likely to achieve such a goal, unlike theory which speaks to women as labourers—paid and unpaid; therefore, the concept of "sexual division of labour" plays a strategic role as much as providing Young with a theoretical category of inquiry.

Taking a somewhat different approach than Young, Sandra Harding's "What is the Real Material Base of Patriarchy and

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[45]*Ibid.*, p. 64.

Capital" proposes that Hartmann's analysis leads to what she calls a "radical solution": "Thus, Hartmann's arguments lead us to the conclusion that it is women, armed with the newly emerging historical, materialist, autonomous feminism who now stand at the revolutionary place in history."[46] For Harding, the question is no longer the "woman question," but, is instead the "man question"-- that is, what is his revolutionary role?[47] With a distant echo of Young, Harding says that we need to investigate capitalism through an understanding of the gendered division of labour. For Harding this means that we must recognize that: (a)the production of "things" is dissimilar to the reproduction of persons; and, (b)that the notion of "material base" must be expanded to include the "psychological" birth of the social person.[48]

> But this historical, material base of the production of social persons is simply not limited to, or even primarily, an economic base, though economic relations clearly mediate it. It is instead the actual physical division of labour by gender itself, and the consequent physical/social relations of the infant to its environment which constitute the

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[46]Sandra Harding, "What is the Real Material Base of Patriarchy and Capital" in Women and Revolution: a Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism, Lydia Sargent (ed), (Montreal: Black Rose Books, Ltd., 1981), p. 141.

[47]*Ibid.*

[48]*Ibid.*, p. 146.

material base.[49]

Harding disputes Marxist assertions that the addition of or reliance on psychological analysis is ahistorical and over-determined; instead, she argues that the social structure of infant care reinforces the gendered division of labour and teaches girls that they are less valued. For Harding, this is the foundation of the "real" material base and it is also the impetus for women to form "...the revolutionary group in history."[50] Harding tells us that we cannot expect liberation to come from men and thus,

> ...women must take the lead not only in the struggle against patriarchy, but also in the struggle against the underlying interests men have in controlling both patriarchy and capital and in perpetuating dominating relations through various kinds of oppressive relations with others. We are at the moment in history when women must seize the lead in creating a theory and practice which are truly scientific in that they are more comprehensively historical and materialist.[51]

While Harding's argument is inspiring for its revolutionary rhetoric and zeal, Lise Vogel answers the challenge to provide a more historical and materialist theory

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[49]*Ibid.*, p. 149.

[50]*Ibid.*, p. 159.

[51]*Ibid.*

by initiating a "unification" of Marxist and feminist theory. Vogel introduces her argument in Women and Revolution, but offers a more refined approach in Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory. Published in 1983, Marxism and the Oppression of Women offers a comprehensive and sophisticated merging of feminist and Marxist theory. Vogel asserts that socialist and Marxist theory have failed to address the "woman question" outside of the most commonly understood category of wage labourer. She insists that the presence of feminists in socialist circles has introduced three broad areas of inquiry that must be answered in both theory and practice. Generally, she states these as: (a)What is the root of women's oppression? How can its cross-class and transhistorical character be understood theoretically?; (b) What is the relationship of the sexual division of labour to women's oppression? What is the importance of women's childbearing capacity?; and, (c)How can class, sex, and race oppression be understood and reconciled theoretically?[52]

Having outlined the driving questions behind her attempt to unify Marxist and feminist theory, Vogel takes the reader on a thorough overview of the "decade of debate" among feminist and Marxist theorists and moves forward to reclaim

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[52]Vogel, Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory, p. 7.

Marxist thinking in what she defines as its original form:

> Modern students of the socialist movement often suggest that Marx and Engels produced virtually nothing of real usefulness about the oppression and liberation of women. Even less, it is implied, did they put their convictions concerning women's emancipation into practice. Yet these claims, whether openly stated or merely insinuated, are generally not firmly based in research. Indeed, they are more often the expression of particular theoretical and political perspectives than they are serious considerations of the actual work of either Marx or Engels.[53]

To correct the tendency of many feminist-socialists to disregard Marx, Vogel carefully uncovers key Marxist texts to put forward the notion that sexual oppression was not ignored by Marx, although this is not to argue that the original texts offer a complete theory of women's oppression. Specifically, Vogel turns her eye to Capital, the so-called "sex-blind" economic treatise. Capital, according to Vogel, most clearly analyzes the real conditions of working women and children, the "de-skilling" of the labour force through the introduction of automation, and finally looks at the ever evolving family--going so far as to define the internal relations of the family as "latent slavery."[54] Vogel claims that "Marx does more, in Capital, than comment descriptively on the situation of women,

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[53] *Ibid.*, p. 33.

[54] *Ibid.*, p. 61.

the family, and the sex division of labour in present society. He makes a major contribution toward the development of theory required to illuminate such historical developments."[55] Importantly, Vogel identifies three concepts from Marx's writings that are key to understanding women's oppression, which are: "...individual consumption, the value of labour power, and the industrial reserve army."[56] However, Vogel is forced to conclude that Marx's own development of these concepts remains "tantalizingly" incomplete; yet, she argues that the theoretical starting points are laid out in these concepts and that their development— that is, the development of a clearer understanding of the reproduction of labour power— holds the key for a feminist program growing from and strengthened by Marxist theory.

One would anticipate that the issues arising from Sargent's collection and Vogel's work would have again inspired significant debate among Marxist and feminist theorists. However, this is not really the case. To a large extent, little cross-over occurred between those scholars identifying themselves as either feminist or Marxist. From an outside perspective, "two solitudes" were developing, with internal debates abounding. The next section will identify various strains (in both senses of the word) that have developed among various "feminisms" in recent scholarship.

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[55]*Ibid.*, p. 63.

[56]*Ibid.*

II. WHAT CONSTITUTES FEMINISM?

In order to develop a strategic gender consciousness, and by this I mean to imply a gender awareness among those women who actively seek socialist social and political change or who may be particularly susceptible to take on an activist role, there is an immediate necessity to take up a dialogue with feminism. Such a dialogue unavoidably leads to the now notorious problem known as the "woman question." Further, before one talks of feminism generally or feminist politics specifically, there is a presumption that one's audience must be named. The question then, is: to whom and on whose behalf do you speak? This question becomes further complicated by a variety of "types" of feminism that each claim "truth" and an ability to explain women's oppression in a unique way-- or, in other words, these "feminisms" make truth claims on behalf of women in often a universalistic and sometimes in an unreflective manner. However, in spite of the variety of truth claims, it is possible to uncover a commonality within feminist scholarship that makes it reasonable to "distill" a core of theory, belief, and practice that deserves the title "feminist." It is from these common strains that it is possible to develop a "feminist" conception of women as a necessary category of revolutionary theory— akin to the traditional reliance upon class as *the* crucible for social

change.[57] This being said, it is also important to distinguish feminist theory from a more general category of "women." The goal here is to arrive at a theoretical category rather than to make broad-based comments on women's experience as if it is a universally experienced "state of being." Feminism provides a potential theoretical construct for viewing social change but should not assume an audience that includes *all* women. Keeping this distinction in mind, the following sections look at the common understandings shared by a variety of feminisms while developing some of the key theoretical concerns that must be addressed by a revolutionary Marxist feminism.

Explaining Oppression

All forms of feminist analysis build from the socio-political notion that women have faced and continue to face systemic oppression and social inequality as a result of biological sex. Feminists from Olymphe de Gouges to Catherine McKinnon generally argue that women have inhabited a socially inferior position relative to their male counterparts. Where feminist analyzes begin to differ is in their explanation of how and why women's oppression is— speaking in generalities--broad-based and universally experienced across cultures and political systems. In order to develop an explanation of this

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[57]It is not my intention, as will be clear later in my argument, to suggest gender as a replacement for class. The reference here is simply for the purpose of comparison.

oppression, feminist arguments draw on at least one of the following three concepts in proving the persistence of women's oppression.

1)The Public/Private Split

The notion that the social world is divided between public, that is political, and private, that is the household, underlies much of feminist thinking. The simplest derivative of this argument postulates that women's earliest exclusion from the polis– compensated by her rcle in the household– has led to women's social subordination to men, decreased rights of citizenship, and ensured the institutionalization of heterosexual marriage. The name most often applied to these social relationships is patriarchy. Again, the history and "depth" of patriarchy are hotly contested among feminists; however, few would argue against the notion that we inhabit what could be loosely conceptualized as a patriarchal social system-- that is a social system which trades upon the rigid application of sexual inequality; and, further, that this social inequality has led to the assigning of acceptable social roles for men and women that ensures women's exclusion from the "corridors of political power." It is in the context of the public/private split that a differentiation is drawn between the concepts of sex and gender. While sex is merely the recognition of biological male and female, gender

represents the social roles ascribed to either male or female sexes. This differentiation is important as it allows feminists to argue against certain forms of "biological determinism" that assert a "natural" role for women outside of the political world.

2)Malestream Thinking

Among feminists, implicit in the argument that women have been excluded from politics, is the underlying assumption that modern political philosophy and theory has viewed men and women through a theoretical lens which assumes women's subordination and exclusion from politics. This "thinking", often referred to as male-stream history, has the simultaneous effect of removing women from political history and ignoring women's contributions while also providing the intellectual support for women's continued exclusion. O'Brien argues that the prevalence of "male-stream" thinking has represented an unacknowledged ideology that has passed through history unchallenged:

> When I say, then, that male-stream thought is ideological thought, what I am saying is that it misrepresents one level of reality in the need to give expression to another level of reality. Whatever men are looking at, and whatever else they may be, they are male.[58]

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[58]Mary O'Brien, The Politics of Reproduction (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 8.

3)Women's Reproductive Role

The fact of fecundity is one which cannot be overlooked by feminists. Women's reproductive potential is not a derivative of gender, but is biological fact. This is not to suggest that women *must* reproduce, but, instead, that their biological sex contains the potential of reproduction. O'Brien offers a useful definition of reproduction that includes the"...total sociobiological process from copulation through birth to the nurture and care of dependent children."[59] Early feminist scholars, such as Shulamith Firestone, argued that technology would eventually free women from reproductive labour; however, freed or not, women cannot escape their biological potential.[60] Thus, feminists must account for women's reproductive potential in order to fully theorize oppression and the possibility for emancipation. However, the very "social" nature of reproduction raises several key and fundamental debates among feminist theorists. What is significant here is that regardless of the feminist approach being utilized, to fully account for women's oppression and to

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[59]Mary O'Brien, "Feminist Praxis" in Feminism: from Pressure to Politics, Angela Miles and Geraldine Finn(eds), (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1982), p. 332.

[60]The statement that women cannot escape their biological potential must be clearly understood. Simply, I mean only to highlight that the female sex– not individual women *qua* women– has this potential role in the reproduction of the species.

even suggest women's emancipation, it is necessary to theorize women's reproductive ability and its entailing social role. In her attempt to develop a feminist theory of reproduction, O'Brien rightly notes:

> Where does feminist theory start? I answer: Within the process of human reproduction. Of that process sexuality is but a part. I intend to argue that it is not within sexual relations but within the total process of human reproduction that the ideology of male supremacy finds its roots and its rationales.[61]

The concepts of public/private spheres, male-stream thinking, and the need to theorize reproduction are "foundational" for feminism. Angela Miles argues it is this identification of women's inequality and their specificity which renders feminism both necessary and unique:

> ...feminism's progressive power lies essentially in its ability to affirm both women's specificity and equality in a transcendent and revolutionary synthesis of these two apparently contradictory conditions.[62]

Major Divisions in Feminist Theory

Although there is considerable agreement among feminists about the issues facing feminist theory in a general sense, there is considerable debate about the focus and direction that is possible from within feminism. The result of these

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[61]O'Brien, The Politics of Reproduction, p. 8.

[62]Miles, Feminism: from Pressure to Politics, p. 272.

debates is the development of various feminisms which are advocated by a variety of proponents. The following section attempts to identify some of the major feminist theories in order to both demonstrate the breadth of feminist scholarship but also to lay the foundations for arguing in favour of a feminism which locates its theory in a materialist explanation and is revolutionary in its potential.

Liberal Feminism or Feminist Empiricism[63]

Taking on 19th century liberal theorists, liberal feminism argues that

> The privatization of the family, and the legitimation of patriarchal authority in the private sphere, derive from the

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[63]Mary Hawkesworth's consideration of feminist epistemology in "Knowers, Knowing, Known: Feminist Theory and Claims of Truth" in Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society vol. 14 no. 3 (Spring 1989), pp 533 - 557, divides feminist epistemological theory into Feminist Empiricism (corresponding to liberal feminist approaches), Feminist Standpoint Theories (corresponding to socialist/materialist approaches to epistemology), and Postmodern feminist epistemology which will be considered in the context of postmodernism/poststructuralism generally. The titles applied to feminism, for example empiricist vs. liberal, often serve as a valuable indication of what is under consideration. For Hawkesworth the ways in which feminism theorizes knowledge (both its acquisition and dissemination) figures before more "practical" or strategic considerations come into play. For my purposes, this section serves only to broadly outline elements which are common to various feminist interpretations of women's oppression. This section should also not be read to indicate that there is no empirical research derived from other feminist theories, only that the first association between empiricism and feminism were expressly concerned with "bringing in" gender as a consideration rather than proposing a fundamental problem with the notion of "objective research."

> ontological priority granted to the individual in liberal theory. Thus, in classical liberal theory, the positioning of the individual as prior to and partially outside of society permitted the exclusion of women from society.[64]

However, rather than suggesting that these philosophic grounds are inherently wrong, Liberal feminists instead argue that the "oversight" can be remedied by "bringing in" women to public life and guaranteeing equality to female citizens. The major political battles to be fought by Liberal feminists are not revolutionary but may be better defined as "inclusionary." Liberal feminists articulate a need for women to play an equal role in politics, enjoying the same rights of citizenship as their male counterparts. Liberal feminists offer few challenges to traditional liberal economic theory and are not likely to put forward an indictment of capitalism *per se*. Zillah Eisenstein raises an interesting and provocative point in her essay "Reform and/or Revolution: Towards a Unified Women's Movement," by asserting "When I use the term liberal feminist, I mean that body of contemporary theory which shares the belief in the supremacy of the individual and the correlate concerns with individual freedom and choice. This belief underlines the demand for women' independence. All

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[64]Barbara Marshall, Engendering Modernity: Feminism, Social Theory, and Social Change (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1994), p. 11.

feminists, no matter what their particular persuasion is, root their feminism in this (liberal) conception of self."[65] For Eisenstein, this shared "concept of self" means that feminists from various ideological backgrounds should find unity and a common goal by working together on specific projects. Although there is not often a great deal of success from this approach, she does raise an interesting and somewhat pervasive definition of liberal feminism.

Socialist Feminism or Feminist Standpoint Theories

Leslie Sklair argues that Marxist or socialist feminism is a "...response to liberal feminism [as much as it is] a direct consequence of feminist work in Marxist metatheory and theory."[66] The "response" that Sklair is discussing is that socialist feminists argue (in a general sense) that liberal feminists refuse to acknowledge both the historical material conditions and the nature of capitalism which combine in a "historical bloc" to continue and deepen women's oppression. For our purposes here, it is sufficient to note that socialist

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[65]Zillah Eisenstein,"Reform and/or Revolution: Towards a Unified Women's Movement" in Women and Revolution: a Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism, Lydia Sargent (ed), (Montreal: Black Rose Books, Ltd., 1981), p. 343.

[66]Leslie Sklair, "Transcending the Impasse: Metatheory, Theory, and Empirical Research in the Sociology of Development and Underdevelopment" in World Development, vol. 16, no. 6,1988, p. 703.

oriented feminism represents both a response to liberal feminism and a revision of traditional Marxist theory. Importantly, socialist feminism encompasses a project which necessarily entails the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism and bourgeois legal equality in favour of the implementation of real social and political equality.

However, it is important to draw something of a distinction between socialist and Marxist feminism. Both feminisms argue that the oppression of women has a material base, which has an unique historical character under capitalism. However, socialist feminist theory can much more easily rely on a dual systems approach to patriarchy[67]; whereas, Marxist feminism approaches the "woman question" from within traditional texts and through the concept of the reproduction of labour. Notably, Marxist feminism holds that class forms an important role in building a socialist revolution while still acknowledging the often cross-class oppression of women. Although, it is often a process of "splitting hairs" to define a difference between socialist and Marxist feminisms, it does serve to further highlight the range of divisions within women's organizing for change.

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[67]See the first of the "dual legacy" outlined by Vogel, Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory, pp. 127 - 135.

Radical Feminism or Cultural Feminism[68]

The addition of the descriptive "radical" to the notions ascribed to feminism takes the theoretical emphasis of feminism in a significantly new direction.[69] It is also safe to say that radical feminism is the least easily typified variant within feminism. However, at the risk of over-generalizing, radical feminists trade upon the notion that there exists an "essential" nature to women that is not only different from a male nature, but is ultimately superior. The oppression of the female nature is a male response to difference and an internalized knowledge of inferiority and as such the only successful "political" alternative for radical feminists is separation. Radical feminism both underlies the antipornography movement (as enunciated by Andrea Dworkin in the United States[70]) and the "lesbian separatist" movements found across Canada, the U.S., Europe, and Australia. Weir and Wilson present an interesting view of the radical feminism of individuals such as Dworkin, noting the fundamentalist tone of such "radical" rhetoric:

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[68]Hartmann, The Unhappy Marriage, p. 13.

[69]"Radical" could reasonably be attached to any feminist theory in the sense that it challenges the status quo; however, the terminology has come to be accepted in the way that it is used here.

[70]Mariana Valverde, Sex, Power, and Pleasure (Toronto: Women's Press, 1991), p. 15.

> This fundamentalist rhetoric of Andrea Dworkin is the vehicle for a grotesquely over-simplified and utterly pessimistic vision of the human experience, and one that offers no political solution. Some leftwing men, however, have capitulated to it, perhaps because it is congruent with 'post-Marxism', or because they are unaware of Andrea Dworkin's vigorous anti-leftism. The particular emphasis on male violence, while important, has also tended to feed the reemergence of an ideology that asserts not only women's difference from men, but their superiority. Such an ideology resembles that of sections of the nineteenth century movement, when biological notions of difference led to a conservative emphasis on women's sacred role in the home, and as guardians of moral purity.[71]

In order to build a strong argument in support of the essential nature of woman, radical feminism often turns to the psychoanalytic work of Freud as revised by feminist thinkers such as Nancy Chodorow. The notion of psychoanalytic feminism focuses on how gender is acquired and what role women play in gender acquisition and the continuation of patriarchy. It is arguable that psychoanalytic feminism should be considered outside of the cultural or body-centric arguments levied by radical feminists; however, the distinction that I draw here regards the notion of woman's essence. Both psychoanalytic and radical consideration of feminism stipulate a relationship

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[71]Angela Weir and Elizabeth Wilson, "The British Women's Movement" in New Left Review no. 148 (November - December 1984), p. 79.

to the body which is the locus of both oppression and emancipation.[72]

The previous differentiations of feminism, of course, do not represent "water-tight" theoretical compartments but are the products of dialogue and debate among feminists. It is this creative interaction and dialogue that, I would argue, makes feminist concerns an essential component of revolutionary theory. Some of the primary concerns of feminism (to whom/for whom do we speak?/what is the nature of oppression?/what is the route to progressive social change?) are the questions of revolution. In the following sections I want to "take up" the feminist challenge and investigate two questions that must necessarily be answered before further developing the theoretical and strategic role of women in socialist revolution: (1) how do we arrive at a workable notion of women's subjectivity?; and, (2) how do we theorize the relationship between patriarchy— or, more generally, women's oppression, and capitalism? It is this second question that can be answered by the following review of core Marxist theory.

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[72]What may become readily apparent from the preceding discussions of "types" of feminism is that the idea of women's oppression can be added onto other theories in an attempt to give "voice to the whole" of human experience. Not included, for example, in my brief overview is a development of anarchist feminism, a full recount of psychoanalytic feminism, or the relationship of feminism and ecology.

III. FINDING THE MARXIST CORE

Marx's original theory is a subject open to debate as is evidenced by the many revisions which have been put forward since Marx's original publication. Ellen Meiksins Wood attributes two important accomplishments resulting from Marx's theoretical work: (1)Marx provides an entry point to understanding historical processes; and, (2)Marx provides a specific analysis of the "capitalist mode of production."[73] These "accomplishments" arise from the careful construction of a political theory founded on the following core elements:

Method

Marx employs a dialectical model known as historical materialism. In other words, historical materialism forms a theoretical orientation which seeks to trace human history through its material forms (i.e. the manner in which the means of production have been organized). The method is also dialectical in its approach to history, or the progress of history, through an examination of antagonistic relationships. The application of this methodology allows Marx to identify significant epochs in human history: slavery, feudalism, capitalism. Each epoch is defined by a specific antagonism

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[73]Ellen Meiksins Wood, "Marxism and the Course of History" in New Left Review no.147 (September - October 1984), p. 100.

such as the struggle between owner/slave, lord/serf, or bourgeoisie/proletariat.

Marx argues that the transition to capitalism is the simplification of class struggle in that the only important social antagonism to be taken into consideration is the relationship between bourgeoisie and proletariat. It is important to note, however, that Marx should not be read as a deterministic or teleological philosopher. His argument is not that history must unfold in a specific order, but that it has unfolded as such. It is through the development of historical materialism and its application to history that Marx suggests the potential "defeat" of capitalism. As Wood notes,

> His theory of history does not take the form of propositions like 'primitive communism is (must be) followed by slavery...etc.' (which is less a theory or a key to the forces of change than a proclamation), but rather something like 'the fundamental key to the development of feudalism (say) and the forces at work in the transition to capitalism is to be found in the specific mode of productive activity characteristic of feudalism, the specific form of which surplus was pumped out of the 'direct producers, and the class conflicts surrounding that process of surplus-extraction.' Surely there are more than enough constraints here.[74]

Historical materialism is significant as a methodological

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[74] *Ibid.*

approach to capitalism because, as noted above, it constructs human history as the history of struggle. Marx does not merely suggest that history unfolds in a deterministic way, but, demonstrates that there are real struggles taking place with real historical outcomes and consequences. That being said, Marx does have an ultimate goal in mind as he traces the history of human/class struggle— the goal is to demonstrate the eventual "victory" of the proletariat over the capitalists and the end to class struggle through the formation of communist society. In order to accomplish this end, Marx developed what might today be called metatheory about the rise, globalization, and eventual demise of capitalism.

Wage-Capital Relation

Marx argues that the transformation from feudal and merchant economies to capitalism is the creation of a new relationship between the labourer and the products s/he produces. This new relationship is based upon the notion that the labourer independently possesses her/his labour power. In order for labour-power to have a productive expression (or to provide a means to appropriate the production of others) the labourer must "sell" her/his labour to the capitalist. In theory the labourer is "free" to sell her/his labour power to whomever s/he wishes; however, the real relationship, as Marx reveals, is an association which deprives the worker of the

real ability to chose when/how or to what ends her/his labour will be used. The labourer is "forced" to sell her/his labour in order to appropriate items necessary for survival. In this manner, the capitalist is in a position to exploit the worker and depress wages. The wage-capital relationship is fundamental to the creation and growth of capitalism, as Marx notes: "The process, therefore, that clears the way for the capitalist system, can be none other than the process which takes away from the labourer the possession of his means of production; a process that transforms, on the one hand, the social means of subsistence and production into capital, on the other, the immediate producers into wage-labourers."[75]

A second, and crucial element of the wage-capital relation is the concept of surplus value. Surplus value is the *raison d'être* of capitalism; in other words, it represents the ability of the capitalist to earn profit through the labour of others. Surplus-value is achieved through the appropriation of the worker's labour beyond the break-even point of commodity production. Thus, if a worker's labour and materials are paid for in the productivity of the first six hours of the working day, the remaining two hours will generate profit for the capitalist. Should the capitalist

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[75]Karl Marx, Das Kapital as revised by Serge L.Levitsky (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1959), p. 350.

wish to further increase (maximize) surplus value, it may only be accomplished through an increase in worker productivity either through enhanced performance or increased working hours at the same rate of pay (known as absolute value); or through technological or management innovations (known as relative surplus value). It is within the context of this exploitative relationship between the worker and the capitalist that the class struggle which typifies capitalist accumulation is engendered.

Although it may appear as a given that profit is the main goal of capitalism, the accumulation of capital does require a theoretical explanation. Marx answers the "whys" of capitalism by postulating the *Principle of Commodification*. Clyde Barrow explains the principle in this way:

> The principle of Commodification refers to the idea that in capitalist societies all use values are potentially convertible to exchange values. As a historical phenomenon, commodification is the tendency of the capitalist mode of production to extend market relations to a wider and wider range of social phenomena, thus making it possible to convert capital (i.e. money) to other types of use values.[76]

In other words, Marx argues that value is not deducible merely to the "use" of an object, but is related instead to its value

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[76]Clyde Barrow, Critical Theories of the State: Marxist, Neo-Marxist, Post-Marxist (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), p. 15.

as determined by exchange. Commodification reduces all social interaction to a form of market exchange. An item's value, like labour, is derived merely from its exchange value. Capitalism successfully reduces the exchange value of labour (low wages, worker exploitation) while increasing the exchange value of commodities. Inherent within the principle of commodification are two additional issues for Marx. The first is the ability of capital (in the form of money) to be convertible into other types of power— that is, political power becomes a derivative of capital. The notion that capital may express itself in other power relationships is borne out by Marx's conception of the state as representative of capital's interests. Obviously, this relationship between state and capital places all legislative and coercive elements at the discretionary use of capital. For Marx, the relationship between the accumulation of capital and politics is one of mutual reinforcement. The economic relationships (i.e. the mode of production) form the base upon which a political superstructure is built. The superstructure is the realm of ideology, ideas, and institutions and is the product of the base— notably, the defining feature of the interaction between base and superstructure is class struggle.[77] The

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[77]The issue of the relationship between the "base" and "superstructure" has been hotly debated among Marxist (continued...)

second issue commodification raises is the reality which Marx expresses as the *Law of Capitalist Accumulation.* This "law" indicates that capital will increasingly become concentrated in fewer and fewer hands, and , thus, the profits derived from the commodification of society in general will benefit fewer rather than more individuals.

The great irony of capitalism for Marx is that within the capitalist mode of production (the assembly line combined with an efficiently organized division of labour) exists the potential to eradicate human want. Poverty, hunger— in short, scarcity could be ended through the technological innovations which present themselves in capitalism; however, because of the *Law of Accumulation* and the profit motive, the technological means to end scarcity merely serve to further impoverish the worker. In order for fundamental changes to occur that would create a fair and equitable distribution of wealth, Marx, argues that the working class must first become conscious of their exploitation.

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[77](...continued)
scholars. However, Marx's own point is strikingly simple. The organization of productive forces is a social act; therefore, arising institutions (and their practices) also represent a social process. The "realm" of ideology is not merely "reducible" to an economic base, but is the result of social processes that have a material foundation.

Contradictions and Crises of Capitalism

How are the workers to become conscious of class struggle? This is a fundamental question for Marx. His answer lies in his assertion that modern capitalism produces fundamental contradictions in the lives of the working class. The first contradiction is the fact that the drive to increase profit leads to an on-going attempt to depress worker's wages. The result is that the purchasing power of the worker is adversely affected by the downward pressure on wages and therefore consumption is reduced. The second contradiction inherent to capitalism is that over time profits will fall as more capital is introduced per unit of labour.[78] These two inherent contradictions of capitalism lead to on-going cyclical crises. The nature of the crises has been termed both underconsumption and overproduction— however, I would argue that choosing one over the other becomes more of a question of semantics as both have a similar effect. On the one hand, underconsumption necessitates that new markets must be found; and, on the other hand, overproduction insinuates that new, cheaper sources of labour and production must be utilized. To quote from the Manifesto of the Communist Party:

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[78]Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The Manifesto of the Communist Party", in Robert Tucker (ed.) The Marx-Engles Reader, 2nd Edition (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978), p. 478.

"And how does the bourgeoisie get over these crises? On the one hand by enforced destruction of a mass of productive forces; on the other, by the conquest of new markets, and by more thorough exploitation of the old ones."[79]

The very fact that capitalism is constantly forced to expand to wider productive and commodity markets leads to the opportunity for an international association among workers– a necessity in the cause of a proletarian revolution. The global expansion of capitalism, because of the inherent contradictions and crises of the system, leads to a situation in which there is a long run decrease in the standard of living of all workers. What remains missing, then, to foment full, socialist revolution, is the organization of the workers themselves. Notably, Marx proposes that participation among workers will be non-voluntarist; however, members of the ruling class will also feel compelled to participate, as Marx notes: "...the whole range of society, assumes such a violent, glaring character, that a small section of the ruling class cuts itself adrift, and joins the revolutionary class, the class that holds the future in its hands."[80] Thus, the final solution to the alienation, exploitation, and immiseration of the working class is a revolutionary movement led by the

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[79]*Ibid.*, p. 478.

[80]*Ibid.*, p. 481.

proletariat which establishes first socialism (the so-called Dictatorship of the Proletariat) and finally the communist state in which "...we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all."[81]

Having identified the core considerations of Marx's work, there is still a need to define how Marx's ideas can come together in a theory that speaks to human emancipation. In order to define the key points of convergence of feminism and Marxism, it is necessary to turn to Wood's explanation of what she calls "political" Marxism. Importantly, Wood draws our attention to three aspects of Marx's own theory which are often overlooked or hopelessly obscured; these are: (1)Marx's historical interpretations; (2)the social, rather than the economic, base of Marx's work; and, (3)the revolutionary role of class struggle.

Marx's own development and understanding of the historical movement to capitalism has often come under fire as ahistorical and/or overly deterministic. In the case of feminist criticism, Marx's historical materialism is said to ignore the historical development and depth of women's oppression. Instead, Wood urges us to see the main target of Marx's analysis, that is capitalism:

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[81]*Ibid.*, p. 491.

> Nevertheless, the formula concerning the contradictions between forces and relations of production does seem to have a more specific and fruitful meaning, if we cease to treat it as a general law of history— a law so general as to be vacuous— and regard it as an expression of a law of *capitalist* development, a principle internal to the capitalist mode of production from its inception to its decline, a statement about its specific dynamic and internal contradictions. Indeed it is precisely, and only, in this specific application that the principle receives any detailed elaboration from Marx himself— and in such a way that it appears not as a general law but as a characteristic specific to capitalism, an account of precisely those contradictions that are associated with the uniquely capitalist drive to revolutionize productive forces.[82]

In other words, Wood is arguing that Marx has provided a method of analysis, specific to capitalism, which provides all the necessary tools to critique capitalist social relations. It is the Marxist method, the historically specific critique of capitalism that should also be able to account for oppression outside of the specific restriction of class.

The second fundamental aspect of Marx's work is the social nature of production:

> Marx's purpose, then, is to stress not the dualism of 'the material' and the 'social' but the definition of the material by the social; to define the material process of production not in opposition to the social process of

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[82]Wood, "Marxism and the Course of History", p. 102-103.

> production but as a social process; to focus attention not on 'abstract matter' but on the social form that gives it reality... .[83]

Drawing together the economic and social base of capitalism, Wood puts forward the definition of political Marxism as "...understood here, is no less convinced of the primacy of production than are the 'economistic tendencies' of Marxism. It does not define production out of existence or extend its boundaries to embrace indiscriminately all social activities or even class 'experiences.' It simply takes seriously the principle that a mode of production is a social phenomenon."[84] Wood further notes, "Equally important-- and this is the point of the whole exercise-- relations of production are, from this theoretical standpoint, presented in their political aspect, that aspect in which they are actually contested: as relations of domination, as rights of property, as the power to organize and govern production and appropriation."[85] It is precisely this interpretation of Political Marxism that makes the fit with feminism. If we are to understand the nature, extent, and even the origins of women's oppression and domination, we

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[83]Ellen Meiksins Wood, "The Separation of the Economic and Political in Capitalism" in New Left Review no.127 (May - June 1981), p. 72.

[84]*Ibid.*, p. 77.

[85]*Ibid.*

must look to the social arena where material relationships have been defined, contested, and again redefined. There is, however, a Marxist caveat on the ways in which we can practically mediate the "social terrain" of struggle. For Wood, this mediation must continue to be understood in the context of contending classes to avoid "dissolving the relations of production in an undifferentiated mass of social relations or class "experience," in which there is no way of identifying critical targets."[86]

It is this strategic need to "identify critical targets," that returns Wood's analysis to the importance of class struggle and the central revolutionary role of the proletariat. In Retreat from Class, Wood further examines what she terms New Social Movements (ecology, women's liberation, student movements) and the New True Socialists (the so-called post-Marxists, such as Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau) and the potential "revolutionary role" these groups can be expected to play. Wood raises two critical points in regard to these movements/theorists: (1)although they may enjoy popular appeal, they lack a broad critique of the material relations that lead to exploitation-- that is, the exploitation of both individuals and natural resources;

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[86]*Ibid.*

and, (2)that the strategic value of a working class movement is lost if we indulge in "identity-based" movements and politics.[87]

Both of these points are worthy of further consideration, specifically in the context of finding a "feminist" home in Marxism. In Retreat from Class, Wood begins her analysis from a very simple premise: capitalist hegemony rests on a formal separation of political and economic spheres:"Capitalist hegemony, then, rests to a significant extent on a formal separation of 'political' and 'economic' spheres which makes possible the maximum development of purely juridical and political freedom and equality without fundamentally endangering economic exploitation."[88] The result of this separation, well discussed by many feminists in the context of "the personal is political," is that capitalism can be entirely comfortable with notions of juridical equality, and even political freedom, without there existing any real challenge to economic exploitation: "Capitalist hegemony, then, rests to a significant extent on a formal separation of 'political' and 'economic' spheres which makes possible the maximum development of purely juridical and political freedom

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[87]Ellen Meiksins Wood, Retreat from Class: a New "True" Socialism (London: Verso, 1986), p. 168.

[88]*Ibid.*, p. 150.

and equality without fundamentally endangering economic exploitation."[89] The liberal notion that one is free if s/he is equal before the law and has a voice in the selection of governors, has little affect on those structuring relations of production, that is the means by which surplus extraction is best carried out. Wood's analysis of New Social Movements leads her to the conclusion that this key consideration, the division of political and economic spheres under capitalism has either been missed by these movements or even if the connection has been made, there is no sense of how to build a broader-based movement:

> There is no sense here [among the 'new true socialists'] of Marx's own complex and subtle understanding of the ways in which capitalism creates not the mechanical inevitability of socialism, but the possibilities and contradictions which put it on the historical agenda as it never could have been before. Missing too is his conception of the working class not as a mechanical reflex of technological development, whose 'historic task' is nothing more than (automatically) to appropriate collectively the forces of production created by capitalism, but rather a class which contains the possibility of a classless society because its own interests cannot be fully served without the abolition of class and because its strategic location in the production of capital gives it a unique capability to

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[89] *Ibid.*

destroy capitalism.[90]

Wood's second concern, that of the need to build a strategic centre for the fight against capitalism, often raises concerns among other social activists. In the case of feminist organizing, Wood's point is often interpreted as an order from the Marxist leadership to put aside other "causes" until after the revolution. However, Wood's response to such fears is both convincing and in keeping with socialist goals. Her first response is that issues raised by New Social Movements are not only important to the militants directly involved, but are issues critical to the general interest:

> This does not mean that there is no place for coalitions and alliances with other social movements. The nexus of politics and working-class interest can— and indeed should— be extended to social issues beyond the immediate material interests of class, to the politics of peace, gender, environment, and culture; and, as we have seen, it is in any case a mistake to treat these issues as if they take us 'beyond class politics'. But the vital interests of the collective labourer must remain the guiding thread for any political movement which has as its goal the construction of socialism.[91]

Her second response, one critical, I believe, to developing a feminist praxis within Marxism, is that the working class is in and of itself unique because its condition

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[90] *Ibid.*, p.186-7.

[91] *Ibid.*, p.198.

for real and meaningful freedom is the construction of a classless society. Wood rightly identifies this as a unique feature of the working class:

> But the first principle of socialist organization must remain the essential correspondance between working-class interests and socialist politics. Unless class politics becomes the unifying force that binds together all emancipatory struggles, the 'new social movements' will remain on the margins of the existing social order, at best able to generate periodic and momentary displays of popular support but destined to leave the capitalist order intact, together with all its defences against human emancipation and the realization of 'universal human goods.'[92]

Further to Wood's analysis, Brenner and Ramas link the cyclical crises in capitalism to the reinforcement of women's subordination. They argue (as does Vogel) that capitalism creates a division of labour that goes beyond the factory and finds itself expressed in the sexual division of labour within the capitalist-derived family household system. Brenner and Ramas use Marx's analysis of the capitalist system to make clear the material conditions which require a privatized domestic sphere and they do not shy away from asserting the role of "biological facts":

> The contradiction seems to us to be apparent. Biological facts of reproduction— pregnancy, childbirth,

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[92] *Ibid.*, p.199.

> lactation— are not readily compatible with capitalist production, and to make them so would require capital outlays on maternity leave, nursing facilities, childcare, and so on. Capitalists are not willing to make such expenditures, as they increase the costs of variable capital without comparable increases in labour productivity and thus cut into rates of profit. In the absence of such expenditures, however, the reproduction of labour power becomes problematic for the working class as a whole and for women in particular.[93]

Further, they argue that "...the tendency of capitalism toward periodic crises and therefore toward cuts in the standard of living of the working class prevents a break from the family-household system and reinforces the subordination of women."[94]

Brenner and Ramas also carefully note that the assertion of a material basis to women's subordination does not deny that pre-capitalist notions may also have an impact on the historical form the family takes under capitalism:

> To argue that the sexual division of labour had a material base is not to say that either the pre-capitalist ideology of the patriarchal family or the 'dual spheres' ideology of the bourgeoisie had no role in the construction of the family-household system within the working class. It is also not to deny that men had a material interest in a family where men retained control over

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[93]Johanna Brenner and Maria Ramas, "Rethinking Women's Oppression" in New Left Review 144 (March - April 1984), p.48.

[94]*Ibid.*, p.49.

> women and children, were given respect and power, and where men's needs came first. But working-class men did not have the means to impose this form of household over the opposition of women. ...Rather, given the historical conditions under which the system emerged, the forces and relations of capitalist production imparted a coercive charge to biological reproduction. Where pressures on the wage level of the working class were great, where the low level of development of the forces of production made domestic work exhausting and time-consuming, and where the proletariat struggled just to eke out survival, the necessity for women to bear and nurse children seriously constrained the alternatives open to the working class for organizing its reproduction.[95]

Utilizing a Marxist core in developing an understanding of women's oppression is not without complication; however, Wood, Brenner, and Ramas are illustrative of the "strategic" needs that accompany any movement for change. In other words, there is a strategic need to be able to speak to and mobilize a revolutionary agent that is implicit in the Political Marxism advocated by Wood, in particular.

Marxism as a theoretical core provides two insights that are fundamental to a successful feminist project. The first is the assertion of a critique of capitalism (that is, the application of the classical core to develop an explanation of women's material circumstances as structured by capitalist

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[95] *Ibid.*, p.53.

relations); and, the second is the strategic need to identify an "agent" of change. Although the privileging of "the worker" as the revolutionary agent has historically presented several problems for Marxist feminists, the next section will further develop the notion of a strategic relationship between the so-called "working class" and "women".

IV. TAKING UP THE DEBATE

So I wonder why we are writing: writing takes energy and time, which might better be used in the course of more concrete action.

Nevertheless, I write out of a conviction about the importance of theory.

Bonnie Fox,"Never Done"

Although it is readily apparent that there are significant philosophical and political oppositions within feminist thinking, it is still possible to build a revolutionary praxis akin to Marxist formulations that account for both feminist concerns and Marxist theoretical insight into capitalism. As Lise Vogel argues, "...the problem is neither with the narrowness of Marxist theory nor with socialist feminists lack of political independence. Rather, socialist feminists have worked with a conception of Marxism that is itself inadequate and economistic."[96] For Vogel, then, the solution to the problem of an inadequate Marxism is to reread Marx in his most expansive form. She convincingly argues that the initial "separation" that has come to characterize the relationship between feminism and Marxism is derivative of the "dual legacy" of dual systems theory and social reproduction theory.[97] Vogel argues that the reformist

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[96]Vogel, The Unhappy Marriage, p. 197.

[97]Vogel, Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory, p. 131.

movements within International Socialism came to adopt the dual systems analysis while rejecting the social reproduction model which integrates sex division of labour and class oppression.[96]

The result of the "dual legacy", from Vogel's perspective, is the continued distancing of women's subordination from socialist organizations. The result, clearly and personally articulated by Sheila Rowbotham, was a division between emerging feminist theory and socialist thinking. The outcome of this splitting is painfully obvious. The New Left emerged with relative autonomy from concerns about "the woman question" and feminism slid into a complacent judgement about patriarchal socialist organizations. A further problem also plagued the Left: the notion of class- specifically an oppressed working class- increasingly lost resonance in the so-called post-industrial society. This resulted in a "loss" of a revolutionary subject for western Marxism. Who were the working classes? Why don't they reject the system which oppresses them? Theorists and activists alike "lost" their theoretical home for Marxist thinking. Conversely, at a time when the New Left was facing a reduction in its audience (late 1960s - mid-1970s), the movement toward women's liberation (not to mention other social movements,

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[98]Ibid., p. 133.

such as the student movement, antiwar organizations, etc.)[99] was undergoing a growth period.

The resulting historical paradox for western feminism and Marxism appears (at least in hindsight) to have been a collective failure to recognize an opportunity to engender a revolutionary subject through feminist thinking while maintaining an important Marxist critique of capitalism. This lost opportunity has only deepened in the face of neoliberal reform around the world. The task, given this apparent failure, is to reformulate the revolutionary subject, to inquire into her "subjectivity" from within the feminist tradition without casting aside Marxism's own theoretical insights about the nature of capitalist exploitation.

The Subject

Finding the "subject" or defining "women's subjectivity" is the focus of much of feminist inquiry. It is also a crucial question in defining the relationship between feminism and Marxism. For feminism specifically, and political theory generally, it is necessary to ask, as does Iris Marion Young, "...what can it mean to use the term woman? More important, in light of these critiques [about women's oppression], what

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[99]This is not to suggest that none of these new social movements utilized Marxist or socialist theory/rhetoric in their causes, but merely to highlight that the traditional socialist organizations and the traditional appeal to the working class were in decline.

sort of positive claims can feminists make about the way social life is and ought to be?"[100] In other words, one's theory must conceptualize women's subjectivity[101] in a way that can be meaningfully addressed (redressed?) through theories of social change.

Marxism, on the other hand, creates a larger problem in that subjects are defined by the ways in which they interact with structures. As Marshall notes, "'Subjects' in orthodox Marxism are positioned as bourgeois or proletariat, owner or worker— as members of a class. The concept of class thus problematizes the relationship between individuals as they appear as workers and owners, and between the individual and society."[102] Marshall goes on to note that Marxist feminist attempts to introduce gender considerations to the notion of class have not moved outside the constraints of the paradigm

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[100]Iris Marion Young,"Gender As Seriality" in Rethinking the Political: Gender, Resistance, and the State, Barbara Laslett, Johanna Brenner, and Yesim Arat(eds), (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 103.

[101]Chris Weedon offers a succinct definition of subjectivity:"'Subjectivity' is used to refer to the conscious and the unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relations to the world" in Chris Weedon,Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), p.33.

[102]Marshall, p. 96.

of production.[103] However, there is an on-going failure within these reformulations to posit a conception of gendered subjectivity which is compatible with the Marxist notions of class relations of oppression and domination. In other words, feminist conceptions of gendered subjectivity often try to express a relationship among women and their experience which transcends class cleavages and locations. While it is a laudable goal to account for oppression across class divisions, it is not a goal which is ultimately compatible with Marxism; nor, is it likely to provide the strategy necessary to motivate women as a social collective (which is necessary to achieve social change).

However, this is not to argue that there is no way out of the impasse between class and gender. In fact, if we look to Geoffrey Ste. Croix's assessment of class in Marx's writings, there may exist no impasse at all. Ste. Croix sets out to understand the contextual meaning of class in Marx's writings. For Ste. Croix, his first question does not relate to the relationship between class and gender, but to Marx's own use of the notion of class in regard to slaves. Ste. Croix argues two straight forward points: (1)that Marx never provided *a* definition of class; and, (2)unless otherwise specifically narrowed by context, there is a primary usage of

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[103] *Ibid.*

class in Marx's thinking: "...class is...a relationship of exploitation."[104]

Ste. Croix's usage of Marx's concept of class is instructive in two regards. First, he draws our attention to the fact that a class is constituted through a relationship; that is, a class exists through its exploitative relations with another group. Second, Ste. Croix reminds us that a class need not be self-conscious or share a common identity. For women, then, there is no reason to deny a class cleavage among women regardless of their awareness of such exploitation.[105] Although, Ste. Croix does not directly address the issue of gender in his definition of class, his analysis leads to an important conclusion. In the context of Marx's own thinking it is not necessary to utilize class as an exclusionary concept, but instead to understand it as a relationship that exists because of exploitation. The real problem, then, is not to define class, but instead to return to the stubborn problem of finding or naming the source of

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[104]Geoffrey De Ste. Croix, "Class in Marx's Conception of History, Ancient and Modern" in New Left Review 146 (July - August 1984), p.99.

[105]Ste. Croix's argument bears some resemblance to an argument put forward by Iris Young ("Gender as Seriality") who develops Sartre's notion of social series in relation to gender. Young reaches a similar conclusion to Ste. Croix insofar as gender experience need not be self-conscious or class-aware experience.

exploitation. For Marx, this is simple: exploitation is the definitive form of productive relations under capitalism. For feminism, identifying the "source" of gender exploitation has been a far more difficult and conflicted process.

Even as Ste. Croix leads us toward an understanding of class as a relationship of exploitation (or, in other words, as a social phenomenon), the question of women's own subjectivity, that is, their experience of exploitation, still presents a theoretical problem for Marxism (and feminism). For some theorists the only way out of the impasse of gender vs. worker subjectivity is to look to postmoderism.

At the risk of oversimplification, those of the postmodern disposition are likely to argue that the very notion of a subject is a remnant of the Enlightenment's rational subject and should be recognized and rejected as such. Postmodernism, as a loosely defined theoretical grouping of ideas, takes the individual out of material circumstances and instead sees personality and difference as key considerations. At its extreme, postmodernism literally dissolves the acting/thinking subject in favour of the "free play" of difference and discursive practice. E.Meiksins Wood notes that the very concept of "politics" is fundamentally altered in the face of postmodernism, "...giving way to the fractured struggles of 'identity politics' or even the

'personal as political'."[106] The desire to elevate identity and the "personal as political" creates a strong affinity between some feminist thinkers and postmodernism, in this respect Mary Hawkesworth notes,

> ...feminist postmodernists advocate a profound skepticism regarding universal (or universalizing) claims about the existence, nature, and powers of reason. Rather than succumb to the authoritarian impulses of the will to truth, they urge instead the development of a commitment to plurality and the play of difference.[107]

However, Carol Stabile notes that these "postmodern beliefs" have very serious political consequences:

> Despite its many contradictions and confusions, postmodernism does have some unifying principles: an uncritical and idealist focus on the discursive construction of the 'real' (i.e., what is 'real' is constructed in and by language, although no one really explains what this means) and a related privileging of the notion of 'difference.' If, in the end, we cannot point to any 'real' interests that might unify 'us,' then the only form of political action conceivable is one based on 'differences' in identity. As opposed to Marx's notion of unity in difference, or E.P. Thomson's 'identity of interests,' in which people share widely common interests which can be represented by political agencies, postmodernists reject any such

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[106]Ellen Meiksins Wood, "What is the 'Postmodern' Agenda? An Introduction" in Monthly Review vol. 17, no.3 (July/August 1995), p.9.

[107]Hawkesworth, pp.536-7.

> representation in favour of particular and localized differences.[108]

Closely linked to postmodernism, poststructuralism has also been embraced by some feminists as a way out of the classical class dilemma.[109] In essence, poststructuralism first appeared in literary criticism as a concern for the symbolic content of language. In its specific feminist form, poststructuralism suggests a notion of women's subjectivity which is well worth critical consideration. Chris Weedon offers the following as defining features of poststructuralism:

> Language is the place where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested. Yet it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed. ...Subjectivity is produced in a whole range of discursive practices- economic, social, and political- the meanings of which are a constant site of struggle over power. ...poststructuralism theorizes subjectivity as a site of disunity and conflict, central to the process of political change and to

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[108]Stabile, p. 93.

[109]Stabile raises an interesting distinction between postmodernism and poststructuralism. Stabile suggests that poststructuralism is the "theory" and postmodernism is the practice- in this way, one can adopt the useful components of poststructuralism without wholeheartedly endorsing the postmodern thinking of Foucault and company!

preserving the status quo.[110]

What is useful in Weedon's definition of poststructuralism, more so than other notions of women's subjectivity, is that the poststructuralist approach recognizes that there may be a resistance among women themselves to being forced into membership in a "group" which they feel may fail to recognize or relate to their aspirations and experiences as individuals which transcends their experiences of being a member of a particular gender. Importantly,

> Although the subject in poststructuralism is socially constructed in discursive practices, she none the less exists as a thinking, feeling subject and social agent, capable of resistance and innovations produced out of the clash between contradictory subject positions and practices.[111]

However, the adoption of a poststructuralist conception of "fluid" or shifting identities does not necessarily offer up a useful notion of "woman" that can contain the "resistive agency" advocated by Weedon. The greatest theoretical failure of poststructuralist accounts of subjectivity is an inability to conceive of collectivities which may be called upon to achieve social change. Although the poststructuralist

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[110]Weedon, p. 21.

[111]*Ibid.*, p.125.

position illuminates individual subjectivity and allows for a variety of identities within the category "woman" it is less clear that "women" could be called upon to act in solidarity--ultimately leaving us with the same problem encountered by orthodox Marxist and socialist feminist accounts of subjectivity; that is, lacking a way to address women's subjectivity collectively. Moreover, Wood reminds us that the "...(oppression based on gender, race, fragmentation, global communications) cry out for a materialist explanation. ...[this is not to say] a materialist approach mean[s] that we have to devalue or denigrate the cultural dimensions of human experience. A materialist understanding is, instead, an essential step in liberating culture from the stranglehold of commodification."[112]

Sensing yet another impasse, Barb Marshall is able to provide a "way out" of the poststructuralist atomism and direct theoretical inquiry to notions of women's collectivity; notably, from within the project of modernity. Importantly, Marshall notes that we must return to the basic question of the individual-society relationship[113] to find a way to adequately theorize the subject.

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[112]Wood,"What is the 'Postmodern' Agenda? An Introduction", p. 10.

[113]Marshall, p. 63.

Towards a Reformulation

As a means of answering the "woman question," Marshall puts forward three concepts, drawn in part from other theorists. The first is the notion of gendered identities. As she notes: "...it seems more appropriate to speak of 'gendered identities', implying a recognition of plurality and difference without abandoning the notion that gender does play a part in constituting the subject."[114] Importantly, this notion does not posit the unified/rational subject assumed by the modern project, nor does it so de-centre the subject that no possibility would remain for "resistive agency" among women.

The second concept is gender order; because the notion of gendered identities allows for the concept of a "subject" theoretical tools such as the concept of gender order (attributed to Jill Matthews[115]) further develop the idea that individuals operate in a "...historically constructed web of power... ." The gender order is experienced as a "material and ideological grid" which translates sexual difference into

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[114] *Ibid.*, p. 112.

[115] Jill Matthews, Good and Mad Women : the Historical Construction of Femininity in Twentieth-Century Australia (North Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1984).

social inequality.[116] Importantly, gender order is tied to the bodily (biological) existence of individuals and because it is the nexus within which difference becomes inequality it also imbues patriarchy with agency as well as structure.[117]

Closely linked to gender order, the third concept, positionality (attributed to Linda Alcoff[118]), provides a useful analytical tool which encompasses both structure and subjectivity as they intersect in individual women. This "...suggests that gender identity is not only relational to a given set of external conditions, but that the position women find themselves in can be actively utilized."[119] Further, positionality provides "...a starting point for understanding how knowledgeable, acting subjects may nonetheless tend to participate in the legitimization of the conditions which reproduce their 'position'."[120] Combining Marshall's gendered identities, gender order, and positionality, one is able to approach the "woman question" from the perspective of activating women against their oppression without relying

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[116]Marshall, p. 115.

[117]*Ibid.*, pp. 115-16.

[118]Linda Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism versus Post-structuralism: the Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory" in Signs (13:3, 1988), pp. 405-436.

[119]Marshall, p. 117.

[120]*Ibid.*

exclusively on their self-conscious agency.

In the context of revolutionary theory, Marshall's formulation allows the theorist to develop a materialist explanation of oppression and to appeal to women as agents in opposition to their material circumstances. However, Marshall's conceptualization of gender does not sufficiently develop the "grounds" for a materialist explanation of oppression or necessarily lead to social revolution. Marshall's categories offer explanatory and theoretical potential for understanding women's subjectivity; and, in combination, Marshall presents us with individual identities which are gendered, which have a social "place" as a result of the gender order, and these self-same individuals undertake actions which are in keeping with their position in the gender order. Marshall further argues that understanding women as not merely *a* gender but being formed through gendered identities grounds feminism in history and forces the recognition that "...given certain historical conditions, women make what may be very reasonable choices (or perhaps the only 'rational' choice available), the long run consequences of which are to create and recreate the conditions of their subordination."[121]

It is not difficult to see that Marshall's formulation,

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[121] *Ibid.*, p. 150.

as it is sparingly developed above, is highly theoretical and in some ways complicates the issue of women's subjectivity, forcing theory to address much more than biology. However, it is also a sophisticated approach which attempts to move theoretical considerations beyond subjectivity itself to broader questions of social change. This, after all, is Marshall's real project: to develop an engendered modernity that provides the "space" for women to act as authors of their own emancipation. Marshall rightly identifies that the means for women to be "authors" of their own social destiny is through a feminist subjectivity that imbues individuals with the potential to oppose their "position" in the gender order while still recognizing the constitutive role of gendered identities. Sue Tolleson Rinehart develops the concept of gendered identities in a similar way to Marshall, conceptualizing a notion of *gender consciousness.* However, Rinehart is worthy of some review here insofar as her notion of gendered consciousness points more directly to a strategic way of speaking to Marshall's gendered identities; that is, Rinehart overcomes the inherent problem of finding some way to conceptualize women so that they may be addressed and mobilized in the name of social revolution.

Gender Consciousness

Although Rinehart's Gender Consciousness and Politics provides a methodological approach to women's political participation and voting behaviour in the United States, her foundational concept, gender consciousness, presents a compatible addition to Marshall's approach. Rinehart answers the inability of feminist theory generally to find a way to its audience. Feminism, or more specifically, socialist feminism has lacked Marx's proletariat in its attempts to derive a solidarity among women. This shortcoming on the part of feminism can be tied to two inherent weaknesses: (1)a propensity to theorize women's oppression rather than to speak to real, material circumstances; and (2)an inability to come to terms with women's rejection of feminism as either a political label or rallying cry. Further, when faced with "right-wing" women's groups or even the older variant of maternal feminism, today's feminists are perplexed, confused, angered, and utterly at a loss for an explanation that extends beyond a truncated understanding of "false consciousness." What Rinehart offers is a relatively simple and direct means of understanding women through their own experience of gender consciousness.

Rinehart develops gender consciousness from an understanding that "...the 'consciousness' of modernity is the

phenomenon of subject encountering itself in and of the world, and of confronting object."[122] In the case of gender consciousness, Rinehart argues that this "...is the recognition that one's relation to the political world is shaped in important ways by the physical fact of one's sex...."[123] Notably, this definition means that feminism itself is "...a powerful manifestation of gender consciousness."[124] In other words, feminism results from individual women who are conscious of their gender forming a sense of themselves as a "group" facing deprivation relative to other groups. Rinehart argues that the awareness of membership in a group leads to action: "Put simply, gender consciousness supports a perception of the relationship of gender roles to political roles that allows individual women to legitimate themselves."[125]

Importantly, Rinehart demonstrates that socially conservative women also display a gender consciousness that leads to political activism, even though the social roles they advocate decry a public woman:

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[122]Sue Tolleson Rinehart, Gender Consciousness and Politics (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 30.

[123]*Ibid.*, p. 14.

[124]*Ibid.*

[125]*Ibid.*, p. 15.

> The traditional gender role divisions to which they [conservative women] subscribe, though, simply cannot accommodate public woman, and the measure of the challenge to traditional roles can be taken, paradoxically, in the competent defense of traditional gender roles made by women activists who are very public indeed.[126]

American research has demonstrated that the majority of women will place themselves "smack in the middle" between feminists and conservative women, so one may be tempted to conclude that gender consciousness is experienced by relatively few women. However, again, Rinehart demonstrates that these women are still gender conscious and this consciousness will express itself in the policies advocated by women that are "...at variance with men."[127]

The key to gender consciousness arises from the ability of women to be addressed as a group. Rinehart contends that women are a group insofar as they experience a commonality in their reproductive potential. Returning to my previous assertion that theory needs to account for women's reproductive potential, Rinehart does not stipulate that reproductive potential must be realized in motherhood, but instead asserts that it makes women aware of their difference from men. Further, this difference is experienced as gender

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[126] *Ibid.*, p. 16.

[127] *Ibid.*

rather than sex. Moreover, Rinehart's contention is that the experience of difference raises consciousness and makes activism possible, as Marshall argues that positionality makes it possible. Rinehart further points out that regardless of women's individual perceptions, they are already addressed as a group:

> While men may think of themselves as men, and no doubt do, during many of their waking moments, there is little reason to think that they see themselves as members of the 'group of men,' in political terms, rather than as individual males. Women, in contrast, have been addressed by the political system as a group— whether to restrict them or later to remove the restrictions— and thus have every reason to address themselves in group terms as well.[128]

When combined with Marshall's concept of gendered identities, gender consciousness opens the potential for women to be mobilized in the name of revolutionary change through much the same mechanism as socialism's appeal to the working class. Conceivably, the same appeal could be made to individuals on the basis of race, ability, or sexual orientation. Moreover, when further combined with Ste. Croix's assertion about the meaning and place of class in Marx's own thinking, it becomes possible to address women as active agents of social change- likely in conjunction with other "groups" which also constitute an exploited class.

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[128] *Ibid.*, p. 33.

CONCLUSION

Although it may seem that we have gone full circle, the preceding theoretical analysis points to some interesting and important potential crossovers between Marxism and feminism. What is apparent is that it is possible to build a program of change that utilizes Marxism and feminism to establish a creative solidarity leading toward the full recognition and mobilization of women as revolutionary agents. The object here is to maintain a materialist understanding of women's experiences under capitalism while looking for a strategic entry point through which to address women. In other words, if we can agree that women's experience can be theorized under a Marxist rubric, we still must decide how it is that we will strategically align women in causes of revolutionary change. It in here that Marshall and Rinehart stand as particularly instructive. Their argument, when combined, leads to the conclusion that women can be addressed as a result of their own consciousness of "differential" experiences under capitalism. Moreover, Ste. Croix's insight into class as a relationship of exploitation leads to the conclusion that gender and class do not need to be setup adversarially as identity choices for individuals, but that class speaks to the alienated experiences of a growing number of groups under capitalism.

There is real, emancipatory potential in an analysis that leads to an identification of the material causes of exploitation (which, in Marxist terms, is not to deny those ideological/psychological elements) and the social relationships which control and manipulate individuals within a social system. Further, feminism is instructive as it brings to light the specific experiences of women- but, loses this instructive ability if there is no material understanding of the causes of alienation and if there is a failure to conceive of a program for change that involves women without their specific identification as feminist. Moreover, Marxism will also fail, in Marx's own words, if it does not involve women's participation. Marx's point was very straightforward and born of his own insight and experience. Women not only were segregated in the private sphere (now regulated by capitalism) but they were also entering into the public sphere as reserve army workers, social caregivers, and reproducers. According to Marx's writings women were the "doubly oppressed" in the home and in the workplace, how could they be overlooked in the revolution? Sadly, that is a question that was less dwelled upon by later revolutionaries.

The goal of this undertaking has been to reassert a necessary relationship between feminist concerns for women's specific oppression and Marxist theory concerning the material effect of capitalist social relations. What should be

apparent is that both seek to uncover the "foundation" of social relationships; however, it has been my contention throughout that feminism has overlooked some obvious material circumstances in women's lives that are the direct result of capitalist social relations. The correction to this oversight is obviously to look to theoretical works that offer some insight into how it is that capitalist social relations exploit and oppress individuals (within classes, genders, or races). Marxism does this, but Marxism has also had significant failures when it comes to accounting for women's oppression not only under capitalism but often from within the socialist movement itself. The correction to both parties and their oversights is to creatively merge Marxism and feminism. Moreover, as shown by Marshall and Rinehart, it is to utilize women in the social positions they currently occupy under capitalism so that they may act in their own interest and in the interest of the revolution.

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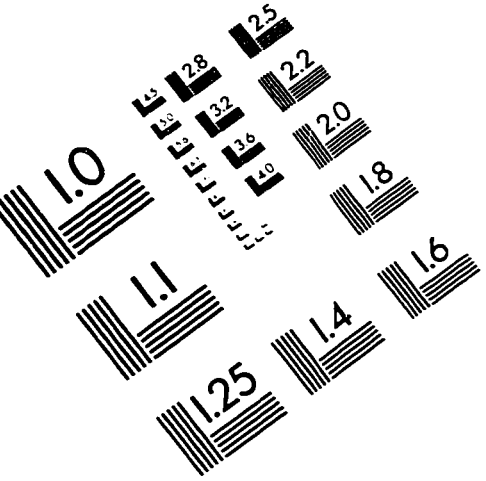

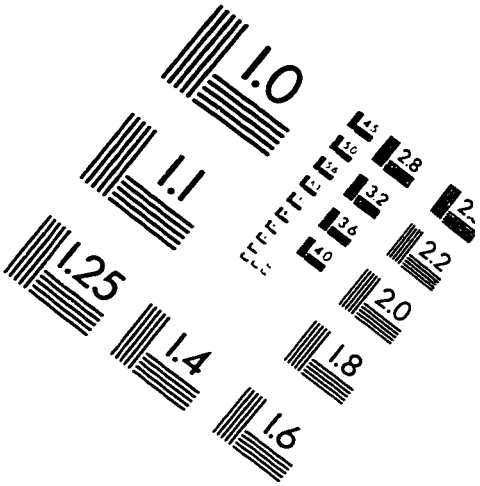

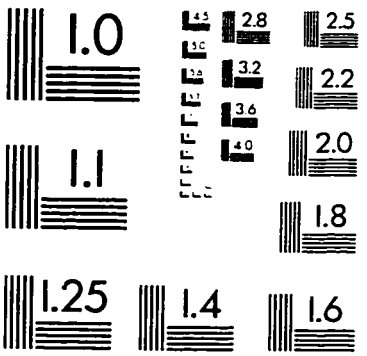

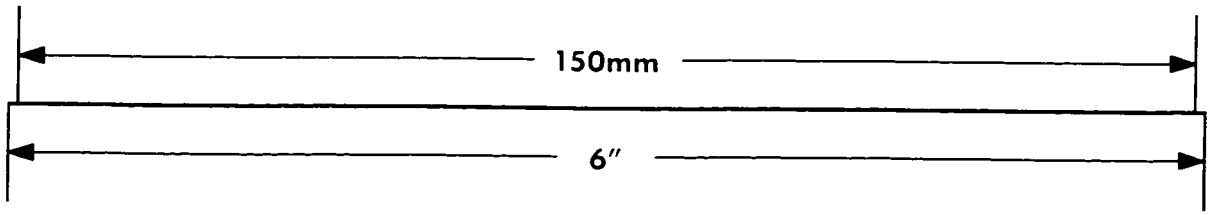

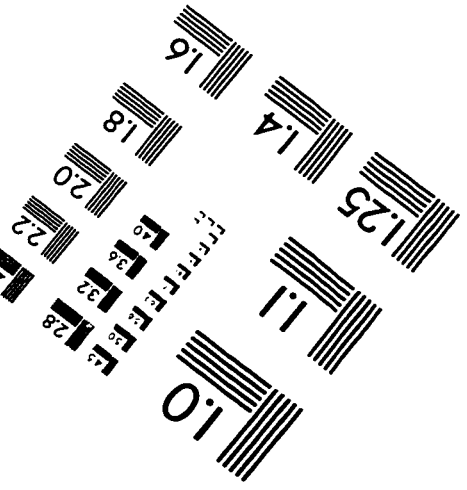

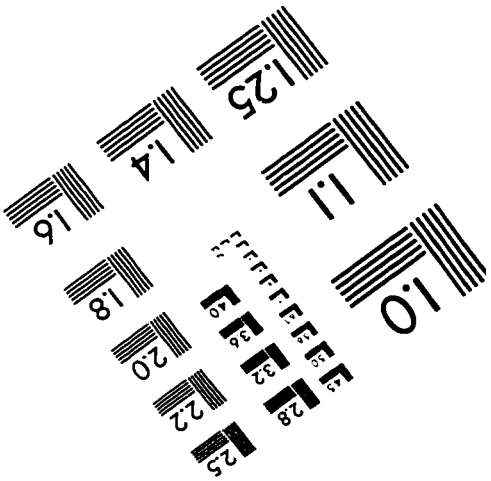

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