

The history of the rise and demise of Women's Liberation is a primer for a study of the fatal weaknesses that infected all the New Left struggles of the 1960s. The collapse of Women's Liberation shortly followed the general collapse of the New Left in the early 1970s. Hindsight makes clear that the fatal flaw of the New Left lay in its inability to recognize the determinative role of class conflict. It was consequently unable to distinguish between class antagonisms within mass movements, a product of the failure to comprehend that revolutionary movements arise and flourish only within revolutionary classes.

Many of the errors of the New Left are perpetuated today, whether it be in the so-called socialist feminist movement or in the so-called anti-imperialist movement. Each such tendency, in its own way, has failed to learn from the recent past. Yet, as women, we must not fall prey to the dictum "history repeats itself," for the massive institutionalized exploitation and oppression of women continues, virtually untouched by all the fulminations of the 1960s, just as American imperialism flourishes with unhampered brutality. Nevertheless, any critique of the New Left must recognize that it was, in itself, a powerfully progressive force in all of its manifestations.

Consequently, we cannot fail to recognize that the Women's Liberation movement resurrected the "woman question" and rebuilt on a world scale a consciousness of the exploitation and oppression of women. For nearly forty years women had been without a voice to articulate the injustice and brutality of women's place. For nearly forty years women had been without an instrumentality to fight against their exploitation and oppression. From the mid 1960s to the early 1970s, Women's Liberation became that new instrumentality. From the United States and Canada to Europe, to national liberation struggles in Africa and Asia, to revolutionary China itself, the reverberations of the movement set in motion a new awareness and new movements for the emancipation of women. Whatever the faults and weaknesses of Women's Liberation in the United States and Canada, it was a historical event of worldwide importance.

Nevertheless, what happened to the Women's Liberation movement in the early 1970s is precisely what happened to each mass movement of the last decade: internal differentiation along class and political lines. In the case of the women's movement, the remnants of Women's Liberation have come to be dominated by a middle class leadership, reducing a vigorous and radical social movement to a politically and ideologically co-opted reformist lobby in the halls of Congress. The problem before us is to understand the course of the class conflict that resulted in the final co-optation and decline of the autonomous women's movement.

*Consciousness Raising: The Beginning*

The autonomous women's movement was a necessity of the time, a product of the political realities of the 1960s, a transitional movement which was a direct product of the male supremacist structure of the New Left and the legitimacy it permitted for the expression of male dominance in everyday life. The New Left was an instrument for the suppression, oppression and exploitation of women. The formation of the autonomous movement was the only reply possible. Women set about organizing women in order to avoid the wrecking tactics of the men and to openly fight against the exploitation and oppression of women. Women would never have been able to do so within the male-dominated New Left. Women clearly recognized that the politics and practice around the "woman question" on the part of student and other left groupings were deformed by their own practice of male supremacy. Women were forced to conclude, on the basis of experience, that only by building a base among women would it be possible to put a correct priority on the question of the emancipation of women, to confront the entire left and force them to a recognition of the centrality of women's emancipation in all revolutionary struggles.

The origin and importance of the small consciousness-raising group is to be found in the basic organizing tool of the autonomous movement: organize around your own oppression. There were many foundations for such a position. First, the major task faced by early organizers was to get women to admit that they in fact were oppressed. The socialization of women includes a vast superstructure of rationalizations for women's secondary status; the superstructure of belief is reinforced through inducing guilt and fear (of not being a "true" woman, etc.) as a response to rebellion against women's traditional role; consequently, women are raised to be very conservative, to cling to the verities of the hearth, to a limited and unquestioning acceptance of things as they are. However, organizers very quickly learned that under the crust of surface submission there had built up in countless women an enormous frustration, anger, bitterness - what Betty Friedan called "an illness without a name." Women's Liberation gave the illness a name, an explanation and a cure. The cure was the small group and the method was what the Chinese Communists call "speaking bitterness." The bitterness, once spoken, was almost overwhelming in its sheer emotional impact.

For many new recruits, consciousness raising was the end-all and be-all of the early movement, a mystical method to self-realization and personal liberation. But for others, especially for left-wing radical women, the original aim of the small group was supposed to have been the path to sisterhood - that unity expressed in empathic identification with the suffering of all women - which would lead from the recognition of one's own oppression to identification with the sisterhood of all women, from sisterhood to radical politics, from radical politics to revolution. Early organizers had correctly understood that women could be organized on a mass scale in

terms of their own subjective oppression and by appealing to the common oppression of all women (irrespective of class). Aiming at radicalizing the constituency of Women's Liberation, early radical organizers talked a great deal about the common source of oppression (hoping to foster the empathic identification that would provide the bridge to cross-class unity). They talked much less about the fact that the common oppression of women has different results in different social classes. The result of the class position, or class identification, of almost all recruits to Women's Liberation was to retranslate "organize around your own oppression" to "organize around your own interests." The step from self understanding to altruistic Identification and cross-class unity never occurred because the real basis for radicalization, common economic exploitation, was absent.

"Organize around your own Oppression" was indeed a Pandora's Box of troubles. Middle class women used this maxim to justify the pursuit of their own class interests: "We are oppressed too," "We must take care of our own problems first." Middle class women also justified ignoring the mass of working class women by asserting that "ending our oppression will end theirs," i.e., the fight against discrimination would equalize the status of all women.

The transformation of the small group from its original political consciousness raising function into a mechanism for social control and group therapy was a result of the predominantly middle class character of Women's Liberation. The fact that there were so few women in Women's Liberation who were directly experiencing material deprivation, threats of genocide or enforced pauperization - that is, so few who were driven by conditions of objective exploitation and deep social oppression - made it almost inevitable that the search for cultural and life-style changes were substituted for revolutionary politics.

What radicals had not taken into account was the fact that middle class and wealthy women do not want to identify with their class inferiors; do not care, by and large, what happens to women who have problems different from their own; greatly dislike being reminded that they are richer, better educated, healthier and have more life chances than most people.

Therefore, behind the outward unity of the Women's Liberation movement of the 1960s, centered as it was around a public ideology based upon feminism, sisterhood and the demand for equal rights, there raged an internal fight between the so-called feminists and politicians. This fight was disguised in many ways, most effectively by personalizing it or by casting it as a battle against "male-identified" or "elitist" women, in which the pejorative "politico" implied both sins summed up by the phrase "anti-woman." All of these pseudo-psychological arguments were

manipulative verbiage which mystified the fact that class politics vs. reform politics, and therefore class conflict for hegemony over the leadership of the movement, were the real stakes of the combat. Certainly, participants at the time often were not consciously aware of the true nature of their struggle, but from the vantage point of hindsight, the true meaning of these struggles is manifestly clear. While in the beginning, roughly from 1967 to 1969, the left was in a relatively powerful position, by 1973 a coalition of the center and right had gained control of the women's movement.

### *The Rise of Class Conflict*

The early and primitive ideology of Women's Liberation stressed psychological oppression and social and occupational discrimination. The politics of psychological oppression swiftly transmuted into the bourgeois feminist ideology of "men as the enemy," for psychological world-views pit individual against individual and mystify the social basis of exploitation. Nevertheless, the politics of psychological oppression and of invoking the injustice of discrimination were aimed at altering the consciousness of women newly recruited to the movement in order to transform personal discontent into political militancy. Women, being in most cases without a political vocabulary, could most easily respond to the articulation of emotion. (This, of course, explains the impassioned, personal nature of the early polemical literature. It was indeed "speaking bitterness.") Furthermore, women of almost any political persuasion or lack of one can easily accept the straightforward demand for social equality. Explaining the necessity for the abolition of social classes, the complexities of capitalism and its necessary evolution into imperialism, etc., a much more formidable task, often elicited more hostility than sympathy. On the other hand, the stress on discrimination and psychological theorizing aimed directly at the liberal core of North American politics. In turn, sex discrimination affects all women, irrespective of race, language or class (but the fact that it does not affect all women in the same way or to the same degree was often absent from discussion).

The primacy of ideologies of oppression and discrimination (and the absence of class analysis exposing exploitation) and the ethic of sisterhood, facilitated the recruitment of large numbers of women from certain strata of the middle class, especially students, professionals, upper-middle class housewives and women from all sections of the academic world.

Given the predominantly apolitical disposition of women in general coupled with their initial fearfulness and lack of political experience, the task of revolutionary political education was an uphill battle from the beginning. The articulation of a class analysis in both Canada and the U.S.,

too often in a style inherited from the competitive and intellectually arrogant student left, frightened women away or left them totally confused and unable to understand what the fuss was all about. In a purely agitational sense, the feminists' anti-male line had the beauty of simplicity and matched the everyday experience of women; the left-wing radicals had the disadvantage of a complex argument that required hard work and study, an "elitist" sin. However, the anti-male line had its difficulties too, rooted in a fundamental contradiction which faces all women. It was impossible to tell women not to resent men, when it was plain in everyday life that the agents of a woman's oppression at home and on the job were men. On the other hand, women were unwilling and unable to actualize anger against sexism into a hatred of men.

Because of this contradiction there existed a predisposition to take a rhetorical anti-male stand (throwing men out of meetings to keep them from being obstructionist, expressing anger and contempt towards men to display defiance and thus give moral support and courage to new women, etc.), overlaying a profound ambiguity regarding what was, or ought to be, the relationship between men and women.

The result was a situation which might be termed dual leadership, made up of the early left activist organizers, the politicians, and the newer level of middle class women, the feminists, the latter seeking, by virtue of their class position, wealth and education, to bring the goals, ideology and style of the movement into line with their politics and class interests. The ethic of sisterhood publicly smoothed over these two opposing conceptions of the enemy, i.e., who and what is going to be abolished To accomplish the liberation of women. Thus, the public ideology of Women's Liberation built unity around certain basic feminist tenets acceptable to the mixed class composition of the mass movement: 1) first priority must be placed on the organization and liberation of women (glossing over differing and contradictory positions on the definition and means to attain liberation); 2) action programs ought to put first priority upon woman-centered issues; 3) socialist revolution would not in itself guarantee the liberation of women.

The class conflict seething under the nominal agreement on the basic tenets of feminism was ideologically expressed in two contradictory lines of analysis corresponding to the dual leadership situation. The feminist line stemmed from the assertion that "men are the principal enemy" and that the primary contradiction is between men and women. The politico line stemmed from the assertion that the male supremacist ruling class is the principal enemy and that the primary contradiction exists between the exploited and exploiting classes, in which women bear the double burden of economic exploitation and social oppression. The leftist line stressed that the object of combat against male-supremacist practices was the unification of the men and

women of the exploited classes against a common class enemy in order to transcend the division and conflict sexism created between them. Women's Liberation was called upon to combat sexism by combating the dependency and subjugation of women that created and perpetuated the exploitation and oppression of women. The position on men was explicit: men in the exploited classes, bribed through their privileged position over women, acted so as to divide the class struggle. The source of divisiveness was not men per se but the practice of male supremacy.

One can immediately see that the leftist analysis, pointing to class and property relations as the source of the oppression of women, was much more difficult to propagandize than the feminist anti-male line. In everyday life what all women confront is the bullying exploitation of men. From the job to the bedroom, men are the enemy, but men are not the same kind of enemy to all women.

### *The Material Basis of Bourgeois Feminism*

For the middle class woman, particularly if she has a career or is planning to have a career, the primary problem is to get men out of the way (i.e. to free women from male dominance maintained by institutionalized discrimination), in order to enjoy, along with the men, the full privileges of middle class status. The system of sexual inequality and institutionalized discrimination, not class exploitation, is the primary source of middle class female protest. Given this fact, it is men, and not the very organization of the social system itself, who stand in the way. Consequently, it is reform of the existing system which is required, and not the abolition of existing property relations, not proletarian revolution - which would sweep away the privileges of the middle class woman.

The fact that the fight against discrimination is essentially a liberal reform program was further mystified by the assertion that the equalization of the status of women would bring about a "revolution" because it would alter the structure of the family and transform human relationships (which were held to be perverted through the existence of male authoritarianism). The left line held that equalization of the status of women is not, nor could it be, the cause of the decomposition of the nuclear family. The organization of the family is a result of the existing economic structure; just as the origin of the contemporary nuclear family is to be found in the rise of capitalism, so it is perpetuated in the interests of monopoly capitalism. Furthermore, equalization of the status of women would be no more likely to introduce an era of beautiful human relationships than did the introduction of Christianity bring obedience to the Golden Rule or the Ten Commandments. The claim that status equalization would bring about a "revolution"

is of the same order as the claim made by the Suffragists that giving women the vote would usher in an era of world peace. Abolishing discrimination would not lead to a "revolution" in the status of women because it would leave the class structure absolutely untouched. Gloria Steinem might build a corporation, a woman might become a general or a corporation vice-president, but the factory girl would remain the factory girl.

The tactical and ideological error of the left in this struggle was to try to win the entire mass movement to their position. The failure to recognize class struggles led to the defeat of the leftist position not only because of the predominant middle class background of the movement, but also because the left had not only to fight the petty bourgeois reformers, but also the anticommunist, cold war ideologies with which almost all North Americans have been so thoroughly infected. Without disciplined organization and a working class base, a left position will always lose in a mass movement, or be reduced to self-defeating opportunism.

### *Sisterhood: Root of Bourgeois Feminism*

The politics of oppression and the politics of discrimination were amalgamated and popularized in the ethic of sisterhood. Sisterhood invoked the common oppression of all women, the common discrimination suffered by all. Sisterhood was the bond, the strength of the women's movement. It was the call to unity and the basis of solidarity against all attacks from the male-dominated left and right, based on the idea that common oppression creates common understanding and common interests upon which all women can unite (transcending class, language and race lines) to bring about a vast movement for social justice - after first abolishing the special privileges enjoyed by all men, naturally.

The ideology of sisterhood came to emphatically deny the importance, even the existence, of class conflict in the women's movement. To raise class issues, to suggest the existence of class conflict, to engage in any form of class struggle was defined as divisive of women, as a plot by men to destroy women (after all, were not Marx and Lenin men?) as weakening the women's struggle, and the perpetrator was proven beyond the shadow of a doubt, to be a traitor to women, male-identified, an agent of the enemy in the sisterhood. Sisterhood was a moral imperative: disagreements were to be minimized, no woman was to be excluded from the movement, all sisters were to love all other sisters, all sisters were to support all other sisters, no sister was to publicly criticize other sisters.

Sisterhood, and the outward unity it provided, also disguised and mystified the internal class contradictions of the women's movement. Specifically, sisterhood temporarily disguised the fact that all women do not have the same interests, needs, desires: working class women and middle class women, student women and professional women, minority women and white women have more conflicting interests than could ever be overcome by their common experience based on sex discrimination. The illusions of sisterhood were possible because Women's Liberation had become in its ideology and politics predominantly a middle class movement. The voices of poor and working class women, of racial and national minority women or even of housewives with children were only infrequently heard. Even when these women were recognized, they were dismissed with a token gesture or an empty promise. When the isolation of the left was complete, almost all internal opposition to bourgeois feminism disappeared.

The collapse of sisterhood was principally a result of the disguised class and political conflict which became acute throughout 1970-71. Under the guise of rejecting "elitism" left-wing women were attacked mercilessly for being "domineering," "oppressive," "elitist," "male-identified," etc. In fact, the early radical leadership was in this way either discredited or driven out of the movement, to be replaced by "non-oppressive," "apolitical," manipulative feminist or "radical feminist" leadership. This was the period of the "trashing." At this time a clearly defined right-wing also emerged, the reactionary "radical feminists" who were, by and large, virulently anti-leftist and anticommunist.

In the end, political debate became almost completely nonexistent in the small group, which was essentially reduced to being a source of social and psychological support. Rivalries, disputes and feuds often grew up between small groups in the same city (each doubtless accusing the other of being "elitist"), frequently having the effect (along with the major programmatic and ideological divisions between feminists and politicians) of making even the minimal workings of a women's center impossible.

### *Reactionary Feminism*

The bourgeois feminist line, "men are the enemy," branches into two ideologies, liberal feminism and reactionary (or "radical") feminism. The first, liberal feminism, does not openly admit that its ideology is a variant on "men are the enemy" but disguises that assumption behind a liberal facade that men are "misguided" and through education and persuasion (legal if need be) can be brought around to accepting the equalization of the status of women. Since the questions of the



origins of injustice and the roots of social power are never very strong in any liberal ideology, there is little besides legislative reforms and education to fall back on.

Reactionary feminism, on the other hand, openly asserted as its fundamental tenet that all men are the enemies of all women and, in its most extreme forms, called for the subjugation of all men to some form of matriarchy (and sometimes for the extermination of all men). It offered a utopia composed of police states and extermination camps, even though reactionary feminists very rarely followed through to the logical outcome of their position.

Reactionary feminism was not an ideology of revolution (the likelihood of victory seeming remote even to its advocates) but an ideology of vengeance. It was also a profound statement of despair that saw the cruelty and ugliness of present relationships between men and women as immutable, inescapable. Reactionary feminism may have been politically confused, and it was certainly politically destructive, but it powerfully expressed the experience and feeling of a whole segment of the female population.

The root of reactionary feminism was in the sexual exploitation of women. Its strength lay in the fact that it did express and appeal to psychological oppression, for this oppression is far worse than the conditions of economic exploitation experienced by petty bourgeois women. In the last analysis reactionary feminism was a product of male supremacy, and its corollary, sexual exploitation. Male supremacy, itself reactionary, breeds reaction.

With the virtual expulsion of the left leadership the "radical feminists" assumed leadership over the portion of the movement not yet co-opted into the reformist wing. The excesses of the right: man-hating, reactionary separatism, lesbian vanguardism, virulent anti-communist, opposition to all peoples' revolutionary struggles (including Vietnam), served to discredit Women's Liberation and to make public the split in the movement between the reformists and the radical feminists. Of the expulsion of the left, no mention was made, keeping up the masquerade as an "anti-elitist campaign." The triumph of the right resulted in the disintegration of the Women's Liberation movement. In the shambles to which the movement had reduced itself, left and right opportunists were swift to seize the opportunity to take control. The leftists watched the predictable occur with despair while the reactionary, so-called "radical" feminists, with their shriek of "elitism" still issuing from their mouths, found the movement they had sought to control snatched out of their hands.

*The Failure of Program*

Women's Liberation never produced a coherent program. Programmatic development requires theoretical development, and Women's Liberation was incapable, on the basis of its class contradictions alone, of generating a coherent political analysis. What program and agitation existed clearly reflected the class nature of the movement. The wide variety of national and local single-issue programs undertaken by isolated women's groups reflected the overriding problems of younger, middle class women: the need for legal abortion (rather than a demand for universal health and nutritional care, including abortion and birth control services, which working class and poor women desperately need); demands for cooperative, "parent controlled" day-care centers (rather than universal day-care with compensatory educational programs which the majority of working class parents and children need); the creation of women's centers to provide young women with a "place of their own" in which to socialize, to work for abortion on demand or to secure illegal abortions (rather than creating organizational" centers capable of organizing with working class women for struggles on the job or in the community).

The cold truth of the matter is that the women's centers often differed very little from the standby of the suburban housewife community work, complete with good deeds, exciting activities, lively gossip and truly thrilling exercises in intrigue and character assassination. Within these centers working class women often wandered about in a state of frustration and confusion. They knew something was very wrong, but they did not know what.

Given the almost exclusive attention to sexual exploitation and the consequent psychological oppression, the focus was not upon male supremacy as part of class exploitation, but upon its result, the practice of male chauvinism; not upon the need for revolutionary social and economic changes, but upon individualized struggles between men and women around the oppressive attitudes and objective sexual and social privileges of men. Furthermore, emphasis upon male chauvinism had the effect of privatizing the contradiction between men and women, transmuting the conflict into problems of personal relationships, rather than politicizing the conflict as part of the overall capitalist system of economic and class exploitation.

The internal failures of the movement may be summed up in a brief series of criticisms. Mass movements contain within them class contradictions; women were far too slow to recognize class struggle for what it was within the movement. Furthermore, lack of a correct theoretical analysis led to the left's inability to generate correct programs to guide internal class struggle. The movement was thus reduced to single-issue mass campaigns which had to coalesce around the lowest common denominator, reform. Leadership thus passed to liberal reformers or left opportunists who opposed straightforward class conflict or open recognition of the inevitability

of such conflict. The movement isolated itself, for these and other reasons, from the concrete struggles of working class women, in the home and in the factory, who make up the majority of oppressed and exploited women. The final and perhaps the most important lesson to be learned is that a movement without coherent politics, organization and discipline cannot be a fighting organization.

In short, Women's Liberation, for all its rhetoric and all its pretensions, for all its brave start, has outwardly become what it really was (indeed, what it had to be): an anti-working class, anticommunist, petty bourgeois reform movement.

### *Socialist Feminism*

The last gasp of Women's Liberation continues today as a loose collection of small local organizations committed in varying degrees to autonomous socialist feminist organizing. The constituency is almost exclusively from the white petty bourgeoisie as indicated by attendance at the National Conference on Socialist Feminism (held in 1975). Reports of the 1975 conference suggest that the socialist feminist constituency is very mixed in political orientation.

There is without doubt a significant proportion of women who are biding their time with socialist feminism in reaction to the regressive positions of most new Marxist-Leninist formations (whose morality is Victorian and whose understanding of the so-called "woman question" is hardly equal to Bebel's statement written in 1879). There is reason to believe, however, that its stable constituency is made up of white radical feminists who are conscious social democrats and who represent one continuation of the radical petty bourgeois politics of the early days of Women's Liberation. Whatever the precise class composition of socialist feminism might be, its leading tendency is clearly a cross between radical feminism and social democracy. This peculiar amalgamation underlies the first three "principles of unity" drawn up by the conference organizers:

1. We recognize the need for and support the existence of the autonomous women's movement throughout the revolutionary process.
2. We agree that all oppression, whether based on race, class, sex, or lesbianism, is interrelated and the fights for liberation from oppression must be simultaneous and cooperative.
3. We agree that Socialist Feminism is a strategy for revolution.

(1) It is not surprising that these "principles of unity" produced very little unity and a great deal of confusion and contention, also very reminiscent of the confused and contradictory organizing conferences of Women's Liberation. Nevertheless, the "principles of unity" exhibit very clearly the petty bourgeois class character of Women's Liberation perpetuated under the guise of socialist feminism. For example, in principle no.

2 we note that "all oppression, whether based on race, class, sex or lesbianism, is interrelated" without any indication of how they are interrelated. Throughout, oppression is used, but not exploitation. Oppression is a psychological term, while exploitation is an economic term that refers to class relations. Class is used as a category in itself, as are race, sex and lesbianism. There is no recognition that race and sex discrimination are products of class exploitation. We must assume that tacking on "lesbianism" is a result of an opportunist attempt to appeal to radical lesbians, for surely homosexuality is subsumed under sexual discrimination.

Hostility toward recognizing the determinative role of class, also inherited from Women's Liberation, is demonstrated in a report of the conference written by a member of the Berkeley-Oakland Women's Union:

*There was much said in panels and in workshops on the question of race, class, lesbianism, etc., but there was no agreed-upon framework in which to place these discussions. Nor was there any apparent reason to attempt to resolve differences, as we were making no commitment to work or struggle together beyond the conference... Members of the Marxist-Leninist caucus often stated that class was the primary contradiction. They also often remarked that the women's movement was a "middle class" movement. Many of the working women at the conference expressed a personal disgust at this sloppiness of terminology, as well as the way it discounted their own position in the work force... (2)*

The "disgust" was displayed by those women who were sympathetic to the position put forward by Barbara Ehrenreich:

*Let's start by being very honest about class. About ninety per cent of the American people are "working class": in the sense that they sell their labor for wages, or are dependent on others who do... Now' what does that tell us? . . It tells us, for political purposes, a class is not defined strictly by gross economic relationships. For political purposes, a class is defined by its consciousness of itself as a class that exists in opposition to another class or classes. (3)*

The Ehrenreich position resolves the problem of "sloppy terminology" by liquidating the middle class (or new petty bourgeoisie) into a vast, undifferentiated mass (90% of the population)

defined by class consciousness-for-itself. Since no such class or class consciousness presently exists in the United States, class is effectively made non-existent. It therefore follows that women can be united around their common "oppression" and become a "class defined by its consciousness of itself as a class that exists in opposition to another class or classes," and we are right back to the unity of sisterhood propounded by Women's Liberation. Is it any wonder that 'the conference was also plagued with the homogeneity contradiction (sic), most of the women there being white and under thirty-five years old...' (4) Dismissing the determinative role of social class as a "gross economic relationship" and substituting a psychological definition without a material basis perpetuates the Women's Liberation tactic of "organizing around your own oppression," exemplified by the retention of the slogan, "the personal is political." The rejection of Marxism as 'an "agreed-upon framework" thereby continues to justify the hegemony of white middle class (petty bourgeois) women in Women's Liberation-by-another-name: socialist feminism.

The real unity of the socialist feminist tendency is stated in the first principle asserting the necessity of an autonomous women's movement. In clinging to this belief, socialist feminism would condemn women to continued isolation and segregation. The formation of the autonomous movement in the mid-1960s reflected the constraints that pervasive and entrenched left-wing male sexism put upon any attempt to organize women as a significant part of the New Left. In organizing the autonomous movement, women had demonstrated their ability to organize a vigorous mass movement. Yet, the male-dominated left's actual response was to isolate and ghettoize the women's movement even within the petty bourgeois left. Women's Liberation fell into the trap by characterizing political struggles as "male-dominated," or Marxism as "penis politics," reducing Women's Liberation to dead-end reformist programs around "women's issues": abortion, day-care, women's studies programs, women's health clinics and so forth. The reduction of the autonomous movement to a trivialized, isolated and limited series of local reformist struggles was the legacy of retaining a separate women's movement.

Once the "woman question" had been put on the New Left agenda, conditions were created that potentially could have enabled women to carry the fight against sexism directly into the left. By and large, this did not happen. The autonomous movement, by isolating women, did not allow a serious political campaign against sexism to be carried out between men and women as an organizational struggle. The continued political segregation of women limited opposing sexism to opposing sexism in one's lover or husband; Consequently, the autonomous movement failed in its mission of defeating left-wing sexism, as the regressive lines of much of the new communist movement make quite clear. The prolonged existence of the autonomous movement, with its

penchant for psychological theorizing, made it difficult to see that the defeat of sexism and racism in the left was an organizational, not attitudinal, problem. The solution to the prevalence of both sexism and racism must be found in the process of party formation itself. The very structure of a revolutionary party must provide an organizational basis upon which equality between comrades can be developed and enforced,

The rejection of Marxism, the rejection of the determinative role of the relations of production, also serves to mystify precisely what sexism is - a class relationship between the sexes, just as racism is a class relation between races. This was the insight provided by Engels so long ago, when he wrote that the relationship between man and wife was as the bourgeoisie to the proletariat. It is not that men and women, black people and white people, each make up a class (although at one time that was asserted in Women's Liberation) but rather that the social relations existing between them irrespective of actual class membership have the character of class relations, being, as they are, the product of class relations. Thus, sexism and racism have a class identity: each demands relations of inequality, subordination, and the assumed inferiority of one group of humanity to another.

The refusal to recognize the determinative role of class relations in Women's Liberation and in its offspring, socialist feminism, must result in reducing talk of "revolutionary process" and "socialist feminism is a strategy for revolution" to radical cant. These phrases can have no content, no real referent, without a unified theoretical understanding of the origins of exploitation and the material roots of psychological oppression. Socialist feminism is, in the final analysis, nothing more than a continuation of Women's Liberation past its time.

### *New Directions*

The entire period of the 1960s in North America was crippled by the cold war repression of the 1960s and 1950s which had left two generations almost completely bereft of any knowledge, theoretical or historical, of North American class struggle and North American socialism. Over twenty years of anti-Marxist, anti-Soviet propaganda (which began in the elementary school and continued through graduate education) guaranteed that the majority of North American youth was anticommunist, anti-socialist, anti-Marxist. U.S. imperialism and its Canadian branch plant protected the masses of the people from severe material deprivation and served to validate the ideologies of "America, the apex of democratic, free enterprise" on both sides of the border. Indeed, it was one of the contradictions of imperialism, the brutal exploitation of black and native people throughout the continent and of Quebecois in Canada, which began the revival of a

moribund left and signaled the sharpening of the contradictions and class struggle which marks the 1970s.

Isolation from revolutionary theory and practice left the movement, specifically the New Left, the peace movement and Women's Liberation, without the theoretical tools (and most particularly without any understanding of dialectical analysis) so necessary to guide practice in the long run. As a result, practice was typically pragmatic and sporadic, marked by few victories and many defeats, exhausting and disillusioning people. Isolation from revolutionary classes, combined with theoretical and historical ignorance, meant that people often did not have any adequate analysis. As a result, people were tactically, not strategically oriented. Furthermore, they were populist and reformist by default, through ignorance and programmed anti-communist. Great numbers of militants responded with confusion and despair as effort after effort collapsed or was defeated outright or, even more frustrating, was co-opted into irrelevant reform. Without any knowledge or sense of the dialectics of history, without a correct understanding of capitalism and imperialism, with no way to evaluate or understand the course of class struggle, the radicalism of the 1960s found itself bankrupted in a few short years. Thus, we can clearly see that Women's Liberation was not unique, but that the fate of the Women's Liberation movement followed the general pattern for the New Left of the 1960s.

Many of us, after more than ten long years of experience in a series of movements, and especially the Women's Liberation movement, have become Marxist-Leninists - not because we read books, but because we fought and lost too many battles, then read the books. In short, we must begin again. This time, however, we are far better armed, in terms of ideology and practice, not to repeat the mistakes of the past, not to compromise with counterrevolutionary racism and sexism, not to be sucked into petty bourgeois class collaborationism, not to fail in our struggle to build an organization, a fighting organization for the liberation of our sisters, our brothers, ourselves.