FEMINIST ISSUES

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The English-language Edition of
QUESTIONS FéMINISTES

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Feminist Issues is devoted to feminist social and political analysis. Its focus is on providing the theoretical framework that is crucial to dissecting and exposing the ideology and conditions within which women live and have lived historically. The same critical need for theoretical analysis was felt by the editors of Questions Féministes in 1977 when they launched their journal. Feminist Issues is dedicated to making this work widely available to English-speaking feminists, to expanding this kind of work, and to contributing to the creation of a forum for further international communication in the women's movement.

Feminist Issues is not an exact duplicate of Questions Féministes. It will publish all the key theoretical writings, with a somewhat different ordering, which have appeared and will appear in Questions Féministes. Feminist Issues will also make available for English-speaking readers important feminist articles published in previous years in various French publications. In addition to these translations is the hope and expectation of both the editors of Feminist Issues and Questions Féministes that theoretical work by English-speaking feminists (and women whose best second language is English) will be published in both journals, adding to the work done by French, African, and British writers already publishing in Questions Féministes. In this way Feminist Issues will provide an opportunity for immediate communication between French and English-speaking feminists, which we hope will contribute to strengthening and developing feminist theoretical analysis and the women's movement.

Volume 1, Number 1

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Editors of
Questions Féministes

Variations on
Some Common Themes

A journal of radical feminist theory

This project was born from the recognition that the new feminism does not have a place of its own for theoretical debate, although the need for one is more keenly felt than ever. The feminist press is practically nonexistent in France, and it is not only theoretical journals that we need, but also large-circulation monthlies (like Spare Rib in England, Emma in Germany, Effe in Italy). We should have one but several militant publications (as we used to have with Le Torchon Brûlé, Les Femmes s'Entêtent, Les Pétroleuses, and as we have now with Histoires d'Elles). It would also be desirable if publications of a purely informative nature (like L'Information des Femmes) could develop and multiply. If we have chosen to devote ourselves to the launching of a "theoretical" journal, it is because such a journal seems to us equally necessary, not because we give it priority.¹

What do we mean by "theoretical"?

Women frequently have an ambivalent reaction to this term. We certainly feel the necessity for an in-depth analysis of the oppression of women, but we know at the same time that "theoretical" too often refers to inaccessible texts which are destined for a privileged social elite. Theoretical is made equivalent to obscure — as if the fact that a text is incomprehensible were proof of its "scientific" character, of its "seriousness." We want to break this equation. Our aim is to restore to theory its true meaning, and, at the same time, to make it everyone's concern, so that everyone can not only use it, but also produce it. For
all accounts (whatever their language) are theoretical if they attempt to explain the causes and the functioning, the why and the how of the oppression of women in general or in one of its particular aspects. Theory is any account which tries to draw political conclusions, and which proposes a strategy or tactics for the feminist movement.

Adopting this political definition of “theoretical,” our journal will strive to bring together texts which theorize the oppression of women. We will draw on material in various languages and of different kinds. We consider that a letter, a literary work, a pamphlet, or an abstract article can contribute equally to the elaboration of a feminist science. But we know that it is not always possible to write simply. Certain concepts do not exist in everyday language and cannot be translated into it. The possibility of a reformulation depends on the level of abstraction or of specialization of the account.

Theory is not only an explanation of facts; it is at the same time a description of reality. We will publish, therefore, papers which offer information about the lives of women in France and other countries, and about their situations past and present.

This diversity, which we hope to be able to put into practice, will permit us to establish and make widely available writing which has ordinarily been denied a place. We will put forward for wider discussion issues which up until now have only been debated within the confines of feminist groups.

A “feminist science”: how and why?

When we analyze the oppression of women, we necessarily study both their material, real, oppression and the ideology which justifies it: an ideology internalized by women, and whose coercive power permits their exploitation. One of the privileged areas of expression of this ideology (and of its development, because it was not produced once and for all) is “science,” and in particular the so-called social sciences. A feminist approach necessarily includes a critique of scientific accounts, its accounts of women, but also its supposedly “general,” all-inclusive accounts. For what is more revealing that what is omitted? General theories of society and the psyche, when they consider categories of sex as natural, without questioning their genesis and social nature, and when they do not take into account the oppression of women, in turn incorporate this oppression, and remain within the most basic sexist ideology. By doing this, they contribute to the perpetuation of the oppression of women while building a false theory of the object they claim to be studying.

We want a feminist science to develop which could account for hierarchical patriarchal structures (and their impact on individuals), and which in so doing would modify the overall analysis of society. Our daily lives would benefit from this feminist science: the emergence of subversive feminist accounts has already made it possible for us, and continues to enable us, to alter the course of our lives. But we also want to know how a feminist point of view can have an impact in the fields where powers are exercised which aim directly at the production of patriarchal structures. In certain professional fields (medicine, gynecology, psychology, psychoanalysis, social work) the question of the oppression of women is crucial, because the problem of “abnormality” keeps reappearing, bringing with it attempts to enforce normalization and adaptation.

Radical feminism

We identify our political perspective as radical feminist. The notion of radicalism comes from the recognition of (and the political struggle against) the oppression of women by the patriarchal social system. In order to describe and unmask this oppression, it is necessary to destroy arguments that are based on the supposedly obvious “facts of nature” — an enterprise which feminists began some years ago, and which should have constituted one of our most solid gains. Such, however, has not been the case. Naturalist “evidence,” even though it has been unmasked, still asserts itself in less artfully and perniciously within the very heart of the women’s movement (where certain groups curiously delete, between women’s and movement the word liberation). The current “neo-feminism” trend, which attracts many women because it appears to be constructive, can be interpreted as a return to classical antifeminism, as confinement in one of the traps which patriarchy has set for us. For our oppression is not the result of our “not being womanly enough,” but precisely the contrary: from our being too much so. We are prevented from leading lives as free and independent individuals, under the pretext that we are “Woman,” “different.” It is the patriarchal system that sees us as “different” in order to justify our exploitation, to mask it. It is that system which prescribes the idea of “nature” and of a feminine “essence.”

Radical feminism takes as its first principle staying on the ground which the first feminists secured against the naturalist ideology. This demands:

1. The resolute refusal of any construction or projection of an idea of “Woman” as existing outside of society.
2. The corollary of this is to try to take apart the notion of the “difference between the sexes” which orders and supports this idea of “Woman,” this being an integral part of naturalist ideology. The social existence of men and women does not depend at all on their nature as male and female, i.e., on the shape of their anatomical sexual organs.

In a nonpatriarchal society, the question of being a man or a woman would not be posed in the terms in which it is posed for us today. All work, all tasks would be performed by men and women. And in regard to sexual practices, the distinction between homo- and hetero-sexuality would have no meaning.
because individuals would meet on the basis of their individuality (a specific individual with such and such a history) and not on the basis of their sexual identity.

To destroy the difference between the sexes is to abolish the hierarchy which today exists between the two terms, one of which is defined with reference to the other and rendered inferior in that very comparison. We cannot claim that the “right to be different,” since in the current context that means the right to be oppressed. Our top priority is the right to be autonomous (not to be “objects of” or “appropriated by” men); our second priority is the right to individuality without reference to sexual identity. This does not mean that “we want to become men,” for at the same as we destroy the idea of “Woman,” we will also destroy the idea of “Man.”

3. The destruction of the idea of “Man”: this notion constitutes another patriarchal trap. Unmasking naturalist ideology has allowed us to demonstrate how science and its theories are sexist. But some go further and affirm that thought, language, and discourse are closed to women because they are “masculine.” Those of us who took that step have sunk into a defeatist position which hampers all of us. This produces a new twist in oppression which we must denounce:

—In the first place, by recalling that when we recognize that we are oppressed we do not thereby sum up our “being.” The social system is contradictory since, despite the oppression which it exercises, it permits us to be feminist, to decode the mechanisms of oppression, to ferret out the evidence of ideology in the various discourses and to do this using language.

—In the second place, by affirming that there is nothing in the social system that is “masculine.” Certain areas of science and certain concepts are mutilated and falsified because they are founded on relationships of power, not because they are elaborated by “men.” The “main enemy” is a hierarchical type of social relationship, where men are represented as histormically constructed, not as biological beings: as “men” precisely, not as males.

Radical feminism also expresses itself in relation to revolutionary currents which today challenge the status quo. It rejects any interference in its concerns by political groups, and considers certain notions, certain current expressions, as having been fundamentally falsified (e.g., the idea of “the primary struggle” and “the secondary struggle” — the terrorist insistence on capitalism as the explanation for all oppression, and the consequent ignoring of patriarchy). Radical feminism proposes to rediscover a materialist approach by using certain political concepts. If the notion of class distinction is correctly used, i.e., is based on the reality of actual oppressions instead of on a religious exegesis of Marx, it can be said that all women belong to the same social class and that this explains the transformation of sex into gender. This insistence that all women belong to the same social class — along with the break with naturalist ideology — is the premise for all feminist struggles. The women’s liberation movement in France, for example, was built on the affirmation of this concept, which broke with Marxist dogma.

At the present moment the radical feminist current, founded on these subversive questionings, seems to be stifled as much in its actions as in its discussions. Scarcely born, or rather reformed, the new feminism is threatened at its core from two different, but both reactionary, directions: the “leftist” cooptation on the one side, and cooptation by the ideology of neofemininity on the other. These two currents, which each in its own fashion (more or less guised) represent the interests of patriarchy, are those which are accepted by the mass media.

Nevertheless, the radical feminist current still exists. It has been the driving force in all the great feminist campaigns. It is radical feminism which is fundamentally subversive of the oppression of women and of all hierarchical social organization. Finally, it is in radical feminism that a number of isolated groups, dispersed throughout the country, find a mutual identity. It is time that radical feminism spoke out, and that it had a place for theoretical and political debate, where it can pool its experiences and analyses and have the results made widely known and discussed.

This is what we propose to contribute, within the limits of a quarterly journal. We hope that this enterprise will bring out of desk drawers papers which have been languishing there, and will also bring to the printed page articles which have not yet even been written for lack of hope of being published.

C.D. & M.P.

... since the time when people in the feminist movement loved to repeat that the theory of the oppression of women “had yet to be worked out,” much has been written and said, in France and in other countries, contributing to one or various analyses of that oppression and resulting in the taking of tactical positions.

The Marxist stumbling block

From the beginning of the movement two streams of analysis of the oppression of women have emerged. One was called “revolutionary feminism” (now “radical feminism”) — and to which we belong — and the other is known as the “class struggle tendency.” The latter has tried to find an “articulation” (as is said) between the women’s struggle and the class struggle, beginning with Marxist
theory, but without questioning it in what seems to us not only its gaps, but also its incoherencies in the way it "situates" the oppression of women. For the time being, in all these groups, it was only a matter of adding on diverse considerations about women, without questioning the principle of the monopoly of the working class, which has always been supposed to contain in its struggle the total subversion of "the" oppression system, that is, of capitalism only. To contest sexist mentality and institutions, one can only on ideological grounds, without basing this struggle on a materialist analysis of the oppression of women. It is necessary to link sexist mentalities, institutions, and laws to the socio-economic structures which sustain them. These structures form a specific system in relation to the capitalist system, and we call it: patriarchy. The basic analysis of the patriarchal system (as a system of production, having specific production relations between the sexes) has already been done within the MLF+, and we want in this journal to contribute to its better understanding and to its further development. Let us recall this analysis very briefly:

If men wage earners and some women (women wage earners, about 45% of the working population) undergo a common economic exploitation in capitalist production relationships, all women (those who work "the double day" and those who are housewives) undergo a common economic exploitation in production relationships which are not capitalist, which men do not suffer (but on the contrary benefit from) - the production of unpaid domestic services. It is the unpaid character of this work which situates it, in the analysis, outside of the capitalist system, one of whose characteristics is wages. Housewives are not paid for their work; they are by virtue of the marriage contract (theoretically for life) economically dependent on their husbands, who draw from this dependence a material and psychological power. This institution of the economic dependence of women has repercussions on their position in paid labor: the "supplementary" wage, part-time work, more frequent unemployment among women, etc.; all these mean economic dependence, the obligation to do domestic work, and relegation to the household.

This analysis permits us to define men and women as two opposed interest groups, and this opposition of interests is not situated only in the family. The economic inferiority of women in employment, like their lack of access to positions of power (including political power), and their restricted access to learning has to be linked to the division of work between the sexes, resting on the institution of the family. The result is a general power of men over women, in which the psychological devaluing of women (in addition to their material exploitation), the sexual oppression, and the physical violence exercised on women are the consequences, as much as a means, of enforcing this power.

The return to "essentialism"

After stepping aside from the orthodox Left, which is at our right because it leaves out the struggle between the sexes, we also have to parry another thrust: you are held responsible for the

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In the Right: a new assault by the good old argument on the difference between the sexes, which this time through the voices of women leaves out historical and dialectical materialism in order to let the naked truth of women's sexual bodies speak.

Everything that is said in the women's movement does not always have a dialectical form. That does not mean that beneath this discourse underlying theories do not exist. It is important to bring them to light in order to dissipate dogmas when these implicit theories (not necessarily conscious) seem to us to be contrary to an avowed feminist purpose.

There exists now a trend that uses the concept of "women's language" to us on a search for a feminine identity. Assertions such as "we are like this and we are like that, and above all we are not like you" are a way of saying to "them": go to hell. All right. But does this way of thinking really express a refusal of, or a questioning of masculine ideology and the system that produces it?

Otherness and body-identity

Some women proclaim the necessity for an "explosion of language," that is, the "masculine" language, because it carries, among other things, phallocentrism. They insist upon "another" language, which in its form will be closer to women's lived experience — and at the center of this experience they often put The Body. Thus their slogans are: to-liberate-the-body, to-speak-the-body. While it is right to denounce the oppression, the mutilations, the functionalization, and the objectivization which the female body undergoes, it is dangerous to center a search for feminine identity on the body. Moreover, the themes of Otherness and The Body are linked, because the most visible difference between men and women and the only one which is sure to be permanent (barring a mutation) is exactly the difference between their bodies. This difference has been the pretext utilized to "justify" the taking of power by one sex over the other.

When a group is in power, it is this group which disseminates the ideology and which dictates its categories. The group in power, which has a need to justify its domination, rejects through difference those whom it oppresses — "they cannot be treated as equals because..." Thus colonized people were generally "lazy" and "incapable" of making their own lands productive, etc. These differences are not explained by specific historical circumstances, for history evolves and can lead to revolution. It is safer for the oppressor to speak of natural differences, invariable by definition. From there come racist and sexist ideologies. And thus a status of inferiority becomes inextricably linked to a status of difference.

Now, after the men have ceaselessly repeated to us that we are different, here we have women who shout, as if they were afraid of not being heard and as if it were a new discovery: We are different!
The theme of difference in itself (whatever the content given to difference) serves the oppressor group. As long as the oppressor holds the weapons of power, all difference established between him and the others confirms him in the only difference that matters to him — that of holding power. If the Blacks have "rhythm in the blood," while the Whites do not, what does it matter? That is not going to change the relationships of power. On the contrary, all so-called natural characteristics attributed to an oppressed group serve to impress this group in a Nature which, given its status as oppressed, is then confused ideologically with a "nature which consists of being oppressed." In today's context, with oppression not having ceased, to insist on Difference (without analyzing its social character) is to give back to the enemy a proven weapon.

To claim a "Woman's language," or forms of expression which would be specific to women, also appears to us to be illusory. On one hand, the language called "explosive," extolled by certain women writers, seems to belong to a current, if not of thought, at least of literary style, which is widespread in literary schools where the male masters reign supreme. It is just as academic as other literary languages and just as masculine. On the other hand, this "Woman's language" is sometimes said to be closer to the body, to sexual pleasure, to direct sensations, etc. This would mean that there exists an expression by the body which is not mediated by the social structure, and that moreover this closeness to the body and to nature would be subversive. In our opinion, there is no direct rapport with the body. To extoll it is therefore not subversive, for it denies the existence and the power of social mediactions, which are precisely what oppress us in our bodies. At most one could demand a different socialization of the body, but without searching for a true and eternal nature. The latter kind of quest turns us away from the more significant struggle against the socio-historical contexts in which the human being is and always will be trapped. If there exists a nature of the human, it is exactly that of being social.

Witch-Woman and Cartesian Man

One could also sum up the approach of certain women in their quest for identity as an opposition between Witch-Woman and Cartesian Man. In going back to the witch as a positive image of woman, there are various aspects to be considered. We must look both at their subversive activities with reference to their history, and at the attributes that certain writers give them as symbols of liberation:

1. "Direct" contact with nature, with their bodies, and with those of others.
2. Their activities, their thought, and their language presented as a positive model of a specifically feminine culture, opposed to the masculine-oppressive culture.
3. And in addition to all that, an aureole of mystery and secrecy evoking the idea of a private territory guarded by women, or a kingdom where they are the queens.

The subversiveness of the witch was as follows: the alliance with the devil; medical practices; and her sexual activities (real or supposed), notably in the "sabbath." The alliance with the devil was surely for the women, as for all poor people, an engagement against the Church, but not a means of struggle against it. To believe in the devil, or to pretend to do so, is to confirm the Church in its dogma of evil. To equate, even in a victorious form, Woman with the Forces of Evil, enter again into the ideology of the Church.

The witches as healers, poisoners, abortionists, and midwives knew plants of the body well. They knew them not by osmosis, but by having studied them as healers. The witch utilized plants effectively; it is because she was familiar with them and classified them — a method which we call scientific. It is not better because it is called scientific, but it means that the witches used their brains in the same way as the men who later monopolized the medical profession.

The witches used to dance on the moor, yes, and they used to hide there. Wild nature was for miserable women the only place where they were allowed by society to survive. The witch as queen of the forests is like the domesticated woman as queen of the household — queen of those places, because excluded from the others. Mystery, night, the forest — these make up the clandestine life of pariahs and heretics. It is an underground from where one can fight, certainly, but for one who does not herself have liberty.

The sexuality of the witches? There is a very interesting aspect of the Sabbath reported by Michelet, and that concerns contraception. "No woman came back from the Sabbath pregnant," they said. It seems that there was often a simulation or staging of sexual acts and also practices called "unnatural" (because they did not result in conception, obviously!). Here we have a sexual insatiable very rationally regulated — control of procreation, but was it for the sake of the sexual liberation of women? Michelet describes "The Woman" who during the Sabbath "grovels," "humiliates herself," "offers herself," "gives herself to the crowd to be devoured," etc. If the witch had certain powers, for which she was feared and respected by the populace, that did not stop her apparently from being considered a sexual object. The conclusion is that one should beware of these Thrones for "Woman" which turn her into an Altar ("... on her back, a devil was officiating.").

There is this "other" language of the witch, advocated by certain women — language of the body, psalm-like, a visceral shout, etc. (even its silence, which it seems can be heard; then what was the point of asking for your turn to speak?). Is this language of the body, this language of cries sufficient to combat oppression? If we should not hesitate to give a shout from the guts in response to a way of
thinking that slams the door in our face, there is no reason to leave the monopoly of a certain conceptual discourse to men by rejecting it as “masculine,” oppressive.” It is necessary to be able to give a name to oppression and to analyze it (expose its mechanisms) in order to fight it. Men are only too willing to leave to us the monopoly of visceral cries and intuition. There again the segregation between the masculine and the feminine has been proven. It is playing the game of the oppressor when we ban knowledge and conceptual tools under the pretext that they have been used against us. It is the same thing, for example, as rejecting work on the pretext that it is “alienating,” that it is part of the “competitive, masculine” world, while the exclusion of women from “work” (that is, the banning of economic autonomy) is a much greater “alienation” at the very center of our oppression.

It is by insisting on ourselves as different, as strangers to the world of men, that we make ourselves their parrots:

Nature-Woman: confirmation of Culture-Man
Devil-Woman: confirmation of God-Man
Mystery-Woman: an abyss to be filled by the reigning ideology
Womb-Woman: haven for received ideas

Sphinx-Woman: the enigmatic smile of one who is powerless to speak.

Woman is supposed to hide a great secret, that of our origins, doubtless, under the pretext that gestation takes place in her body. As a result she can remain illiterate, because she knows too much. But she does not know what she knows (perhaps her ovaries know?): she is supposed to be a mystery to herself. She is said to be beyond formulation, reason, and science — in order to leave her behind.

Sexual Pleasure-Woman: avatar of Body-Woman. Sex-Woman, sexually
avid, sexually frigid, sex-anything-at-all. The special relationship to nature and the particular capacity for sexual pleasure attributed to women strongly recalls the language used about the Blacks, and even about the working class (in May 1968 one of the graffiti on the walls of Paris read “The workers suck better”). In brief, this is the language of ideology about the oppressed. A century ago men relegated us to frigidity or to “purity” in order to better use our bodies. A century later they consign us to the “total orgasm” to make us believe that in the ghetto of “nature” we have a liberty lacking to those who, “alienated” in the social structure, have in fact the means of control over us.

In all that is supposed to characterize women we always find oppression. Do we have the spirit of sacrifice? No, “they” sacrifice us. Maternal instinct? No, obligation of women to fill a certain role. We are close to nature? No, they ban us from access to the tools of social mastery, from knowledge of our own bodies from creation. One kind of creation they let us have — by an ambiguous word-

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We should claim as ours all human potentialities, including those unduly agreed to be masculine, that is, monopolized by men in order to have us more poorly under their boots. For example, rational discourse: it is up to us to modify it to choose its content. For example, violence: it is up to us to choose its forms and objectives, but it is necessary to use it against the violence of oppression. We want access to choice; we want to remove ourselves from the equation of women = oppressed.

More than women, we are individuals. Up to the present only the masculine person has the right to the neuter (to a nonsxed definition) and to the general. We want access to the neuter, that is, the general. Sex is not our destiny. A man, Sarah Guiry, said: “I would gladly agree that women are superior to us if that could dissuade them from being our equals.” That is the pedestaled-doornent tactics, that of kicking upstairs someone you want to get rid of. What “they” want is that we do not walk on their flower beds, that we serve their purposes but remain in our place. Equality is a menace to men; it threatens their privileges.

Those whose feminist approach consists of insisting above all (or perhaps exclusively?) on Difference oppose the notion of equality: “What? Claim equality with the oppressor?”

Equality-with-the-oppressor, however, it a contradiction in terms. If there is equality between two beings, there is neither oppressor nor oppressed. In the dictionary the word equal is defined thus: “Having the same quantity, dimension, nature, or value. See: identical, same, equivalent.” There are here two notions: that of resemblance and that of the same value. Women cannot be criticized for wanting to be considered as having as much value as men. But why do some people pretend to think that being “equivalent” means for women to be like men as they are now, before equality? If to be equal to men signifies by definition that they stop oppressing us, and if at the same time we claim equality for all human beings (that is, that men cease to be oppressors in general), what difference can we claim? According to what criteria? In the struggle for an egalitarian society, the difference that we pose, as feminists, is that of our political choices. When during a demonstration we form the vulva with our fingers instead of raising our list, what do we affirm? We affirm the specificity of our struggle against our specific oppression. We affirm that our principal front, as feminists, is the struggle for the destruction of the patriarchal system, of the phallocracy. From our position as oppressed persons, however, it is not a “feminine” society that we advocate. It is a society where men and women would share the same values — the same necessarily means antiphallocratic, antihierarchical.
In our struggle we demand the recognition of our history in History — the history of our oppression, the history of our revolts, the history of our cultural and technical contributions, etc. But our specific contributions, like all human contributions, have existed and still exist because of a hierarchical division of work based on sex. If we invented agriculture, pottery, the science of plants, the arts of tappistry and patchwork, we should have them recognized as economic and cultural contributions, but we are not to be confined to these alone. We propose to take an active action both in the terrain which has been given to us by men, but in subverting it and in force them to begin to take part in it, and at the same time in the field which we will conquer for ourselves, for example, music, mathematics, architecture, political and economic decisions. What we propose to and should bring about is an overall change in society and in the division of labor, guaranteeing equal access to the means of production and to the tools of culture.

We acknowledge a biological difference between men and women, but it does not in itself imply a relationship of oppression between the sexes. The struggle between the sexes is not the result of biology. We acknowledge a difference between men and women in the social hierarchy — psychological differences expressing at the same time the oppression of one sex by the other and the exclusion of both sexes from the potentialities attributed to the other. It is these differences that we want to abolish.

E.L.

A journal "on" women? No.

The word woman, I cannot and never could bear it. It is with this word that they have insulted me. It is a word of their language, a cadaver filled with THEIR phantasms working against US. Who is this “Us”? Women, to be sure — and there again that WORD. With that they “have had us,” as THEY SAY.

Well, then, a journal to try to understand what happens behind their words, the very ones that they impose on us, sometimes even inside our revolts. To understand that it is BY their words that we let ourselves be caught (woman, love, responsibility, honesty, fidelity, maternal feelings, feminine specificity), but THROUGH their (very) material institutions, that we are had (serfdom-marriage, underpaid work by comparison with theirs, gratis over-work for them, laws and violence against us, silence imposed on us, exploitation, dispossessing us of the world). That is not a matter of "words." But they play with words. Should we follow them? For, watch out, they know what they are doing materially to us. By the age of five it is fixed: they know the secrets of the language of contempt; at this age they go right to the fundamental core; only later will come the (same, but) censored language for oppressive usage, then called "feminine" values. Woman-as-specific-being: it is fixed because they already materially possess their woman: their mother (while waiting for their wife).

The days for their word games are over, now is the time for our analysis, in order that their words not subvert our struggle. "THEY® SAY . . . that every word must be passed through a sieve" (Monique Wittig, Les guérillères). And this sieve has to be that of reality, which their words mask.

Thus, the word woman: we do not have the right any more to use it all by itself, we do not have the right to think of it by itself. The reality “women” is sociological (political), the product of a relation between two groups, and of a relation of oppression. The real group of women is defined by its position as a group within this relation, just as the group of men is itself sociologically defined by its position as oppressor. It is not because we are “women,” but because we are oppressed in this relation that we alone can deconstruct (analyze and destroy) the mechanisms of oppression. And, like any besieged group, we have to study among ourselves, as a matter of priority, the tactics of the oppressor: his behavior (his violence, so perfectly tranquil) and his speech (his words, by which he walls us in), the fact that he starves us, and the fact that he tries to demoralize us. It is not enough to say at this point that the aggressor denies us existence, or that he negates us in our existence, and to pretend that, therefore, among ourselves we are going to “recover” our ego, our “identity,” an “other” identity — as woman. What besieged community can permit that, if it does not want to commit suicide within the fortress?

It is a question of knowing that our social “identity,” our real, material definition is that of besieged persons, and principally that we have to know how, by what strategy the aggressor denies us the ownership and the free disposition of ourselves, the free access to our own food. At the present time, historically, sociologically, he negates us by asserting that we are woman and by forcing us into what he has decided is the condition of “woman.”

Before coming back to this point, let us take up again the “siege” metaphor and consider what are its “moments” — this term being understood at the same time in the sense of an historical evolution of the situation and in the sense of taking diverse positions, which, in the moment where we are now, coexist.

Femininity, Feminitude, Feminism: the three “moments” of the battle

1. First moment: Femininity. Or: “All is for the best during a siege.” The besieger is at the gates of the ghetto. Food is inside the women’s city; the fields have been taken over by the aggressor. It is a quiet siege. He has blocked all exits, except for the largest gate, which is flower-decked (above all for Mother’s Day) and which by the lowered drawbridge leads to his camp. As long as the women agree to take this route, to go begging for their food (in exchange for what kind of work, besides), he will give them some crumbs. They are still hungry in their state of dependence (the material aspect of femininity), but the situation, it seems, can
be borne; all the more since the aggressor “furnishes” them also “the explanation” (the ideology of femininity): it is that their female constitution (biology) is to be hungry; they ARE a lack which he can fill (the proof: the crumbly, weakened by work/servitude and the lack of food, they think that he has to be right, that “that’s the way things are.” At most they give back to their masters their “contempt” that has been directed towards them: MEN ARE thus and so, but that also “is the way things are.” A few, however, individually refuse femininity and they go mad or are killed.

2. Second moment: Feminitude. Or the movement of self “re-cognition” by women. Or: “I have been starved by him without a doubt (first stage of raised consciousness), but I have some VALUE. For example: “I am light on my feet, I can jump and dance, I am going to fly away and build something else, far away from him. I am heavy with my own body, my body is beautiful. This self that they devalue, I will value.” But how can it be done “far away from him”? But who is this “I”? Critical questions. Uncertain answers. This feminitude, similar to negritude, this difference positively affirmed, this cultural feminism, similar to Black cultural nationalism — will these things make it possible to feed ourselves from our own hunger? To acquire confidence in one’s self, we may say, is necessary. This is true, and will only happen if we are together, amongst ourselves. But this “self” is emaciated, its stomach is bloated, it is the product of the dynamics of starvation, of the dynamics of siege. We cannot be satisfied with turning in place, with dancing all alone in our own circle, while they are there, walling us in, barring the roads to liberty. To believe that we could find our food in ourselves is to use an essentialist argument (the idea of an auto-nourishing self) or a metaphysical argument (waiting until manna falls from the sky). It is to play the game of the other; it is to consider the tactical tricks of the adversary (hunger, femininity) without seeing his strategy (siege, imprisonment); it is to focus on the effect without attacking the cause. It is to lock oneself into static reasoning; it is to make an impasse of reality.

The reality is that the sidewalks and city squares are carefully asphalted by the aggressor and that in the ghetto nothing grows that he does not allow to grow (except a few flowers in the cracks of the walls, which cannot replace the possession of fields of grain). Even our “feminine” qualities, like our “imperfections,” are the product of the political relation between men and women, the product of the siege relation. At least, if there is one quality — so obligatorily, so harshly acquired during our servitude — which we have to make use of, it is courage — courage to recognize ourselves and to get together, yes, but for the purpose of breaking the siege.

3. Third moment: Feminism. Or the women’s liberation movement. Or: to attack the social roots of “difference.” Or: “I will not be a woman nor a man in the contemporary historical sense; I will be a Person in a woman’s body.”

The reality is that food, the grain fields, are outside the ghetto. If there is an

“Nowhere” where we have to go to look for our food, it is there where we will find the reconquered fields, beyond the siege relation. If there is an “otherwise” which we must acquire our food, it is exactly by doing battle on the battlefield. This will not happen by dancing ring-around-the-rosy in the town’s main square, if we had the power to pull up the drawbridge, to lock ourselves up again. For the core of the problem is that the machinery of the drawbridge, the chains that keep it lowered toward the assailant, are not in our hands, but in his hands. The battlefield is the great open door of Femininity, it is the lowered drawbridge of oppression, it is the camp of the aggressor. It is in order to cross it in force that we must assemble our forces. None of us can be “herself” until all of us will have regained ownership of the world of reality. (Only afterward will our Imaginary, as well as that of men, be transformed.) For the moment what is necessary is concrete, tactical imagination, which proceeds from an analysis of facts.

Does that mean that utopia is to be rejected? Certainly not. Utopias, like schools and cities, are necessary to us: they are our words as oppressed beings, our sociological imagination. But utopia proceeds in fact from an analysis; and there are various kinds of utopias, as well as various kinds of analyses which underlie them. The ones which take into account the political reality (and thus are against it) are based on the following: women = class, sociologically defined in (from within, by) a material and historical relation of oppression, but whose oppression is itself ideologically related to the dominant group to a so-called biological determination of the oppressed class, and of that class alone. The other analyses which (sometimes without realizing it) reiterate (against us) the theory of the oppressor, its ultimate ideology, are based on: women = Woman.

Biological, ideological, political

It seems important to us to succeed in clarifying the relationship between what is political and what is “biological.” For — and it is here that we find a source of ambiguity and of possible confusion in our analyses — we can at the same time say that there is no relationship between a physical constitution and a social “condition” AND recognize that for the time being there is a relationship! And we have to formulate not the false problematic (very fashionable in the “scientific” disciplines) of finding out which is the biological “share” and which is the social “share” in the behavior of sex individuals, but rather the following questions: (1) In what way is the biological political? In other words, what political function does the biological fulfill? (2) In what way (and why) do social classes of sex correspond to biological classes of sex? (3) How does ideology operate materially? It is true that we already have elements of an answer to these questions, but the analysis must be carried further.

A. The biological as an ideology rationalizing the political. We know that the political class of men (as defined in the relation of oppression) defines us as a
biological class, in order to justify by nature its power as oppressor. They make use of the difference between the sexes, but in only one direction. For, contrary to what their loudspeakers would have us believe, they do not have in their minds any real difference between the sexes. If such were the case, it would suppose them to recognize of two sexed groups. However, they think of themselves as pure, the social, general beings, and not as a “biological group of men.” Group of men, they declare. But in their minds they have a quality, and only we would have a “particularity,” a physical constitution (principally defined through maternity). It is we who use the term “masculinity” as opposed to “femininity,” in a sociological analysis; but for them, “femininity” (a given belonging to the biological register) is opposed to “virility,” which is an act belonging to the psychological, social, human register, as they explain it to themselves (and to us) with so many pangs and so much complacency. We see thus a social group which decides, acts, thinks, organizes in power over another social group by defining it as the only biological one.

B. Ideology as materially effective upon reality. It is actually on the basis of our physical appearance that they constantly act out their power. (Example: a job opening is calculated in the employer’s mind at a certain wage outside of any consideration of sex, namely, if a man applies; the “normal” remuneration will drop 30% if it is an obviously female being who answers the advertisement.) In brief, our social class as “women,” the result of the political, has indeed, through the game of ideology, the material contours of our biological category.

C. The logical turning of the political back onto the biological. Starting from our awareness of their politics, and from our political analysis (namely, that two categories of sex do not exist, and thus cannot be thought of, outside of a relation of one to the other), we find out that, as a consequence of the fact that they have chosen biology to define us politically, their own political class also coincides with their physical contours. Thus, the exclusion of (physical) men from our groups is the very expression of the fact that we have understood their politics, that we consider them, in fact, as a political group. We have totally politicized anatomy. They had politically used only ours (when defining us alone ideologically as THE sex); our exclusion of them by virtue of anatomy is the logical turning of their politics back onto them. There one sees the turning of the political against the ideological.

Break the siege or die

If it is on the basis of our anatomy as women that we have been obliged to get together politically, it is indeed also in order not to forget that this biological category is political, that it is constituted by the social relation of oppression and by the very ideology of the oppressor. It is in order not to forget, in order to have the courage to recognize that if we unite our forces as anatomical women, it is to destroy ourselves as sociological women and at the same time to destroy men as sociological men.

We have to abolish the social classes of sex. In order to do that we must not allow ourselves to be invaded by the insidious question of identity, of values “specific” to each sex, not let ourselves be engulfed by the sole valorization of our “culture” of sex. We must not forget that “specific” means in the first place “uniquely pertaining to a species.” For us there is only one sole human species, and this excludes all discriminations, all hierarchies (of sexes, of races, or classes).

For us, the analysis has to be first of the power relation which transforms women (females) into women. A discourse and a practice which would center themselves on women as women can run the risk of unwittingly repeating the terms of the oppressor — of closing our category upon itself. And, in doing that, we would leave out all the women who do not have the material possibility of acting as if the aggressor does not exist, who do not have the leisure to fall back again into the trap of woman-valued-as-woman. In accepting these terms we would turn against ourselves, against our social sex group, by forging an “identity” which hides the material exploitation and the oppression which are the daily relationship which creates our class. For the women who are the most womanly, those who correspond most fully to the contemporary “identity” of our class, are the women at the poverty wage level, those whose husbands forbid them to go on strike, women with no wages at all, raped women, battered women, and abandoned women with dependent children.

It is not then we ourselves, as women, who need to be regained, but our freedom. We do not have only to promote our feminitude. If we must vitalize ourselves, if we must speak out and write, if we must act, it is in order to transform now the social, economic, and political relationships which lead to hierarchically classifying into so-called “sex” groups individuals who are identically human and identically socializable. It is a question of analyzing the system of social sex classes, in order to destroy it. We must break the siege — or slowly continue to die.

N.-C.M.

A theoretical journal for feminism? Yes.

We want to prevent a member of the National Assembly from saying that aging women cost the national economy too much, and that, for love of them, the Assembly will vote their retirement at age 60 to spare their employers the trouble of getting rid of them. We want to understand and bring to light the historical and
social determinants which have allowed one social group to be treated like cattle, and which have made of us — half of humanity — domestic beings raised for reproduction and the maintenance of the species.

We know the meaning of words, and we know that "love, abnegation, devotion" are the fake language of contempt, of humiliation, and of fear that pervade our daily lives. We — who are living beings — are treated like objects, because a society founded on violence, exploitation, and oppression implies (where it is a question of us) dispossessing us of our name, identity, rights, body; it implies rape, terror, murder. We are objects (as the case may be) of usage, of barter, of exchange, of fortune, of prestige, of power, of manipulation, of science. We, alone of all historically dominated social groups, have failed to recognize the social character of our condition because as women we are bound by individual (marriage) contracts to the patriarchy.

We know the meaning of words: "the eternal feminine," "instinct," "ouriou," confinement within "the nature of things." We know that psychology, categories of knowledge, intellectual disciplines, bourgeois values, idealism, all are a coded language. There is no such thing as essence. No such thing as Woman, as femininity, as the eternal feminine. There is a social group charged with mental tasks, held in contempt for having to do them, so little "specialized" that the language, which designates us and shapes us, describes us simultaneously as the sex and as the sex that has no sex organ, as the mother-goddess and as the whore, as the muse and as the blue-stockings. We know that "women" means power relation that implies the double-day, professional disqualifications, the lowest pay, the exclusive social charge of the aging, the infirm, and children. Some say: Woman. We say: women.

We are feminists because the commercial manipulation of our bodies, in our lives, leaves us no choice; because a society which permits the exposure of the genitals of baby girls shows clearly the political character of the hierarchy of the sexes, and shows clearly that it is not pornography which produces enjoyment, but the enjoyment of power which constitutes pornography.

As feminists we have to show that this hierarchy of the sexes has a historical and social character, and is thus arbitrary and reversible. We have to show that there are no "women" except in as much as an unequal relation of power makes of the oppression and the exploitation of one social group the condition of power of the other.

C.C.-P.

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