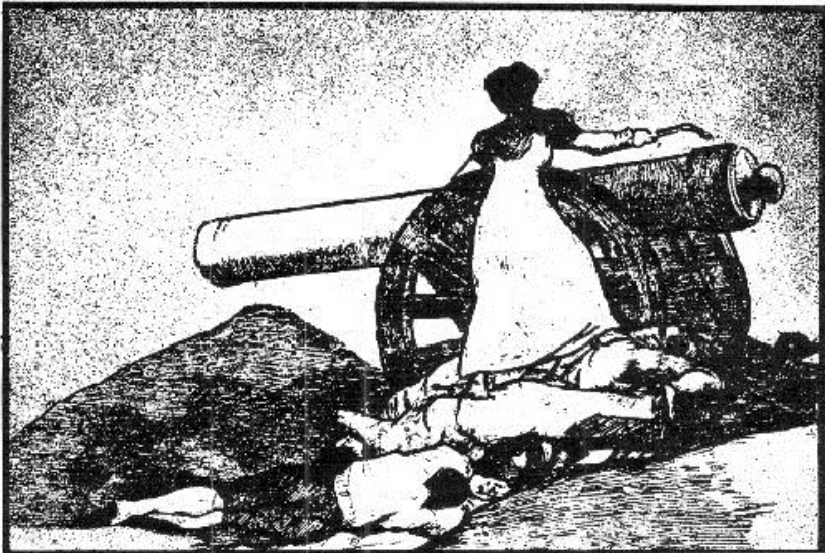


## FEMALE LIBERATION



as the basis for social revolution

*Roxanne Dunbar*

## FEMALE LIBERATION AS THE BASIS FOR SOCIAL REVOLUTION

By Roxanne Dunbar

The present female liberation movement must be viewed within the context of international social revolution and within the context of the long struggle by women for nominal legal rights. The knowledge that is now available, gained in past struggles, makes the current women's movement more scientific and potent, Black people in America and Vietnamese people have exposed the basic weakness of the system of white, Western dominance which we live under, They have also developed means of fighting which continually strengthen themselves and weaken the enemy, The dialectics of liberation have revealed that the weak and oppressed can struggle against and defeat a larger enemy, Revolutionary dialectics teach that nothing is immutable, Our enemy today may not be our enemy next year, or the same enemy might be fighting us in a different way tomorrow, Our tactics must be fitted to the immediate situation and open to change; our strategy must be formed in relation to our overall revolutionary goals, Black Americans and the Vietnamese have taught, most importantly, that there is a distinction between the consciousness of the oppressor and the consciousness of the oppressed.

# I.

Women have not just recently begun to struggle against their suppression and exploitation, Women have fought in a million ways in their daily, private lives to survive and to overcome existing conditions, Many times those “personal” struggles have taken a self-destructive form, Almost always women have had to use sex as a tool, and have thereby sunk further in oppression, Many women still believe in the efficacy of fighting a lone battle, But more and more women are realizing that only collective strength and action will allow us to be free to fight for the kind of society that meets basic human needs. Collective activity has already had an enormous effect on our thinking and on our lives. We are learning not to dissipate our strength by using traditional methods of exerting power-tears, manipulation, appeals to guilt and benevolence, But we do not ignore what seem to be the “petty” forms of female oppression, such as total identification with housework and sexuality as well as physical helplessness, Rather we understand that our oppression and suppression are institutionalized; that all women suffer the “petty” forms of oppression, Therefore they are not petty or personal, but rather constitute a widespread, deeply rooted social disease. They are the things that keep us tied down day to day, and do not allow US to act, Further, we understand that all men are our policemen, and no organized police force is necessary at this time to keep us in our places. All men enjoy male supremacy and take advantage of it to a greater or lesser degree depending on their position in the masculine hierarchy of power.

It is not enough that we take collective action. We must know where we have come from historically and personally, and how we can most effectively break the bonds. We have identified a system of oppression-Sexism. To understand how sexism has developed and the variety of its forms of suppression and mutations, female liberation must, as Betsy Warrior puts it, “re-examine the foundations of civilization.”

What we find in re-examining history is that women have had a separate historical development from men. Within each society, women experience the particular culture, but on a larger scale of human history, women have developed separately as a caste. The original division of labor in all societies was by sex. The female capacity for reproduction led to this division. The division of labor by sex has not put a lighter physical burden on women, as we might believe, if we look only at the mythology of chivalry in Western ruling class history. Quite the contrary. What was restricted for women was not physical labor, but mobility.

Because woman’s reproductive capacity led to her being forced into sedentary (immobile, not inactive) life, the female developed community life. Adult males were alien to the female community. Their job was to

roam, to do the hunting and war-making, entering the community only to leave again. Their entrances and exits probably disrupted normal community life. What hunters experienced of the community were feasts and holidays, not day-to-day life. At some point, when women had developed food production and animal domestication to the point of subsistence, hunters began settling down. However, they brought to the community a very different set of values and behavioral patterns which upset the primitive communism of the community.

In a very real sense, the hunter was less civilized than the female. He had little political (governing) experience. The experience of the hunter had led him to value dominance; he had become unsuited for living as equals in the community, because he knew only how to overpower and conquer the prey. Other masculine values, formed in the transient existence as hunters, included competition (with the prey) and violence (killing the prey). Hunters developed a taste for adventure and mobility. They developed technical skills and a sense of timing and accuracy and endurance. Though hunters worked together and developed a sense of brotherhood, their brotherhood developed outside community life.

Gradually in some cases, but often through violent upheaval, former hunters took over female communities, suppressing the female through domination and even enslavement. The political base for the taking of power often came from the secret male societies formed by men in reaction to female control of community institutions.

As societies became more affluent and complex, life was rationalized and ordered by introducing territoriality, or private property, and inheritance. Patrilineal descent required the control of a female or a number of females to identify the father. The offspring served as labor as well as fulfilling the function of transcendence for the father (the son taking over), and females were used for barter, as were cattle. This then led to the dominance of the male over a wife or wives and her (his) offspring. The female, like the land, became private property under masculine dominance. Man, in conquering nature, conquered the female, who had worked with nature, not against it, to produce food and to reproduce the human race.

## II.

In competing among themselves for dominance over females (and thereby the offspring) and for land, a few males came to dominate the rest of the male population, as well as the entire female population. A peasant laboring class developed. Within that laboring class, males exploited females, though the male peasant had no property rights over females (or land). The landlord could take any young girl or woman he wanted for whatever purpose, and the peasant was not allowed to “protect” “his” woman.

The pattern of masculine dominance exists almost universally now, since those cultures where the pattern developed have come to dominate (colonize) pre-literate societies, and have introduced patterns of private property and nationalism. The Western nation-states, which have perfected colonialism, were developed as an extension of male dominance over females and the land. Other races and cultures were bought and sold, possessed, dominated through “contract” and ultimately through physical violence and the threat of destruction, of the world if necessary. We live under an international caste system, at the top of which is the Western white male ruling class, and at the very bottom of which is the female of the non-white colonized world. There is no simple order of “oppressions” within this caste system. Within each culture, the female is exploited to some degree by the male. She is classed with the very old and very young of both sexes (“the women, children, and old men”). White dominates black and brown. The caste system, in all its various forms, is always based on identifiable physical characteristics—sex, color, age.

Why is it important to say that females constitute a lower caste? Many people would say that the term caste can only properly be used in reference to India or Hindu culture. If we think that caste can only be applied to Hindu society, we will then have to find some other term for the kind of social category to which one is assigned at birth and from which one cannot escape by any action of one’s own; also we must distinguish such social categories from economic classes or ranked groups as well as understand their relationship.

A caste system establishes a definite place into which certain members of a society have no choice but to fit (because of their color or sex or other easily identifiable physical characteristics such as being aged, crippled, or blind). A caste system, however, need not at all be based on a prohibition of physical contact between different castes. It only means that physical contact will be severely regulated, or will take place outside the bounds deemed acceptable by the society; it means that the mobility of the lower castes will be limited. It means that whatever traits associated with the lower caste will be devalued in the society or will be mystified in some way.

Under the caste system in the Southern states, physical contact between black and white is extensive (particularly through white male sexual exploitation of black women). In the South under slavery, there was frequent contact between black “mammy” and white child, between black and white pre-adolescent children, and between white master and black slave women.

Between male and female, thousands of taboos control their contact in every society. Within each, there is a “woman’s world” and a “man’s world.” In most, men initiate contact with women, usually for the purpose of exploitation. Women have little freedom to initiate contact with adult males. The same is true for black and white in America.

The clearest historical analogy of the caste status of females is African slavery in English-speaking America. When slaves were freed during the Civil War, the female slaves were included, but when the right to citizenship was in question, female blacks were excluded. To many, comparing the female’s situation in general with that of a slave in particular seems farfetched. Actually, the reason the analogy is indicated has to do with the caste status of the African in America, not with Slavery as such.

Slave status in the past did not necessarily imply caste status by birth. The restriction of slavery to Africans (black people) in the English colonies rested on the caste principle that it was a status rightly belonging to Africans as innately (racially) inferior beings. (Of course, this was a rationalization on the part of the English, but it became a ruling ideology and was connected with the past.) If a person was black, he was presumed to be a slave

unless he could prove otherwise. Caste was inclusive of the slave and free status, just as the caste status of females is inclusive of all economic classes, age, and marital status, though some are more “privileged” and some are more exploited, depending on the female’s relationship with a male, or whether she has one or not.

Caste, then, is not analogous to slavery. In Rome, where slaves were not conceived of as innately inferior, and did not differ racially from the enslaving group, slaves did not form a separate caste when they were freed. While they were slaves, however, they had neither rights to property nor any legal rights. The master had the power of life and death over his slaves, just as in the slave South. As far as the legal category of the slave as property went, Rome and America had the same social form. It was caste which produced the contrast between the effects of the two systems of slavery. It was the system of caste which gave African slavery in America its peculiarly oppressive character. That caste oppression is analogous to the situation of females both legally and traditionally. (When jurists were seeking a legal category for the position of African slaves in Virginia, they settled on the code of laws which governed wives and children under the power of the patriarch, the head of the family).

In order to understand the power relations of white and black in American society, of white imperialist America and the Third World, and of male and female in all human societies, we must comprehend the caste system which structures power, and within which caste roles we are conditioned to remain.

Often, in trying to describe the way a white person oppresses or exploits a black person, or a man oppresses or exploits a woman, we say that the oppressor treats the other person as a “thing” or as an “object.” Men treat women as “sex objects,” we say; slavery reduced black human beings to “mere property,” no different from horses or cattle. This interpretation of caste oppression overlooks the crucial importance of the fact that it is human beings, not objects, which the person in the higher caste has the power to dominate and exploit. Imagine a society becoming as dependent upon cattle as Southern plantation society was upon black people, or as men are upon women. The value of slaves as property lay precisely in their being persons, rather than just another piece of property. The value of a woman for a man is

much greater than the value of a machine or animal to satisfy his sexual urges and fantasies, to do his housework, breed and tend his offspring. Under slavery, the slave did what no animal could do—planting and harvest, as well as every other kind of backbreaking labor for which no machines existed. But the slave served a much larger purpose in terms of power. It is convenient and “fun” for a man to have satisfactions from “his woman,” but his relation to her as a person, his position of being of a higher caste, is the central aspect of his power and dominance over her and his need for her.

(A further example of the importance to the higher castes of dominating human beings, not mere objects, is the way men view their sexual exploitation of women. It is not just the satisfaction of a man’s private, individual, sexual urge which he fantasizes he will get from a woman he sees. In addition, and more central to his view of women, he visualizes himself taking her, dominating her through the sexual act; he sees her as the human evidence of his own power and prowess. Prostitution, however exploitative for the woman, can never serve this same purpose, just as wage labor, however exploitative to the wage slave, could not have served the same purpose in Southern society that black slaves served.)  
through the man or her children.

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Black people fell under two patterns of dominance and subservience which emerged under slavery, and which are analogous to patterns of male-female relations in industrial societies. One pattern is the paternalistic one (house servants, livery men, entertainers, etc.). The second pattern is the exploitative pattern of the field hands. Among females today, housewives and women on welfare are subject to the paternalistic pattern. The exploitative pattern rules the lives of more than a third of the population of females (those who work for wages, including paid domestic work) in the United States. But it is important to remember that females form a caste within the labor force; that their exploitation is not simply double or multiple, but is qualitatively different from the exploitation of workers of the upper caste (white male).



Though the paternalistic pattern may seem less oppressive or exploitative for females, it is actually only more insidious. The housewife remains tied by emotional bonds to a man and children, cut off from the more public world of work; she is able to experience the outside world only through the man or her children. If she were working in public industry, however exploitative, she could potentially do something about her situation through collective effort with other workers.

However, even for women who hold jobs outside the home, their caste conditioning and demands usually prevail, preventing them from knowing even that they have the right to work, much less to ask for something more. Also, the jobs women are allowed to have are most often "service" and domestic ones, demanding constant contact with men and children. Females and blacks, even under the alienating capitalist system, are subject to the paternalistic pattern of caste domination every minute of their lives. White men, however exploited as laborers, rarely experience this paternalism, which infantilizes and debilitates its victims.

A caste system provides rewards that are not entirely economic in the narrow sense. Caste is a way of making human relations "work," a way of freezing relationships, so that conflicts are minimal. A caste system is a social system, which is economically based. It is not a set of attitudes or just some mistaken ideas which must be understood and dispensed with because they are not really in the interest of the higher caste. No mere change in ideas will alter the caste system under which we live. The caste system does not exist just in the mind. Caste is deeply rooted in human history, dates to the division of labor by sex, and is the very basis of the present social system in the United States.

### **III.**

The present female liberation movement, like the movements for black liberation and national liberation, has begun to identify strongly with Marxist class analysis. And like other movements, we have taken the basic tools of Marxist analysis (dialectical and historical materialism) and expanded the understanding of the process of change. Our analysis of women as an exploited caste is not new. Marx and Engels as well as other nineteenth-century socialist and communist theorists analyzed the position of the female sex in just such a way. Engels identified the family as the basic unit of capitalist society, and of female oppression. "The modern individual family is founded on the open or concealed domestic slavery of the wife, and modern society is a mass composed of these individual families as its molecules." And "within the family, he (the man) is the bourgeois and the wife represents the proletariat." (Frederick Engels, *Origin of The Family, Private Property, and the State*).

Marx and Engels thought that the large-scale entrance of women into the work force (women and children were the first factory workers) would destroy the family unit, and that women would fight as workers, with men, for the overthrow of capitalism. That did not happen, nor were women freed in the socialist revolutions that succeeded. In the West (Europe and the United States) where proletarian revolutions have not succeeded, the family ideology has gained a whole new lease on life, and the lower caste position of women has continued to be enforced. Even now when 40 percent of the adult female population is in the work force, woman is still defined completely within the family, and the man is seen as "protector" and "breadwinner."

In reality, the family has fallen apart. Nearly half of all marriages end in divorce, and the family unit is a decadent, energy-absorbing, destructive, wasteful institution for everyone except the ruling class, the class for which the institution was created. The powers that be, through government action and their propaganda force, the news media, are desperately trying to hold the family together. Sensitivity, encounter, key clubs, group sex,

income tax benefits, and many other devices are being used to promote the family as a desirable institution. Daniel Moynihan and other government sociologists have correctly surmised that the absence of the patriarchal family among blacks has been instrumental in the development of “anti-social” (revolutionary) black consciousness. Actually, in the absence of the patriarchal family, which this society has systematically denied black people, a sense of community life and collective effort has developed. Among whites, individualism and competitiveness prevail in social relations, chiefly because of the propagation of the ideology of the patriarchal family. The new sense of collective action among women is fast destroying the decadent family ideology along with its ugly individualism and competitiveness and complacency. Our demand for collective public child care is throwing into question the private family (or individual) ownership of children.

Yet, under this competitive system, without the family unit and without the tie with a male, the female falls from whatever middle-class status she has gained from the family situation. She quickly falls into the work force or has to go on welfare. Such was the case for black slaves when a master voluntarily freed them, and when slavery was ended as an institution. In both cases, the “helplessness” is used as the rationale for continued domination. Lower caste status almost always means lower class status as well. For women who are supported by and gain the status of their husbands, working class status is always a potential threat, if they do not perform their wifely duties properly. However, many of these supported women have chosen to enter the work force in the vast pool of female clerical workers, in order to gain the economic independence that is necessary to maintain self-respect and sanity. On these jobs, women are still subjected to patterns of masculine dominance. But often on the less personal ground of workplace, a woman can begin throwing off the bonds of servitude.

## IV.

How will the family unit be destroyed? After all, women must take care of the children, and there will continue to be children. Our demand for full-time child care in the public schools will be met to some degree all over, and perhaps fully in places. The alleviation of the duty of full-time child care in private situations will free many women to make decisions they could not before. But more than that, the demand alone will throw the whole ideology of the family into question, so that women can begin establishing a community of work with each other and we can fight collectively. Women will feel freer to leave their husbands and become economically independent, either through a job or welfare.

Where will this leave white men and “their” families? The patriarchal family is economically and historically tied to private property and, under Western capitalism, with the development of the national state. The masculine ideology most strongly asserts home and country as primary values, with wealth and power an individual’s greatest goal. The same upper class of men who created private property and founded nation-states also created the family. It is an expensive institution, and only the upper classes have been able to maintain it properly. However, American “democracy” has spread the ideology to the working class. The greatest pride of a working man is that he can support “his” wife and children and maintain a home (even though this is impossibility for many and means misery for most). The very definition of a bum or derelict is that he does not maintain a wife, children, and home. Consequently, he is an outcast. It is absurd to consider the possibility of women sharing with men the “privilege” of owning a family. Even though 5.2 million families are headed by females in this country, they gain no prestige from doing so. In fact, the family without a male head or support is considered an inferior family. A woman supporting her family actually degrades the family in terms of social status.

At this point in history, white working-class men will fight for nothing except those values associated with the masculine

## V.

ideology, the ideology of the ruling class family, home, property, country, male supremacy, and white supremacy. This force, the organized or organizable working class, has been vital in other social revolutions. However, because of the caste system which reigns here, the American democracy of white males, and the power of the nation in the world with which white workers identify, white male workers are not now a revolutionary group in America. Among the most oppressed part of the white working-class males-Irish, Italian, French Canadian (in the U.S.), Polish immigrants-the patriarchal Catholic church buttresses the masculine ideology with its emphasis on family. Even among lower caste (color) groups, Puerto Ricans and Mexican-Americans, the church reinforces masculine domination.

However, the women who “belong” to these men are going to revolt along with the women who belong to middle-class men, and women on welfare and women not yet in the cycle of marriage and family. Black women will probably continue to fight as blacks alongside black men with a reversal of the trend toward taking second place to the black man in order for him to gain his “due” masculine status according to the prevailing masculine ideology. When the white working-class man is confronted with the revolt of women against the family and the society, he will no longer have the escape valve of supremacy over those beneath him in the caste system.

Feminism is opposed to the masculine ideology. I do not suggest that all women are feminists, though many are; certainly some men are, though very few. Some women embrace the masculine ideology, particularly women with a college education. But most women have been programmed from early childhood for a role, maternity, which develops a certain consciousness of care for others, self-reliance, flexibility, non-competitiveness, cooperation, and materialism. In addition, women have inherited and continue to suffer exploitation which forces us to use our wits to survive, to know our enemy, to play dumb when necessary. So we have developed the consciousness of the oppressed, not the oppressor, even though some women have the right to oppress others, and all have the right to oppress children. If these “maternal” traits, conditioned into women, are desirable traits, they are desirable for everyone, not just women. By destroying the present society, and building a society on feminist principles, men will be forced to live in the human community on terms very different from the present. For that to happen, feminism must be asserted, by women, as the basis of revolutionary social change. Women and other oppressed people must lead and structure the revolutionary movement and the new society to assure the dominance of feminist principles. Our present female liberation movement is preparing us for that task, as is the black liberation movement preparing black people for their revolutionary leadership role.

The female liberation movement is developing in the context of international social revolution, but it is also heir to an 120-year struggle by women for legal rights. The nineteenth-century feminist movement as well as its child, the women’s suffrage movement, were comparatively modest in their demands. They fought from a basis of no rights, no power at all. In the first movement, women began fighting for the right of females to speak publicly for abolition of slavery. The cause of female rights and the abolition of slavery were inexorably linked. The early feminists did not see the family as a decadent institution. They wanted to find a way to force men to share responsibility in the institution they created by supporting their families. They saw alcohol as an enemy of family solidarity.

With the end of slavery, only black males received citizen ship. Black women and white women remained unenfranchised. Women then began the long struggle for the vote. They felt they could make the large-scale and basic changes in society which they saw as necessary by their influence in politics. They believed that woman’s political involvement would bring her out of privacy. Many of them questioned the very foundations of

civilization, but their strategy and tactics for gaining the desired upheaval of their society revolved around political influence within the System.

In the process of their struggle, the feminists and suffragists opened the door for our present female liberation movement. They won not only the right to vote, but other legal rights as well, including the custodial rights to their children. More than that, women began to fight their oppression and lift up their heads. At the same time, working women were fighting their wage slavery. Women began to emerge from privacy and to know that they did in fact have rights for which they must fight. They gained confidence in the struggle, and asserted a new independence, which we all inherited.

We also inherited an understanding of the weakness of single issue tactics, and of “organizing” women around issues rather than teaching a complete analysis of female oppression. We learned that there is no key to liberation. We must fight on many fronts at once. Thanks to gains made by our feminist predecessors, though, we have the confidence to assert feminism as a positive force, rather than asking for equality in the man’s world. We can demand that men change. We can consider leading a social revolution, not just working in supportive positions, and hope for the justness, benevolence, and change of heart of men. We can assert the necessity of industrializing all housework, and for right now to have school cafeterias open to adults as well as children. We can demand the extension of public education facilities and funds to include infant and child care. We can demand the development of maternal skills and consciousness in men. We can insist on the necessity for revolution to be based on the needs and consciousness of the most oppressed of women. We can revoke any privileges we have which divide us from other women.

We are developing necessary skills-self-defense and physical strength, the ability to work collectively and politically, rather than privately and personally, and the ability to teach our ideas to many other women in such a way that they then can become teachers as well. From these new relations and skills will be built the values of the new society. Right now they are our tools of struggle. Though we may work in isolated and difficult and dangerous situations, we can know our larger strategy and goals, and know that we are a part of a worldwide struggle for human liberation.

**FOURTEEN**

# *Female Liberation as the Basis for Social Revolution*

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