

7. Our friends and ourselves: the hidden foundations of various pseudo-feminist accounts*

I. Neo-sexism or masculine feminism

We have some good friends among men. We flee them like the plague, and they try to force our interests. Who could fail to recognize in this the marks of true friendship!

All these friends, all these masculine partisans of women's liberation, have a number of things in common:

- 1 they want to substitute themselves for us;
- 2 they actually speak instead of us;
- 3 they approve of women's liberation, and even of the participation of women in this project, so long as liberation and women follow and certainly do not precede them;
- 4 they want to impose on us their conception of women's liberation, which includes the participation of men, and they want to impose their participation so as to control the movement and its direction: the direction of women's liberation.

So well meaning are our masculine friends that they cannot help bending their ears to us from time to time. They understand what the women's liberation movement is about to the extent that, because it is only open to women, they can say 'Of course the oppressed must liberate themselves', and in so doing they distinguish themselves from, and show themselves to be superior to, the vast majority of men, who do not understand, and whom they can virtuously repudiate. They thus show an 'open' attitude. They try to understand because they are keen political brains, the type who can tell which way the wind is blowing before anyone else. But it is precisely their duty as keen political brains to produce keen political analyses, and this inevitably leads them to spot here and there points which have been neglected by women (who remain, don't forget, the principal agents of their own liberation). And, having located these points, it would be dishonest, nay unfriendly, of these keen brains not to point out to us the factors we have neglected. And point them out they do, kindly but firmly.

But where do these men get their clear views, not only of what feminism ought to be, but of what it *is in essence* – an essence of which the existing movement is nothing but a chance incarnation in

their eyes: nothing but a reflection and, according to them, a very approximate, if not frankly unsatisfactory, imitation of what it could and should be?

The fact that they do not participate in the actual movement, that they do not follow the discussions and contradictory debates which take place within it – in a word, the fact that they are not the individuals directly and primarily involved – does not seem to be an obstacle to them. Indeed they think that their opinions are not only just as valuable as those of the thousands of women who have been considering these various problems for years, but rather that they are *more* valuable. These men seem to conceive of their inevitable non-involvement, their status as observers, not as a handicap, but, on the contrary, as an advantage. However this (generally implicit) idea quite obviously goes against their own political principles and against those which they accept in accepting the women's liberation movement.

So why is there this flagrant contradiction? First, because our friends do not believe that women are oppressed in the same way as other groups. They would not dare 'advise' the Blacks, the people of the Third World, or the Palestinians on how to lead their struggle against us, i.e. against western whites – still less to 'rectify' their 'errors'. They would not dare imply of these oppressed people what they constantly imply of women: that we are partial, 'both prosecutor and judge', whereas *they* are impartial and will only appraise. In a word, they do not really believe that *they* oppress us.

Second, and related to this, the 'friendship' of friends is *paternalism*: a benevolence which necessarily involves a good measure of scorn. Indeed, a benevolence which can only be explained by scorn. They meddle in our affairs because they think we are incapable of dealing with them.

But this is not all: the truth – another truth – is that they who are first in everything cannot resign themselves to not being first here too. Yet obviously they cannot be first here. Their benevolence is nothing but an attempt to secure a place, an attempt not to be left out. There is certainly an objective and a major reason for their attempt to control the direction of the women's movement, which is the fear that things will go against them. But there is also a tendency, imprinted in them since birth, which has become second nature, and which is stronger than they are. And that is that any place must be *their* place, and that their place is *in front*.

This was seen in a spatial way at the first large women's demonstration in France in November 1971 for free abortion. If a third of the men were at the back as arranged, the other two-thirds were at the front, hiding the women and behaving as if this were a normal demo; that is, a men's demo. No exhortation could persuade them to move, if not to the back, then at least into the ranks. They knew it was a women's demonstration, but their conditioning went against the practical consequences of this fact. They had to be there, as usual, in the front line of what was happening, even at the risk of harming the political objective they were supporting.

So what is the difference between these friends and our declared enemies, those who drag us in the mud and cover us with ridicule? It is a difference of means and not of ends: a matter of tactics and not of strategy. Our enemies attack from the front and frankly (honestly?) acknowledge their objective: to stay in their place (and thus to keep us in ours). Our friends, however, have chosen to keep their place in a more subtle, but also a more thorough way. Our enemies are excluded at least from the feminist ranks, which matters little to them since they still have the rest of society; but our friends envisage nothing less than *maintaining their power even within the small bastion of resistance to that power*.

One such friend is Claude Alzon, Professor of Sociology at the University of Vincennes and self-proclaimed feminist. In recent years he has written a number of leading articles in *Le Monde* on

women's liberation. Various activists in the WLM asked to be allowed to write similar articles but without success. Alzon has never written a single article in *Le Monde* on any other subject; and he was given space only because he was talking about women. He would not have been able to publish on this subject ten years ago. It was the emergence of the WLM and the demand for speech *by* women which created a demand for speech *about* them. But male power not only dissociates these two exigencies, it in fact uses one against the other. It is not enough to refuse to allow women to speak; it is necessary, the better to re-establish order, to have men speak about women. Alzon speaks *doubly in our place*: he speaks about women, indeed about our liberation; and he speaks about it in places which would not have existed but for the WLM, but from which women are excluded. Our friends can give voice thanks to us, and, to make matters worse, they do so by withholding it from us. While writers like Alzon, and film makers anxious to make a name and a career, jump with both feet and open arms into the new domain of women, editors and television producers anxiously await something even better than women's silence: men talking.

The friends of women's liberation have many a time revealed that their understanding stops short at the point where our real liberation begins. How else, in the circumstances, could they claim to be our allies without some forfeit?

They do not claim to be our allies for long, anyway. It is not hard to see that the benevolence they display, and which they claim distinguishes them from other men, simply disguises the same contempt as is shown by the hostility of the majority. They soon abandon the carrot for the stick: 'Take care', they say, 'not to alienate those men who *are* well-disposed towards you.' But why should we be careful not to alienate men? Haven't they agreed woman's liberation depends upon women? Their warning reveals that our friends, who claim to believe we are the agents of our own revolution, are merely mouthing our words as a tactic. They do not believe a word of it. They think that the 'support' of a minority of men is more important for women's liberation than raising the consciousness of the majority of women.

We hope that the support of some men – or rather, of some individuals who have *abandoned* the privileges of their position as men in so far as they can, since if they keep them they will still be enemies – will be useful from time to time. But to say that the support of class enemies is always useful is going a bit far, and to suggest that it is determinant, that it is an indispensable condition for the success of a revolution, is both historically untrue and politically inept.

It is therefore perhaps not surprising to find Alzon continuing his confusion to its logical end and maintaining that 'the opposition is not between men and women, but between feminists and anti-feminists'. Class position and the way of thinking about it – the materialism which he claims as a marxist – are here completely absent. He suggests that all that is needed is a bit of good will, and *pow!*, we can thumb our noses at the social (sex class) structure.

I am always amused to hear 'marxists' assert that it is all a question of values; or, going further, that it is all a question of declarations of good intent. I am amused to hear them say that revolutionary struggles are not conflicts between concrete groups with opposed concrete interests, but rather, as (scholarly as well as popular) idealist philosophy has been telling us repeatedly for two thousand years, that conflicts arise between groups supporting different ideas, and that the fact that one group benefits from and another *suffers* an oppression is not the point at issue! On those occasions when our friends do suggest that which side you are on actually does make a difference, they are referring not to the reality of oppression (which is, after all, the reason for wanting a revolution) but rather to the values you hold; whether you are sexist or racist. And then, lo and behold, it appears that feminists

stand accused of sexism because they refuse to allow men into the WLM.

Racism, sexism, non-mixed organizations and heterosexual couples

Turning the accusation of sexism or racism back onto the victim is a classic defensive reaction, and a classic reactionary defence. We are, of course, quite used to seeing *women* accused of sexism by people who do not even know the meaning of the word, but such people at least have the excuse of not claiming to be ‘revolutionaries’, still less ‘feminists’ or friends. To accuse women of ‘inverse sexism’ (or Blacks of counterracism) is not only unfriendly, it is reactionary, because it posits a symmetry between oppressor and oppressed. To decry or exclude those who oppress you is not symmetrical with decrying or excluding those whom you oppress. It is therefore incredible that anyone who claims to be up to date with Black or feminist struggles, let alone a friend or a ‘specialist’ in the area, should demonstrate such ignorance.

The ‘concept’ of ‘counter-racism’ has long been shown for what it is: an attempt to intimidate and to prevent an oppressed group organizing on its own behalf. This demystification was the work of the Black Power movement in the USA, which began in 1965 with the *exclusion of whites* from the ‘civil rights’ organizations. This revolution ended fifty years of reformism on the racial problem – fifty years of white paternalism.

The functioning of the liberal race relations groups was based on a denial of reality, on a constant pretence. They pretended that the situation in which the whites were oppressors and the Blacks oppressed had no influence on the functioning of the civil rights groups: neither on their politics, nor on the power structure within the groups. They proceeded as if the intrinsic inequality which characterizes relationships between Blacks and whites was annulled as soon as they entered the organizations’ headquarters. Liberals denied that the whites brought with them superior political resources – their better knowledge of, and access to, the power structure – and that they had what, for want of a better word, can be called superior ‘psychological’ resources. Since one cannot struggle against something one is unaware of, something whose existence is denied, these factors played fully and without check within the groups, with the inevitable result that the whites occupied privileged positions even within the organizations dedicated to ‘improving the lot of the Blacks’. But the white presence had even more fundamental consequences than their occupying every dominant position in the hierarchy of the group itself. It affected even more important areas. It affected the definition of the objectives of the movement, which is linked to the definition of the struggle – i.e. it affected the definition of the oppression against which the movement was supposed to be fighting.

1 Blacks could not recognize their own oppression in the presence of whites. They could not denounce the dominant position of the whites in the group itself, even if they recognized it, since the dogma (the official representation of the group’s functioning on which the existence of the group as a mixed group depended) denied from the start the possibility of the whites being dominant in the group.

2 In addition, whether or not the whites in a group individually had dominant positions, their presence reinforced the tendency to adopt the dominant definition (that is, the *white definition*) of what the Blacks were ‘suffering’. This definition by the oppressor of the nature of the oppression, which was general in the society outside and therefore internalized by Blacks and whites alike, was personified by the white members of the group. They expressed it sincerely, and it was therefore all the more difficult for the Blacks to begin to oppose it with their own definition of what they suffered.

Their own definition could not really exist so long as the whites' definition was the official one. The opinion of the whites within the group was therefore sustained both by the wider culture in which the Blacks also participated, and by the whites' own individual prestige.

3 Not only did the whites' prestige prevent the Blacks finding their own definition of their oppression, but the presence of the whites also prevented the Blacks fighting the prestige which whites had in Black eyes. Blacks could not be with whites without seeing them in a positive way: they could not *not* admire them and not want to be like them, since this is one of the manifestations of their oppression and one of the means by which it is maintained. Being in the presence of whites meant accepting a positive image of whiteness and accepting what underlay this, the condition necessary for this positive image: a negative image of blackness. This negative image of blackness thus not only existed, it was also sustained and at work inside what was supposed to be a struggle for Black liberation.

It was no chance then that the exclusion of whites from the anti-racist struggle coincided both with the 'Afro' fashion – which is much more than a fashion, or even than a therapy – and with the slogan 'Black is beautiful'. Being non-mixed was the logical and historical condition for the struggle against self-hatred, which was why the new feminist movement adopted a similar practice. The concrete facts – the concrete history of the struggle of both Blacks and women – like the logical implications of the proposition that the liberation of the oppressed is mainly, if not solely, the work of the oppressed, leads to the same conclusion: oppressors cannot play the same role in the liberation struggle as the oppressed.

Our friends, however, do not see this. They usually attribute the non-mixed character of women's groups to the 'after effects' of the 'trauma' that 'male authoritarianism' has produced in women, and treat it as a passing phenomenon. They thereby demonstrate their total and general incomprehension of the processes of liberation, and not just of the liberation of women. For they reveal a view of liberation struggles which is both static and idealist.

It is static in that they see the oppression women suffer as already known and accepted. However the major obstacle to struggling against an oppression is not feeling oppressed. Hence the first moment of revolt for women consists not in joining the battle for change, but rather in discovering themselves to be oppressed. It involves discovering that oppression actually exists, and discovering its *extent*; and then slowly looking further, searching here and there, getting deeper and deeper.

The feminist struggle consists as much in discovering unknown oppressions, in seeing oppression in an area where it was not recognized before, as in struggling against known oppressions. This is not obvious. It is necessary to have lived this dynamic to understand it, to realize how far a representation of liberation as a single battle is false. This static view of liberation implies that a map of women's oppression already exists, with the bearings marked and the contours clearly delineated. There is thus no concern other than to advance across the map to win victories. But, on the contrary, liberation consists precisely in filling in the map, because the more you advance the more you realize how hazy and distant are the outlines of the territory. This process and our progress is not just horizontal and territorial, for each new territory annexed to the problematic of oppression is additionally and inextricably a new dimension, in the sense of meaning added to, and thus transforming the very definition of what we are fighting against. To suggest that the non-oppressed (or rather the oppressors) can participate equally with the oppressed in exploring the nature of the oppressed's suffering is absurd.

Our friends' view of women's liberation is also idealist because they seem to see achieving our

freedom as merely a process of overcoming a number of purely psychological or ideological obstacles – using these terms as opposed to ‘objective’ obstacles, as epiphenomenal is opposed to structural, and, in the end, as ‘imaginary’ is opposed to ‘real’. Consequently they see the oppression women experience as relatively easily cured, since, like all subjective factors, they see it as changeable. Once the weights which have been put on women are lifted and our trauma has been cured by a period of rest (for this is how they see and justify non-mixedness – as the half-time when the players dress their wounds), we shall be able to start fighting our known oppression side by side with men.

Alongside the view that the oppression suffered by women and exercised by men is psychological is a view that it is interpersonal. Some of our friends suggest that the only obstacle to men’s participation in women’s liberation is the authoritarianism men exercise, which, they claim, can be lifted with men’s goodwill. They suggest that oppression can be avoided in individual interactions between men and women, and in heterosexual relationships; and as evidence they often claim to have avoided it in their own interpersonal relationships.

They thus affirm, like the man in the street, and the typical oppressor, that ‘sexism’, the ideological expression of institutionalized oppression, the surface aspects of patriarchy, constitutes *all* the oppression there is. They deny the existence of the institutional *structures* which *cause* ‘sexism’, and they deny that the psychological structure which relays the institutional structure via the production of ‘prejudices’ and the said ‘sexism’, and which, like them, is its creation, is as concrete and objective and as external to individual action as the institutional structure.

Authoritarianism is not, however, a psychological trait which we merely need to become aware of to be able to get rid of it. As a concrete psychological trait, it cannot be ‘abolished’ by an act of pure will, any more than a bridge can be leapt simply by wishing. And even if this trait could be suppressed (obviously by other means than simply volition) its suppression would not abolish what caused it in the first place and what continually reinforces it. What is really in question, and what should make us doubt whether the means to suppress the psychological trait actually exist, is the real (i.e. the institutionally and materially established) authority which men possess – without having to want it and whether or not they are ‘authoritarian’.

This material base on which the ‘psychological constitution’ of individuals grows, and which reinforces and is reinforced by it, brings us back to the social structure. This constrains everybody. It is both external to interpersonal relations and is the framework in which these are set. Whatever my ‘opinions’ or ‘attitudes’, whether or not I hold racist beliefs, I profit from the oppression of immigrant workers. Their exploitation is one of the conditions of my material existence. Whether I am a ‘revolutionary’ or not does not alter the matter: I live as I live because, among other reasons, Africans are exploited in France and the West exploits the Third World. It is not a question of moral subtleties, nor a matter of whether I feel guilty or not. I have contributed nothing towards this exploitation individually, and it is not as an individual that I profit from it, but as a member of a group which I did not choose. However I personally treat immigrants when I meet them, and whatever my subjective reactions to their exploitation, it exists. To the extent that I am exempt from a type of exploitation, I benefit from it, willy nilly, and in two ways. First, because their exploitation increases my income (perhaps in a minimal way in so far as this benefit is in turn taken back from me by others who exploit *me*); and second, and principally, because when others do certain work, I do not do it. Without even mentioning positive benefits, I profit from the exploitation of others simply to the extent to which I am exempt from it.

In the same way, all the efforts a man may make to treat his wife as well as possible, and I am prepared to be optimistic about this, will neither hide nor abolish nor even mitigate the fact that he owes his material situation (and here, to simplify, let us speak only of his occupational situation) to the discrimination which women – the group to which his wife belongs – suffer in the employment market. We cannot separate the situation which men – and hence this particular man – occupy, from the situation which women – and hence this particular woman – occupy in the market.

The interpersonal relationship of a man and a woman is not an island, contrary to what our friends would have us believe. Even if a husband and wife or two lovers do not work together, their respective situations in the labour market, as members of differently treated groups in this market, are part of their overall situation – and therefore of their relationship, even though the latter appears to have nothing to do with labour or the market. The involuntary benefits the man in a couple derives from his group membership on the ‘occupational’ scene, are not absent from the loving, relational, conjugal scene, whatever you call it. They are part of the objective resources which he brings to it, whether he wants to or not, simply in bringing his person. The non-benefits of the woman in the couple are also part of what she does, or does not, bring into the relationship. An individual man does not need to lift a finger to have an advantage over women in the labour market; but nor can he help being so advantaged, nor can he renounce this advantage. In the same way, he may not necessarily take active advantage of his institutional privileges in marriage, but he still has them.

Even accepting that a man may not seek to take full advantage of his benefits at all levels, and of the disadvantages at all levels of the woman he has in front of him; and accepting that he wants to set the relationship up as egalitarian, what does this mean? At most that he does not pursue his advantage voluntarily, that is to say, that he does not voluntarily use his *initial advantage* to obtain *others*. But he cannot renounce this initial advantage because he cannot suppress it single-handedly. He cannot destroy what is not of his making. And for the same reason he cannot suppress the institutional disadvantages of ‘his’ woman.

Benefits and advantages tied to group membership (to one’s ‘sex’) do not play their most important role in one’s heterosexual relationships directly. Rather they are factors which make the more immediate power relationships possible, because there is, institutionally, no symmetry between the ‘partners’ in any conjugal or paraconjugal relationship (and every ‘love relationship’ between a man and a woman comes into this category). The directly economic constraints and the general social constraints in such an association are infinitely stronger for women than for men, and the penalties attached to refusing such relationships are infinitely worse for them. Thus the association of a woman with a man does not have the same objective meaning for him as it has for her, which reflects the ideological norm that marriage and ‘human relations’ are women’s affair, and that they are a ‘real woman’s’ major preoccupation; which in turn reflects the different subjectivities of men and women (the importance of love and the emotions in general in women’s consciousness). Arguably discrimination in the labour market exists only to turn and return women to marriage, precisely in so far as marriage constitutes their objectively most profitable, or least bad, ‘career’ (ideologically: their ‘destiny’, their ‘whole existence’).

This asymmetry manifests itself on the occasion of *a* marriage, within a given union, because of the interpersonal tensions which then emerge, but it is not caused by this union. The asymmetry pre-exists the union: it is the reason for its unequal and eventually conflictual *form*. But above all it is the reason for the very existence of the union: for ‘heterosexuality’ in Adrienne Rich’s usage.

In short, not only is it not necessary for a man to be a voluntary oppressor for a woman to be

oppressed in heterosexual relationships, but the general oppression which precedes any particular relationship itself determines the very existence of the relationship. The particular individual man does not play a personal role in this general oppression, which occurs before his appearance on the scene: but, reciprocally, no personal initiative on his part can undo or mitigate what exists before and outside his entrance.

Only a view of human relationships which involves splitting individuals from society, which considers them as two distinct, albeit linked, orders, which sees a split between what goes on inside and outside people's heads, and inside and outside particular relationships, and between the 'political' and the 'personal', could postulate that interpersonal relationships are a matter of choice and 'emotions'. Only such a view could suggest that any of these choices and emotions are asocial in nature, and that they are not all affected by social determinants. Only such a view, which is idealist or indeed naturalist, could produce the belief that asocial islets of egalitarian personal relations can exist inside an oppressive structure.

It is not surprising that we frequently come across such idealist and individualistic arguments, since these are the dominant ideologies of our society. Idealism impregnates our whole lives and all our most everyday concepts.

What *is* surprising is that many of our male friends who produce them are left intellectuals – self-styled marxists and materialists – yet they use idealist arguments about women's oppression. Why should they abandon materialism there?

Perhaps it is because they cannot participate in the production of new materialist explanations – not being part of the political movement which is fighting for women's liberation, and not occupying that social position which has an objective interest in unmasking the ideology, i.e. not being victims of the oppression. On the other hand, this does not explain why they do not adopt the points of view produced *by* the victims. Perhaps we need to resort to a more cynical explanation for our friends' abandonment of materialism; to look to the fact that, under the circumstances, materialist thought is in contradiction with their objective class interests, and to recognize that it certainly serves men's interests to apply ideological thought to women.

It then becomes interesting to note the ways in which these objective interests are translated: the various ways in which our friends think about women, and what this reveals (betrays) about their attachment to their own class interests, since what they say and do often contradicts (betrays) their avowed political purpose. Time and time again they affirm support for the *women's* movement, yet they do not support *all* women, and indeed they seek to divide women against each other.

I shall look again at the work of Alzon for examples of this, and particularly at the article he was asked to write by the radical publishers Maspero for their journal *Partisans*, and which they subsequently published as a short book entitled *The Ornamental Woman and the Useful Woman* (1973).

Dividing women 1: feminists from antifeminists

We have already encountered Alzon's proposition that the dividing line is not between men and women but between feminists and antifeminists. This clearly implies, on the one hand, that men can play the same role as women in women's liberation, and on the other, that feminists can, and should, treat non-feminist women as enemies.

It is highly possible that this pseudo-thinking is motivated solely by the former 'implication': that the whole discourse is aimed at encouraging acceptance of men's equal participation in women's

liberation. If so, it is particularly odious that a self-declared feminist man like Alzon does not hesitate to use this line to divide women in order to force his way in. This fact alone should prove, were proof necessary, that his concern and his purpose is not the liberation of women. He is prepared to weaken, or attempt to weaken, women's liberation if he thinks this is the price which has to be paid to gain himself a place.

In order to prove that men (and Alzon himself) can participate in the women's movement, he has to prove that the fact of being a man does not automatically justify his exclusion. This for him excuses asserting the symmetrical proposition: i.e. that all women are not automatically involved. Of course it is a gamble to try to prove that membership or non-membership of a group does not count in matters concerning the group, and it is easier to proceed negatively, by dividing women, than positively, by proving that men are taking as much part as women in the latter's liberation.

Alzon therefore argues that we should treat antifeminist women like antifeminist men. Once this point is established, he thinks it will mean that feminist men will be treated like feminist women. Unfortunately, there is no shadow of the symmetry he postulates. The antifeminism of men corresponds to their objective interests, and nothing further need be said on the subject. On the other hand, the antifeminism of women differs radically from that of men; it is diametrically opposed to their interests. What is racism for the oppressor is self-hatred for the oppressed. It is normal for women to be antifeminist: it is their being feminist which is astonishing. Gaining consciousness, 'becoming feminist', is not a sudden and brutal Pentecost. Feminist consciousness is not acquired once and for all, it is a long and never-ending process – and painful with it. We must constantly struggle against the 'evidence': against the view of the world presented to us in a variety of ideologies, and against ourselves. The struggle against self-hatred is never ending. There is thus no abrupt rupture between feminist and 'antifeminist' women, but rather a continuum of points of view of the same situation; because, whatever their 'opinions', women *are* oppressed. Since antifeminism is (1) an obstacle to women becoming aware of their objective interests, and (2) more directly, the reflection in our subjectivity of our oppression, it is therefore one of the means by which our oppression is maintained.

Whereas the antifeminism of men comes from the oppression they *exert*, the antifeminism of women comes from the oppression we *suffer*. In no way can feminists see antifeminist men and antifeminist women as the same, nor can they call the latter their enemies. Antifeminist women are not separated from us by objective interests but by false consciousness. Furthermore, false consciousness does not really separate us because we have all had it, and we all still have at least some of it. It is our common enemy. When we are struggling against their 'opinions', we are not struggling against antifeminist women, but against this common enemy – and thus *for* them, and for ourselves.

Dividing women 2: the threat of 'bourgeois women'

The other side of Alzon's demonstration – his other attempt to divide women – consists in waving the red flag to make conditioned cows charge. Having claimed that liberation does not *interest* all women, he goes on to claim that oppression does not *involve* all women. He tries to show that one category of women is indeed not involved in the women's movement, on the grounds that the criterion of gender is thus no longer salient, and so feminists of the masculine gender can be part of the movement. The movement will, of course, then be emptied of its political content, because what becomes of a movement for the liberation of women if gender is no longer pertinent? But no matter. Alzon knows what he is up to. The keystone to his second attempt at division is the magic phrase

‘bourgeois women’.

The question of bourgeois women has long concerned and divided the women’s movement, and continues so to do. One is therefore sure to spread trepidation by raising it. Quite why is not clear, but it definitely has more to do with women’s guilt than with reality, for in fact nobody knows any of the ‘bourgeois women’ of whom people speak – neither the feminists who insist bourgeois women must be excluded from the movement, although none of them has so much as knocked at our door; nor outside experts like Alzon.

So who are they? Who has seen the frightful privileged women who are our class enemies? Where do we find them and how do we recognize them? What is the operational definition of a bourgeois woman? Nobody even seems to inquire.

Debates within the WLM around the subject of bourgeois women have always been abstract and have shown marked illogicality – associated as a rule with great emotion. Thus it has been said that ‘bourgeois women’ 1 are not oppressed and 2 are our enemies, because 3 ‘they rally behind their men’. The contradiction between 1 and 3 has not seemed to bother anyone; nor has the fact that women have spoken here for women other than themselves. It has also not been noticed that the speakers attribute to bourgeois women behaviour – rallying behind their men – which each speaker denies is true of herself (though in fact the very existence of the Trotskyist groups from which these contradictions were hurled confirms that women *will* so rally). Perhaps the greatest irony in the affair has been the fact that the women who make these accusations within the movement define *themselves* as ‘bourgeois’ (or ‘middle class’). The contradiction between this self-definition (the fact that although ‘bourgeois’ they not only feel themselves to be oppressed, but also that as individuals they constitute part of the women’s liberation movement) and that they are prepared to forecast what will be the sentiments and behaviour of other women, has not seemed to disturb them at all.

An obvious example of the mythical character of the ‘bourgeois threat’ is given by the fact that the only concrete reference to bourgeois women in France used to consist of a horrified evocation of Madame Pompidou. Now she obviously does not constitute a category in herself, nor has she ever, so far as we know, shown the slightest interest in joining the movement, let alone in subverting its revolutionary goals. From the tenor of some of the discussions in the past it might, however, have been believed that this was imminent and that it constituted the greatest danger that the movement could ever face. What was interesting was that the objective economic situation of Madame Pompidou – reputedly an extremely exploitative capitalist – was never actually discussed. For American groups, Jackie Kennedy, whose personal economic situation was different, played exactly the same role. It is clear from the choice of a single individual in both cases, and from the choice of the same individual, the wife of the head of state, again in both cases, that these women were used as *symbols*. What is *not* clear is what they symbolize. In my opinion they were selected because of the convergence of a number of ideological processes.

The ‘threat from bourgeois women’ is in part purely and simply a reflection of masculine ideology, of sexism. This produces, and is manifest by, among other things, the displacement of hatred of the oppressor – the capitalist – on to his servants and possessions. The ‘bourgeois woman’ is the favourite target of male ‘revolutionaries’.¹ She is hated much more than the real oppressor, the bourgeois man. This in turn corresponds to three distinct but non-contradictory processes.

1 It is precisely the real power of the oppressor, the bourgeois man, which makes him *unattackable*, or at least not attackable without enormous risks. It is easier, and also more rewarding,

to attack him through his possessions; to attack the people who participate in his power. On the one hand, these women make this power manifest, and to attack them is to attack this manifestation; and on the other, they do not possess it, which minimizes the risk of reprisal.

Eldridge Cleaver expressed his hatred of white men's power over him by raping their women. White women's participation in white power consists in receiving crumbs, scraps from the white man's table, but it also and mainly consists in being *under their protection*. Even if the risks of reprisal are smaller, it might seem paradoxical to attack those who are nothing but the delegates of a power which lie elsewhere, who are not its principal holders. But it is there precisely that the blow wounds because:

2 Holding power is all the more, and never less, provocative than when this power (however little it may be) is perceived as *illegitimate*. In this sense, the fact that the scraps of power held by the white men's women, or the wives of bourgeois men, is delegated, and not possessed by them in their own right, works not in their favour, but to their disadvantage. The very thing which should make the wives of bourgeois men exempt from attack – the fact that they hold their bit of power in an indirect fashion – renders them particularly odious to other oppressed people. The authority which bourgeois wives are able to exercise – over taxi-drivers and housekeepers, etc. – is perceived as illegitimate *precisely because it is indirect*.

3 This perception reveals two things:

- a that this authority is perceived as going against their rightful status: it prevents them from being *treated as they should be, i.e. as women*. This in turn reveals that women's status should by rights be incompatible with *any* such authority; and
- b that this authority is perceived as contradictory, thus illegitimate, because *it is derived, not from the classic source of authority*, which is considered normal – economic control – *but from its opposite*; from their status as the possessions of bourgeois men.

Thus precisely because they are possessions,

- 1 the authority of bourgeois wives is invalid; and
- 2 their private appropriation by bourgeois men is one of the examples of class inequality and oppression of the proletariat.

Abducting their women lets the bourgeois men know that their monopolization of the world's goods is not acceptable, and is itself a fresh start at redistribution. Equal access to women continues to be an implicit demand in popular (men's) communist sentiments a hundred years after Marx denied it, believing, in his innocence, that this sentiment was held only by bourgeois men. This concept of egalitarianism is still rife, and it continues to show that women are considered to be *goods*, objects.

Attacks on 'bourgeois women' thus reveal in negative the popular conception of what the social order should be. The indignation of communists, proletarians, Blacks, and Algerians – in short, of all oppressed men and those who support them – when this order is not respected, reveals what it should be.

- 1 Women should be shared equally; and
- 2 There is no reason why their 'condition' of being the possessions of certain men (which is shown by their being monopolized) should in any way detract from certain aspects of their 'normal' condition.

For a man to put his hand on the arse of a 'bourgeois' woman, as on that of any woman anywhere, is seldom a *sexual* pleasure or compulsion. It is a way of recalling her and of reminding himself, of the

true hierarchy. For arse-touchers, and for men in general, membership of a sex *should* outweigh membership of a class. This is what is shown by the indignation provoked by the instances where it does not happen: where a woman, by virtue of being married to a bourgeois man, gives orders to a man. It is also shown by the insults, written or spoken, which are addressed to these women. The indignation provoked by the mitigation of sexual status by class status shows that gender is conceived as outweighing class – by Alzon, by certain feminists, and by the left in general. It is thus clear that the hostility towards ‘bourgeois women’ is due to a feeling that they are *out of their place*, that they are usurpers (as well as being wrongfully appropriated objects). This hostility is therefore based on the opposite of what the theory which rationalizes it says.

In the theory, the wives of bourgeois men are ‘bourgeois women’ (i.e. they are oppressors) rather than women (i.e. oppressed), and they are hated in the same way as their male homologues because their class – their condition of being enemies – outweighs their gender. But, on the contrary, if the ‘power’ of ‘bourgeois women’ causes indignation, it is not because they are seen as bourgeois, but because they are seen as *not* bourgeois, as not being *allowed* to be bourgeois. The fact that they exercise, or seem to exercise, certain bourgeois prerogatives arouses indignation because they are seen as doing this unjustifiably, i.e. they are usurping a position. And not only are they usurping it and posing as bourgeois (thereby escaping their ‘normal’ treatment), but it is precisely because they are the property of bourgeois men (because they are possessions and *not* bourgeois) that they can pose as bourgeois and deny the fact that they are possessions!

Thus the attacks on ‘bourgeois women’ mounted in the name of ‘class’ consciousness – which say that class outweighs gender – reveal a diametrically opposed consciousness. They reveal that:

- 1 the wives of bourgeois men are seen (correctly) as not belonging to the same class as their men (women belong to it not as subjects but as objects);
- 2 the wives of bourgeois men are seen as ‘women’ rather than as ‘bourgeois women’; and that
- 3 gender – the subservience owed to all men by all women – should outweigh class.

If we acknowledge the guilt – the oppression – which underlies the ‘bourgeois woman myth’ for women, we must realize just how odious it is of men to support it or even to use it. But then Alzon for one is not really free to take it or leave it. He needs the masculine version of the myth for reasons not of self-hatred but of hatred of others. He needs it to attack feminists. We therefore find in his analysis all the attitudes revealed above.

Attacks on (bourgeois) women disguised as love of the proletariat

The first indication that we are dealing with a myth is the total *irrationality* of what one would not dare call an argument. Drawing on a personal reading of Engels, Alzon in his book introduces a quite arbitrary distinction between ‘oppression’ and ‘exploitation’.

It is not that we have not heard this one before, but rather that we know that it would not be worth saying were it not that it allows the person saying it to put in terms he or she considers polite, their view that the oppression of women is ‘secondary’. This distinction is therefore a kind of refined insult. What is unexpected is that Alzon produces a whole *pamphlet* based on, and consisting solely of, variations on this theme.

Alzon defines neither of the terms, which makes distinguishing them difficult; but then he does not care about this since he does not even try to justify the distinction. One might have thought that this

distinction, that this 'idea', good or bad, proven or not, must underpin what follows and must run through the whole 'proof', since it opens, introduces and justifies the existence of the entire pamphlet. But no. He abandons it as soon as he has mentioned it and does not bring it up again. Why? Because it has served its purpose. It has produced a fake theoretical formulation: a fake division between 'bourgeois' and 'working-class' women.

That it is a myth is also shown by the fact that he never refers to any concrete social group. Who are these 'bourgeois' women, what do they *do* and *where* are they to be found? It appears that they are not the wives of 'bourgeois' men in the marxist sense, since their husbands not only work, but get their income from work. It is thus not a matter of the owners of the means of production collecting the surplus value. Indeed, surplus value has disappeared so far as I can see, or else Alzon is using 'bourgeois' to mean managers, with no excuse and no explanation. But perhaps his excuse is that he has other fish to fry?

Bourgeois women, he says, do nothing; absolutely *nothing* – except go to cocktail parties. Here we have the familiar account of the idle rich, but I do not recognize anyone I have ever met, being socially excluded from these circles, like other petit bourgeois people. For a start, sociologists (and therefore myself and also Alzon) have no hope of being able to penetrate or investigate the circles where these fabulous creatures might be found; and so long as our sources of information are no better than those of everyone else (that is, the *News of the World*, *France-Dimanche* and the odd nineteenth-century author) we would be wiser, not to say more honest, if we kept quiet. In addition, what little we do know leads me to believe that those women who do absolutely nothing do not exist, especially as most of them have children, for the simple reason that this is *impossible* (even if they have one or even more servants) – as those involved well know and would say *if they were asked*.

But what does this lack of information about these mythical creatures matter to Alzon? Does it even matter that there is no proof that they actually exist? What matters to him are the observations which he is going to make about this mythical group, at the expense of flesh and blood women. For example, their husbands are defined as *workers*, yet the wives are '*bourgeois women*'. Does this contradiction matter? What counts is that we note the difference between husbands who *toil*, and *idle* wives; that we see the first *supporting the latter by the sweat of their brows*. (This is undoubtedly why they have been decreed 'workers': if the above-mentioned husbands supported their wives by the sweat of their dividends, Alzon's conclusion would be singularly lacking in impact.)

We can recognize here the popular theory according to which women 'at home' are supported 'in idleness'; which says that they do not earn their living; in short, that they are not worth their keep. Feminists have dealt a rude blow to this view of things. We have shown that housework is work, and that the support such women get is far from being a gift; that it is an inferior form of remuneration to a wage – not in quantity but in kind. But for the moment let us keep to the first subject. The important thing is that without having understood what feminism says about housework, Alzon accepts it. Why? Because by accepting it, by 'granting' that certain women are exploited – gee, thanks mister – and by refusing to accept that others are, he finds a new, cleverer, more 'feminist' basis for the same old project: dividing women. To be sure, his 'refusal' to grant that certain women are exploited originates in part from his failure to comprehend what domestic exploitation is; but it stems mainly from his political purpose (which in turn is the cause of his failure to comprehend). He admits the theory of domestic exploitation only in order to divide women by denying that it applies to some. On the subject of 'bourgeois women' he resorts to the ideological view, according to which the support furnished by the husband is a gift; it is given in return for nothing. This takes no account of the fact that when talking about 'working-class women' he sees their exploitation in quantitative terms: as

consisting of the difference – the deficit – between the money value of their maintenance and the money value of the wage which they might receive. (Where and how?) The wife works more than the husband and consumes the same amount, so the wife is ‘robbed’. This is exploitation for Alzon. Consequently if, all things being equal, women were to eat more than their husbands, the problem would be solved. But either ‘maintenance’ is always an ideological concept or it never is, it cannot be *half* demystified.

But, once again, what does it matter to Alzon, since his approach leads him to this veritable pearl: bourgeois women exploit their husbands! (By this reckoning, children ‘exploit’ their parents, conscripts ‘exploit’ the army, and the elderly ‘exploit’ the hospital.)

He does not explain how husbands who are ‘dominant’ can also be exploited, which is a logical paradox and if it were true would be an absolutely unique occurrence in the history of humanity. (If such men *do* exist, I think they deserve what they get because they are really too stupid. If I were in their place I would use a little of my power to put a stop to such intolerable exploitation.) But this enormity is a trifle in the eyes of one who has transformed the economic dependence of women into an exploitation exercised by them. Furthermore, Alzon is not going to solve the mystery. Having mentioned it, he carries on, because his purpose is not to justify aberrant and thus unjustifiable propositions, but simply to find new insults to throw at ‘bourgeois’ women.

But alas for him, his passion is too strong. It drags him further than he would wish. It makes him show himself in his true colours. In order better to prove his point about the idleness and hence, according to him, the non-exploitation of ‘bourgeois women’, Alzon compares them to high-class prostitutes. He thus reveals just how far he understands women’s oppression (for him it is not, as we had thought, the client, who exploits the prostitute, *but the prostitute who exploits the client*) and the quality of his ‘feminism’. To say that ‘bourgeois’ women are high-class prostitutes is, for feminists, to say that these women are exploited like the rest. For Alzon it is to say the opposite (since it is the kernel of his ‘theory’ according to which women exploit their husbands), for he uses this comparison to prove that they are different from other women. However, it is certainly not as *prostitutes* that ‘bourgeois’ women differ from other women. Why then should Alzon believe this to be a decisive argument? High-class prostitutes do indeed differ from other women from a certain point of view; but not from a feminist point of view. Alzon thinks he can ‘prove’ that these women are not exploited and so are politically inferior to others by treating them as high-class prostitutes. But it is precisely on this point that they are *like* the others. He thus reveals that his point of view is not only not feminist, but antifeminist.

The point of view which sees women in a pejorative fashion is the point of view of the worker who calls a ‘bourgeois’ woman a ‘slut’. Alzon is saying the same thing in ‘academic’ terms. He is saying that whatever they may think, those women to whom I have no access, those whom I cannot oppress, they are tarts just like the rest! The only perspective from which Alzon’s assertions on ‘bourgeois women’ are comprehensible, and the only perspective from which they could have been uttered, is that of sexism. From a sexist perspective it is inadmissible that certain women have, or seem to have, escaped, even in part, from their common fate. This is the perspective of men who are indignant to see their sexual privilege – in particular, their sexual access to all women – held in check by the privileges (or more exactly the *protection*) of class. The very *worst* thing for them is knowing that these ‘privileges’ are derived from, that they are obtained by, sexual oppression: by prostitution, the very thing from which they had hoped to benefit, but which is here reserved for men of the dominant class. This is not the point of view of someone who is calling for an end to the oppression of women. On the contrary, it is that of someone who, like the majority of men, is calling for the total

application to all women without distinction, exemption or mitigation, of the fate of the most oppressed. It is the point of view of the sexual 'sharers', of those who want the unequal distribution of women to stop.

This hatred of 'bourgeois women' is obviously not provoked by a love of women and a desire for their liberation. It is not even a hatred limited to a particular category of women. It is a hatred of all women. It is not particularly aimed at 'bourgeois women', except in so far as they seem partially to escape oppression, or certain oppressions, or oppression by certain men. In practice the active hatred is certainly reserved for 'bourgeois women', for it is they who appear to benefit from an exceptional status, who are allowed a scandalous exemption. But the fact that this supposed status and exemption arouses indignation and hatred with regard to these 'beneficiaries', shows what is in fact the only condition deemed suitable for *all* women.

The only condition for women which does not awaken hostility in the likes of Alzon is a situation of total oppression. This reaction is classic in the annals of relations between dominant and dominated groups, and it has been amply studied in the American South in particular. The benevolent paternalism of whites towards Blacks who 'know their place', and who stay there, is curiously transformed into a murderous fury when the Blacks cease to know their place. The American feminist movement has also analysed masculine reactions to 'uppity women' (literally women who do not lower their eyes). The famous 'bourgeois women' are not among these 'arrogant' women: they are not those 'women's libbers' who contest their role. They are rather women for whom a classic submission to men pays off when their man belongs to the superior stratum of his sex; when the man they belong to dominates other men as well as women and can protect them against these other men. This is experienced by the other men, as I have said, as an anomaly, as a transgression of the ideal rule, which is the submission of all women to all men. It is the more outrageous for being the result of obeying the rule. Left intellectuals are rarely conscious of their attachment to this norm; even more rarely do they put it into words. It is only revealed negatively, in the indignation which its transgression excites in them.

II. Self-hatred as the basis of 'left feminism'

It is within this context that the moral debates in certain strands of the women's liberation movement, and the 'politics' adopted by certain groups, must be understood. The debates do not relate to any description of actual women's situations, nor do the positions adopted derive from either an analysis of the concrete situation of concrete categories of women, or an analysis of the political implications of this or that position for actual engagement in the liberation struggle. The debates are simply an expression of the guilty consciences of those who participate; a conscience which, needless to say, is both the product and the sign of their oppression.

Many women (like most men) think that class outweighs gender. Not only do they evaluate their own class membership incorrectly, identifying themselves with either their husband or their father (if classed themselves, by their own position, they would realize that almost none of them is bourgeois), they also believe their 'class membership' puts them in a category of superiority or 'total non-inferiority' *vis-à-vis* certain categories of men. They then project their bad conscience – in the form of hostility – on to a mythical category of women whom they feel exemplify this anomaly.

This guilty conscience is particularly articulated and systematically expressed in 'leftist' ideology: in the positions adopted by groups within the WLM which are aligned with groups in the male extreme left. But this is not the source of the guilt. It is merely found there in a pseudo-

theoretical formulation, and is accepted by male leftists as a 'revolutionary' rationalization of their male interests. But for women, this theoretical formulation has no structural relationship to the ideology or the movement for a socialist 'revolution'. Rather, women's involvement in the 'proletarian' struggle, the leftist struggle (whose proletarian character remains to be verified)² implies that 'bourgeois' women must be excluded. They cannot be among the people who form the revolutionary vanguard and do the liberating.

Leftist women reproduce in their women's groups the guilty conscience of the petit bourgeois members of the male left *vis-à-vis* the 'masses', i.e. the proletariat. They feel guilty about their comfortable life-style and they pretend to be part of the working class so as to justify leading the class struggle. But for women it really is a reproduction – an imitation – in the sense that it is based on their identification with 'their' men. It is only by identifying with men that these women can feel themselves to be fully 'privileged' and therefore 'guilty'.

This identification has many aspects. On the one hand, there is an identification with the 'personal' oppressor, taken as a model (i.e. the classic feminine alienation), and on the other, there is false consciousness. Following close behind is a *really* guilty conscience.

The identification is produced by women's desires to believe in, and to produce belief in, similarity across the barrier of the sexes. It is a typically magical reaction, a way of annulling in dreams the oppression which cannot be suppressed in reality. Like any recourse to magic, it brings its own contradiction, its annulment, since *identification* is preemptive proof of non-identity. You cannot identify with 'your' man if you are not distinct from that man. From this identification follows the belief of women born of, or married (legally or not) to, bourgeois men that they are themselves 'bourgeois'. This is false consciousness. They do not participate in the privileges of their men's class, whatever they may think. These women then feel *really* guilty in relation to proletarians, partly through false consciousness (because they wrongly believe themselves to be in the same situation and with the same objective relation to the proletariat as their 'blokes'), but also because they feel that the class privileges which they think they exercise as their men do, are, for them, usurped. They feel they have even less right to power and privileges than their men. This second feeling is analytically distinct from the first, even though the two usually go together.

To explore this further, let us distinguish a number of class situations for women which are often lumped together as their being 'bourgeois'.

1 That of the woman who is really bourgeois, that is, a capitalist and owner of productive property. In France there are eleven thousand women who are classified in the census as 'employers in industry and commerce'. Since this category includes both the Rothschilds and the corner-shop, and given the number of small shops owned by women, we can assume that the majority of these eleven thousand 'employers' are closer to grocers than to the Rothschilds. Few of the bourgeoisie in the strict sense are women.

2 That of a woman married to a bourgeois man and benefiting from a certain amount of delegated power.

3 That of a woman with a professional job of her own (some left feminists).

4 That of a woman married to a manager or a professional man and benefiting from next to nothing (some other left feminists).

For the left, in cases 1, 2 and 3 the privileges women derive either from their class membership or

from being the possession of men of the bourgeois class are stained with guilt, doubled in the second case by the way in which they are acquired (the prostitution for which proletarian men reproach them with such virtue).

In cases 2 and 4, there may be certain privileges: almost all the privileges are imaginary in 4, and in 3 imaginary ones may be added to privileges which are derivative but real. In other words, bad conscience works in all cases: all these women feel they have power and privileges which they ought not to have. Guilty conscience is doubled in the second case, that of the classic ‘bourgeois women’, by awareness of the cheating which provokes masculine indignation. In the fourth case, however, the troubled conscience is due solely to false consciousness. False consciousness can also function very well in the second and third case. When you have a few morsels of power you can very easily think you have it all – indeed, it is hard not to.

Left women share with their men the guilt of having class privileges; but for women the left adds to this the guilt of having these privileges improperly, being women. That is to say, it adds to the class oppression (which the women *think* they exercise) *a reversal of the normal sexual hierarchy*. The pangs of conscience due to this reversal have two aspects: first, the women feel that *nothing* should put them in a position to oppress any men; and second, they feel that they are not really in the same situation as their men, that the oppression that they force the proletarians to ‘submit to’ is not founded on the same basis as that of their men: *that it is even less legitimate*. These two feelings are, ironically, contradictory. The first is guilt for *being* bourgeois, the second is guilt for *not being bourgeois*, but for possessing privileges none the less.

This guilty conscience, then, is systematized in political form – it is expressed in ‘theoretical terms’ in certain left women’s groups, as we have said, though it is also utilized as a means of control in non-left groups (e.g. in the Psychoanalysis and Politics groups in France)³. The pretext is an attempt to ‘reconcile’ the class struggle with the women’s struggle. This implies that they have been put at daggers drawn. But instead of this ‘reconciliation’ being derived from an actual analysis of the articulation of the class and woman’s struggles (which their motivation renders them incapable of making), it derives from magic.

They do not try to analyse how the oppression of women, as such, articulates with the oppression of the proletariat as such. To do this would first of all necessitate knowing what the oppression of women consists of, and this they do not want to know. The articulation is therefore effected, or rather is felt to be effected, at the level of concrete groups. They put the accent on *proletarian woman*, or rather on the wives of proletarian men, since they do not draw a distinction between the two (which says a lot about their analysis of the class position of women). They thus substitute for an analysis of connections and contradictions a *factual coincidence*, incarnated in an empirical situation.

They believe that they have articulated class and gender because they concentrate on a group which is oppressed by both capitalism *and* patriarchy. But the existence of such a group does nothing to clarify the question of the relationship between the two *systems*, and the glorification of this group does not replace an analysis which remains to be developed. Furthermore, the contradiction mentioned above is still intact: the women who support this position are not among the women they dignify with being ‘saved’, since according to their own analysis, left feminists *themselves* are (petit) bourgeois, or middle class, and hence, in their theory, not oppressed.

Left women’s hatred of ‘bourgeois women’ is thus the result of three mechanisms of oppression:

- 1 It is primarily and objectively a hatred of oneself, since these women define themselves as

bourgeois. It is even possible that they so define themselves in order to find an 'objective' basis for the self-hatred they share with all women;

2 It is a product of women's false consciousness: their erroneous belief that they possess the same privileges as the men 'of their class';

3 Above all it originates in their guilty conscience. They feel that they usurp whatever privileges they have. They feel they are improperly in a 'bourgeois' situation, since, contrary to what they say, they think this is reserved for men – as is proven by their feelings of guilt.

Women's worthlessness and left accounts of working-class women's oppression

This hatred shows guilty conscience yet again. Not content with feeling themselves *particularly unworthy of oppressing others*, left women feel themselves *unworthy of being oppressed*. They never refute radical feminist arguments that women form a class with theoretical and logical arguments, but always brush them aside in an emotional fashion. What this emotion reveals is a deep refusal to consider themselves on the same footing as other oppressed groups, in particular as equal to the typical oppressed group, the proletariat.

Why? Because the 'working class' (but also the 'Blacks') are represented by *men*, and images show them as men in particularly 'virile' attitudes: wearing helmets, armed and shaking their fists. This image is the one with the highest status for 'revolutionary' women.

To think of yourself as a class is primarily to think of yourself as a *man*, and, furthermore, to think of yourself as a man of the most *glorious* category. It is to raise yourself to the rank of the cultural heroes. But this, in its double claim, is psychologically impossible and unthinkable for the majority of women. It would be a double sacrilege, a double profanity: it would defame the dignity of men and the dignity of the proletariat. (However, since this dignity extends to the oppressed, who are not necessarily proletarian, just because they are men, in the circumstances I am inclined to think that it is *virility* which lends prestige to the proletariat.) Here again, women's feeling of unworthiness leads them to fear that they are usurping power, and it is this feeling which invalidates the account which tries to rationalize their feelings. This account rests on the opposite premises; it explains their refusal to see themselves as equally oppressed on the basis of the pre-eminence of class over gender; but their refusal itself rests on the pre-eminence of gender.

Another example of this feeling of unworthiness in women is their acceptance of the various masculine theories of women's oppression in the family. In one such theory, women's oppression in the family is caused by capital's need for the reproduction of submissive personalities: by the necessity for children to be brought up to be docile workers. It is argued that because of this, everyone – including women – must be sexually repressed so that their libidinal energy is channelled towards work (W. Reich). Another similar theory suggests that women are oppressed by their husbands because their husbands are oppressed by their bosses. In order that male workers shall be allowed a sense of pride, so that they will not rebel and direct their anger against their bosses, men are allowed to dominate someone in their turn: i.e. men are allowed to dominate their wives and children.

What strikes one about such theories is that *even the oppression of women is not aimed at them*. The role of the family is either purely ideological: it is there to form a certain type of personality; and this character formation is but one of the means or the products of the exploitation of the proletariat. Thus the material and very concrete oppression of women is nothing but a means or a consequence – in any case nothing but a by-product – of an *ideological* oppression which itself is but a means to the

real aim: the exploitation of these selfsame workers.

In such theories women are twice removed from the objective – from what is posited as the ultimate end – of the process which oppresses them. Not only is their material oppression not an end in itself, but it is an almost accidental consequence of another oppression; and not only is this other oppression again not an end in itself but only a stage towards the real oppression (the exploitation of the proletariat); and neither of these moments – neither the stage nor the end – concerns *women as such*. Not only are they exploited, but they are only exploited to the extent that their exploitation serves *another exploitation*.

In other words, it is clear that women are perceived as *unworthy even of being exploited*. Their oppression can only be explained, given theoretical status, if it is put forward as mediating another oppression. This clearly means that they are *no more thought worthy of being exploited for themselves than of living for themselves*. Their exploitation, like their existence, must be justified by something other than itself: by its usefulness for the lives of men or for exploitation by men.

That women are in theory not the subjects of their own exploitation reflects the fact that in society they are not the subjects of their own lives. That the theoretical status of women's exploitation should be mediated by men, well reflects the fact that their actual status in society is mediated by men. The deeper meaning of this 'theory' is that if men were not oppressed, women would not be oppressed. This means that the question is put in the following terms: why oppress women if not in order to oppress men?

The desperate concern to 'articulate' women's oppression with the oppression of the proletariat recovers the barely hidden enterprise of attaching the women's struggle to the class struggle, there being no shadow of symmetry in this 'articulation' (i.e. no concern to link the class struggle to women's liberation). The worst of it is that this haste to integrate women's oppression into capitalist oppression, without even knowing what the first consists of, comes not from a bad but from a good political intent. It comes from a concern to establish the reality of women's oppression, to render it visible.

What it shows is that for many women, and men, if the oppression of women is not 'attached' to that of men it will tend to vanish before their very eyes, being quite denuded of meaning. For them only the oppression of men has a meaning in itself, and if the oppression of women is not linked to a self-justifying oppression, it is *insane*.

The inverted image of women's class position

What is shown by the reaction of many women (and men) to the suggestion that women are oppressed in and of themselves; what is shown by the shared but different hostility of women and men towards 'bourgeois women'; and what is shown by the very construction of this scapegoat myth, is what is also unveiled by objective analysis. It runs like a watermark through the very positions which deny it. It constitutes their hidden foundation. This is that *the wives of bourgeois men are not 'bourgeois women'*. They owe their 'class position', which is held to outweigh their status as women, to this very gender status.

This is the point made in [Chapter 2](#) in this book: the fact that popular, like academic, sociology attributes women the class *of their husbands*: that for women we use a criterion of 'class membership' which is different to that used for men (hence for husbands). For women, and only for women, marriage on the one hand replaces a position in the processes of production as the criterion of class membership; and, on the other, even when women have their own place in the capitalist mode

of production (i.e. when they work for wages outside as well as unpaid within marriage), marriage nevertheless outweighs their paid work. 'Bourgeois women' are, thus, so called, and identified with their bourgeois spouses, not because the same criteria are used to class them as to class their husbands, but, on the contrary, because a criterion is used *which distinguishes them*: that of marriage.

What distinguishes bourgeois men from 'bourgeois' women in the class process, is precisely what unites 'bourgeois' women to 'proletarian' women, who are also classified by the class of their husbands. We therefore cannot speak of class *differences* between women – which it seems is the source of eventual political *divisions* – except by first treating them in the same way: by determining their 'class' by their relationship to a man. These differences of classification are thus based on what all women have in common – the fact of being 'someone's daughter and actual or potential wife/woman'.

The fact that this attachment is used instead of actual class membership shows that *dependence* – the status of being women, synonymous in French with that of being a wife (*femme*) – outweighs class membership, i.e. their position in capitalist production. It outweighs it in classification because it outweighs it in reality: because women either have no position in capitalist production, or else this position is less important for their material existence than their patriarchal dependence. It is the latter which constitutes their main (or sole) relationship to production and their main (or sole) class membership, *both being non-capitalist*.

Hostility towards 'bourgeois women' thus rests, in the final analysis, on the correct perception that women do not really belong to the bourgeois class. This hostility reveals that gender membership, an individual's patriarchal class, is perceived as outweighing, and furthermore as rightly outweighing, their 'class membership'. If we find the same thing in an objective analysis as we found in the 'political' (or emotional) positions adopted, it is because this political analysis rests implicitly and in an underhand way on the objective positions. The political analyses are held all the more strongly for being based on a reality which is in absolute contradiction to the manifest argument. If the reality which serves as the basis for the argument is denied by the argument, it is because the argument is designed to justify reactionary positions about this reality. In order that these reactionary views do not appear as such, reality is inverted in the argument, so that we shall no longer see that it is the positions which are upside down.

The differential methods by which the general oppression of women operates, the different forms taken by an oppression deriving from a common basis, still, however, remain to be found and defined. I suspect this will necessarily open up a redefinition of oppression, and not only that of women. But this research cannot proceed with the concepts which are currently in use, i.e. from the problematic of the division of women along traditional class lines, for the reason shown. In reality these divisions are based not on what differentiates women but on what is *common* to us all. The current perception of these 'divisions' is due not only to women's material dependence, but also to our guilty conscience – these being the lot of women. Far from being an analysis, still less a 'revolutionary' analysis, the current perception is a manifestation, and a further proof of, oppression. It will therefore be *from somewhere else*, from a different analysis and politics, from a totally different problematic, one which knows and recognizes this fundamental community of women and which does not derive from guilty conscience (i.e. from a properly *feminist* problematic) that this research can be undertaken. It will be a research of liberation.

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