



Man on Women

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Radical feminism as a political movement is associated with a series of unjustified claims. It is, as I have been arguing, simply not true that "women are oppressed" or that "men and marriage are the primary obstacles to woman's human fulfillment." We now turn to three corollary claims: that

- monogamous marriage and the nuclear family are crucial instruments of exploitative capitalism
- romantic love is the ideology of sexism
- femininity and other manifestations of sexual differentiation are inimical to sexual equality.

So far I have relied mainly on philosophical and psychological considerations that implicate the entire cultural ethos of our times. But feminists sensitive to the social implications of economic determinism and class analysis (such as Simone de Beauvoir, Juliet Mitchell and Gail Pellet) have been preoccupied less with the psychology than the sociology of the family. They perceive sexism as a form of exploitation that conditions, and is conditioned by, capitalism. Juliet Mitchell thus inquires:

What does our oppression within the family *do to* us women? It produces a tendency to small-mindedness, petty jealousy, irrational emotionality and random violence, dependency, competitive selfishness and conservatism. These qualities are *not* the simple product of male chauvinism . . . *they are the result of woman's objective conditions within the family*—itself embedded in a sexist society (emphasis in original).

Putting aside the unfortunate self-deprecation in Mitchell's portrait of modern women (and noting, in passing, its characteristic misconception of dependency), what is significant is her firm insistence on the *objective* character of woman's condition and its rootedness in social relations that are presumably governed by the laws of consumer capitalism. To assert, as I have, that women are troubled in part by a universal existential anxiety does not address the question of whether the place of women in the family is not also plagued by the relationship of capitalism to the family structure.

R. D. Laing, David Cooper and their colleagues have for some time been attempting to develop a psychology of the modern family that illuminates individual "mental illness" in terms of social and economic pathologies. In Cooper's *The Death of the Family* a psychological argument about the interpersonal source of psychopathology is combined with a sociological argument about the economic origins of sociopathology; the result is a merciless indictment of the nuclear family. "The family form of social existence," Cooper writes, "that characterizes all our institutions essentially destroys autonomous initiative. . . . The family, over the last two centuries, has mediated an invasiveness into the lives of individuals that is essential to the continued operation of imperializing capitalism." Cooper's radical view, if at times obscurantist, is typical of the psychological-Marxist critique of the family. By prudently leavening psychology with neo-Marxism it aspires to escape the inherent conservatism of psychiatry (which is adaptation-oriented) without dispensing with its analytic insights, while achieving the intrinsic radicalism of Marxism without becoming mired in its historicism. Unhappily, it does not evade political

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naiveté and anthropological innocence, for both psychology and Marxism share these deficiencies.

The coupling of capitalist exploitation with the institution of the family, albeit useful in pointing up some of the current abuses of monogamous, nuclear structures, distorts fundamentally the historical character of the family as a social institution and dangerously misunderstands the political implications of eliminating it. I would further suggest that feminists who would eliminate the family in the name of liberation may in fact contribute to the creation of the anomic, atomized conditions under which the most pernicious forms of tyranny can flourish.

For most of human history all social relations have been perceived as an extension of familial and kinship relations, all authority as an extension of familial authority. The clan, the tribe, even the *gens* or *Volk* were originally but extended families; the kings were but fathers of extended families; vassalage was but a form of kinship fealty based on natural ties. Only in recent centuries have human relations become defamilialized—public, contractual relations based on interest and governed by law rather than by personal or natural relations. Artificial, voluntaristic (hence, dissoluble) bonds replaced natural, indissoluble ones; the separate, unrelated individual replaced the organic family as the primary unit of citizenship and social anthropology of Engels's *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*. They ought to look also at Sir Henry Maine's *Ancient Law*, another classic of nineteenth-century social anthropology that depicts in some detail the development noted here:

The movement of the progressive societies has been uniform in one respect. Through all its course it has been distinguished by the gradual dissolution of family dependency and the growth of individual obligation in its place. The individual is steadily substituted for the family . . . from a condition of society in which all the relations of persons are summed up in the relations of Family, we seem to have steadily moved [to one] in which all these relations arise from the free agreement of individuals.

This is no more than the evolution of the natural into the artificial polity, the corporate into the consensual state, the feudal-agrarian into the bourgeois-industrial society. It is in fact the coming of capitalism. The family is precisely the precapitalist form of natural social structure that capitalism destroys. This is not merely an historical fact but a necessary consequence of the alienation and contractualization of human relations that attend capitalism. Capitalism is founded on the objectification and commodization of the person (as, for example, "labor power" in Marx's language), on the alienation of the individual from natural human ties, on a celebration of private interest that sets each atomized man and

woman against every other man and woman. Capitalism has not used the family, it has assayed to destroy it, and if vestiges of it have survived, it is only a tribute to the incompleteness of the capitalist revolution.

The most distressing feature of the feminist argument is not, however, its failure to understand that the organic family represents a form of community inimical to capitalism but its myopic support of "reforms" that abet capitalism in its subjugation and destruction of the family. I can, for example, think of no better way to corrupt what little may be left of the idea of personal duty in familial relations than the introduction of a public contract into marriage. For if capitalism is, in the social realm, the contractualization of human relations, the marriage contract represents nothing more than the bourgeoisification of the family. How better to commoditize interpersonal relations than to spell out supposedly permanent relationships in terms of temporary gains and losses? How better to alienate individuals from their identities than to treat them as business associates in a contract entered into exclusively on the basis of benefits received and thus to enhance the private interests of the contracting persons? Women have often assailed men who think the marriage license is a bill of sale legitimating their purchase of a maid or sex object—the price being the man's obligation to provide security. It is hardly an improvement to insist that women must be sure to strike a fair bargain, must be guaranteed a more just price. Indeed, it is no improvement at all, for it does no more than substitute a contract requiring security as the payment for sex and maid service with a contract requiring sex as the payment for sex (guaranteed orgasms for all), housework as the payment for housework (alternating nights for doing dishes), and security as the price for security (both partners work). What then is gained? The family remains a captive of private interest and acquisitiveness, marital partners persist in viewing themselves as consumers seeking the best possible bargain, and the narcissistic mentality so vital to the operation of capitalism is given additional potency. The strength of the family in resisting the capitalist mentality has always been in its firm belief in mutuality and in natural obligations that exist independently of benefits received. It is no accident that Proudhon, a caustic anarchist critic of nineteenth-century capitalism, perceived in the traditional family an alternative lifestyle wholly inimical to capitalism and perfectly conducive to mutualist anarchism.

In its natural form the family can be a bulwark against the ravages of capitalist depersonalization and against the encroachments of totalistic states with their designs on the autonomy of individual men and women. I noted earlier a trend in psychology (represented by R. D. Laing) in which feminists

have found considerable comfort. There is another and different tradition that deserves attention. That tradition is associated with names such as Erich Fromm, Bruno Bettelheim and Theodore Adorno, and has tried to draw a composite portrait of the personality type most vulnerable to mass movements and authoritarian ideologies. The research emerging from this tradition ought to be of interest to feminists because it identifies as the primary victim of authoritarianism precisely the sort of deracinated, homeless, wandering urbanite the feminist seems to associate with liberation. It is the person uprooted from natural ties who craves simplistic answers and authoritarian solutions, the person alienated from a collective familial identity who capitulates so easily to the blandishments of demagogues, mass parties and virulent ideologies. The darker side of liberation is alienation; freedom can also be a euphemism for anomie. Erich Fromm's warning in his *Escape From Freedom* explores these ambivalences in terms feminists cannot afford to ignore:

Modern man . . . has become free from the external bonds that would prevent him from doing and thinking as he sees fit. He would be free to act according to his own will, if he knew what he wanted, thought and felt. But he does not know. He conforms to anonymous authorities and adopts a self that is not his. . . . In spite of a veneer of optimism and initiative, modern man is overcome by a profound feeling of powerlessness . . . the despair of the human automaton is fertile soil for the political purposes of fascism.

The contemporary family, corrupted, abused, frequently stultifying, may do little to retard the emergence of powerlessness and desperation, but surely its elimination will only hasten the coming of the dismal scenario depicted by Fromm. For even in its most perverse forms the family stands in the way of that odious *Gleichschaltung*, that monolithic leveling process, by which fascist regimes manage to divide and thus conquer men and women.

Unfortunately, there is little evidence that feminists think in these terms. Convinced that the family is an instrument of capitalist exploitation, they conceive of liberation only in terms of its elimination. Because monogamous marriage has so often debilitated marital partners and damaged their children they see no alternative to its radical transformation. Yet the healthy family may constitute the only environment within which permanent relationships built on uncalculating love and unneurotic commitment are possible. Marriage may be the last institution in the modern era that still sanctions a disinterested mutuality: where it is possible to give without reckoning emotional profit margins, to support without demanding contractual equity, to feel responsible without inquiring about



compensation, to love without assuming passion is ephemeral. Not that love finds much place in the distrustful assemblages capitalism and neglect have made of modern marriage. It clearly does not. But it will find an even more hostile reception in the anomie, alienated world that is likely to follow the Death of the Family.

To gamble on the death of the family is reckless; to risk the death of love is lunacy. For love is not only a precious gift, it has been the race's most spontaneous and potent weapon in warding off the depersonalizing encroachments of modernism: commoditization, efficiency, exchange, contractualization and bureaucracy. Romantic love has been a natural enemy of regimentation and exploitation since the Renaissance. It has grown up alongside monolithic state power, as its natural antidote. There is no system of orderly power—neither the institutionalized enmities of Shakespeare's Verona, nor Weber's Rational Bureaucracy, nor Mosca's Ruling Class, nor Nixon's Pentagon System, nor Huxley's Brave New World—that fails to tremble before the passionate spontaneity, the uncompromisable loyalty, the will to eternity of lovers.

How strange then to find among feminists the inversion of this unsubtle truth—the claim that romantic love is but the pretty tinsel with which chauvinists decorate the cages in which they imprison women.

If it was ever alive, love is now dead. Kate Millett has said so. If it was ever more than an illusion, it is now no more than a "middle-class myth." Germaine Greer has pronounced this verdict on both love and marriage. I suspect that Norman Mailer's male chauvinism is, in the eyes of some feminists, the least of his sins. It is his belief in *myth* that makes him so unforgivable a her-

etic. While chauvinism is a large and accessible target, the "myth" of love is a more elusive and more engaging foe; it camouflages sexism and obscures repression in a fog of sentiment.

Rather than attacking love outright, many feminists follow Greer's lead and move against it by indirection, by launching an assault on myth, mystery and mystique. This tactic skirts the unsavory business of indicating sentiment, while exploiting the secularism and technologism that are today so very fashionable. Nobody in an ardently agnostic culture, the premise seems to be, would be caught dead believing in anything *mythic* or *mystical*. Thus any term that requires discreditation need only be prefixed with a "myth" root. Betty Friedan, for example, opened the campaign on sexism with a book called *The Feminine Mystique*—and without reading another word we all knew femininity was in for a hard time. When "romantics" (already a pejorative) preoccupied with the psychology of love speak about the physical diffuseness and mental intensity of sexual response, feminists can dismiss them with nothing more than the phrase "the myth of vaginal orgasm" (cf. Anne Koedt). Love itself can be disposed of merely by intimating that it is an unintelligible mystery, a chauvinist myth.

What is most telling about the pejorative use of these terms is the implicit tribute paid to the supposed "realities" of omnipotent science. What cannot be seen with the naked eye, what cannot be measured by scientific instruments, what is not susceptible to controlled experiment, simply does not exist. If vaginal orgasm does not manifest itself as neural spasms visible to trained observers during laboratory intercourse, it cannot exist. If femininity is not specifiable in terms of gene-linked hereditary traits, it can only be a myth. The feminist movement has, in fact, forged a dubious alliance with crude behavioralism and pop science; in their crusade against the old mythmakers they have become victims of the new mythmakers. The old myth made Man the measure of all things, thereby permitting Man's own imagination free play in defining the universe, though inadvertently raising questions about whether Man meant humanity or just men. The new myth (the myth that there are no myths) avoids these sexist ambiguities by suggesting that Measure is the measure of all things, including men and women. What is, is what can be measured—forget the rest.

The feminists are perfectly right: love, femininity, vaginal orgasm and all the images associated with them are myths—mythic through and through. They cannot be replicated by technology, they are gallingly impervious to empirical experiment, they obstinately refuse to be reduced to numbers or to neuters. They exist completely in the human imagination. But so also are philosophy, art, morality, politics and revolution wholly mythic; they are produced by and exist only in the human imagination. Civilization itself

is but a concatenation of smaller myths into a pervasive Myth that reaches across generations and gives to homo sapiens their human identity. Do we really want to dispose of the troublesome and often abused notion of femininity by denying our species' humanity? By scientizing our self-image in the manner of B. F. Skinner's *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*? If we are to be completely "scientific" and limit our definition of existence to pure physical observables, not only is there no such thing as vaginal orgasm, there is no such thing as clitoral orgasm. In fact, there is no such thing as orgasm at all—understood as a mental response to psychosomatic interaction with another human being. There are only muscle spasms and neural reactions that impact in certain as yet unknown ways on particular areas of the brain. And that is not what anybody who has ever had a sexual experience means by orgasm. No more than we mean, when speaking of a Bach violin suite, the atmospheric vibrations produced by dragging the tail of a dead horse across the entrails of a dead cat.

To say, then, that love is a myth is to say of it no more than we say of all the concepts and ideals of civilization. The human creature is a subtle and creative being who conjures meaning where there is none, who reads into inanimate molecules the secret of life, who posits in a material universe the immateriality of the soul, who creates for an inchoate cosmos that clearly has none a cosmic Creator who in turn explains and justifies the existence of humanity. But mythology, the accusation comes, is awash in the backwaters of unreason—susceptible to tidal forces of cultural fascism and the cult of blood. Witness Mailer's flirtation with fascist ideas. Yet feminism swims in its own stagnant pool—immersed in a scientific reductionism whose natural outlet may well be a technocratic fascism of its own. We need not be Luddite critics of industrial progress or Lawrencian romantics about some past Golden Age to understand that our technology is increasingly subordinating our humanity to its own technical purposes. We need not resent the constructive demystification required in past centuries in order to perceive that the process by which we once removed pernicious superstitions is now being employed to denude men and women of their very humanity. In an age of unreason and superstition a people can become slaves to our secularism, impotent vassals of our "progressive" skepticism; the science with which we conquered nature and superstition has become our sovereign master. In the eighteenth century Mailer would have appeared as a Jesuit reactionary fighting to preserve a moribund power structure that used mythology as an instrument of legitimization. But today he is an heretical believer at war with a religiously atheistic society, a revolutionary who would use myth to smash the complacent materialism that is at the very center of the American system of power.

Guilt by association is a poor sort of argument, but has it never given a feminist pause to realize that her battle to demythologize women may, over the long term, be part of the effort to dehumanize the entire species? That her comrades on the barricades are technocrats and manipulators for whom the reduction of humans to neural robots, satisfied by isolated acts of physical self-gratification, is a useful step on the road to the fully controlled society?

Guilt by association remains, however, a two-edged sword in the hands of feminism's critics. If the myth-breakers include dull visionaries of a neuter, uncreative, placid utopia, the mythmakers include cultists of blood and violence, genocidal advocates of racial purity and slaves of a turgid irrationalism. It is not enough, the prudent feminist will answer, to decry the end of mythology. Some myths may be beneficent but others are clearly dangerous—ideological weapons in the hands of ambitious oppressors. The question thus remains whether femininity is beneficent or malicious. What, in reality, is the nature of Woman? This line of reasoning leads directly to the final and most significant issue in the ideology of feminism: the question of woman's "real nature" and the related claim that femininity is fundamentally inimical to equality between the sexes.

Much of the argument about women's real nature has revolved around moot biological issues that are, I believe, peripheral to the central problem. Opponents of feminism have tried to link femininity to hormonal, genetic and other biological factors, as if such arguments could demonstrate the ineradicability of femininity and the ensuing futility of the feminist rebellion (see, for example, Lionel Tiger's "Male Dominance" in the *New York Times Magazine*, October 25, 1970). Conversely, proponents of feminism have pointed to post-biological conditioning and cultural socialization as primary sources of femininity, as if these contentions not only proved that femininity was, after all, eradicable, but that it was by definition undesirable. This seems to be Firestone's position when she argues that overcoming inequality between the sexes requires "eliminating differences"—that we find a definition of human nature independent of either femininity or masculinity.

Neither of these arguments really comes to terms with the relevant issue; each accepts a framework for discussion that can produce only confusion and dogma. Both the biological determinists who see woman's nature as physiologically fixed and the environmentalists who see in it no more than a changing product of evolving cultures are guilty of two common fallacies: The first is what I will call the onion-peeling fallacy and the second, more generally known, is the naturalistic fallacy.

The onion-peeling strategy, which usually is a forerunner of the onion-peeling fallacy, presupposes that

the "real nature" of Woman (or Man) can be discovered only by peeling away the layers of education, socialization, role-identification, politicization, indoctrination and acculturation in which "civilization" has wrapped the "essential being." Thus to view the essential being underlying Woman requires stripping away the conditioned attributes of femininity and womanliness until the naked, natural core is revealed. However, what the onion-peeling fallacy suggests about the onion-peeling strategy is that when all of the multiple layers and secondary accretions are stripped away in the quest for the essential core, the onion itself may disappear. Having no pith, the onion quite literally is its multiple layers; the inside layers are no more definitive of its nature than the outside layers. (Indeed, the tree corollary indicates that the outer layers may be more essential, carrying the vital life sap.) Aggressive peelers may discover that in denuding people of sexual and other social and cultural roles they denude them of human essence altogether. Strip away masculinity and femininity from men and women and the result may be neuter things with no discernible human identity at all. The warning that emerges from the onion analogy is that women are not human beings clothed in a removable mantle of femininity; they are woman-human-beings whose humanity is expressed in and through (among other attributes) their womanhood. Humanness, pure and simple, is a meaningless abstraction. The search for the quintessential being underneath the culturally conditioned woman must necessarily fail.

Even were it successful, it would have little bearing on the feminist argument. For—and this brings us to the naturalistic fallacy—the fact that certain characteristics are "natural" or biologically rooted is quite irrelevant to the question of whether they are desirable or irreversible. Conversely, the fact that they may be acquired rather than intrinsic does not automatically make them undesirable or reversible. Some would argue that homo sapiens kill by nature, but this is hardly a justification for killing; others claim that loving is an acquired trait, yet this clearly cannot delegitimize love. In fact, whether femininity is natural or acquired cannot begin to tell us anything about whether it is a justifiable or attractive way of identifying a particular set of human beings. The tiresome debate about biology versus culture, nature versus conditioning, is finally irrelevant. It asks questions that the onion-peeling fallacy demonstrates cannot be decisively answered, and it precipitates answers that—even were they legitimate—the naturalistic fallacy shows to be irrelevant.

The only question worth asking then is "Do women wish to define their identities by femininity?" If not, by what other attributes? There is no going back to essential human nature, no retrieving of an abstract humanness. Humanity is always embodied in the con-

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no settlement at the expense of children, nor permit reform to become a smokescreen for narcissism. They will compel society to permit women to work under conditions of full equality, recognizing that womanliness is not a function of housework or child care but an identity and a style that can be expressed in any human occupation. Reforms must also recognize that the labor market is full, that there are far more jobseekers than jobs, even without women in the market, that acquisitiveness and competition are in themselves inimical to liberation and useless in the struggle to give meaning to leisure.

In view of these facts, reformers will neither romanticize work nor glamorize labor. They will not, in other words, urge men to become more paternal and less competitive so that women can become less maternal and more competitive. They will strive rather to provide couples and their children with more, not less, time together, giving both partners an equal share of parenthood *and* work in the hope that families will be strengthened when sharp, stereotypical role differentiations are overcome. They will, in this spirit, urge a radical restructuring of the labor market that will permit the splitting of jobs and the halving of schedules so that far more men and women can work part of the time—expanding the number of jobs while giving couples both an adequate joint income and sufficient time to nourish their intimacy and raise their children. They will grant women legal rights over their bodies and provide alternate care centers for their children but will maintain an equal interest in the rights of children to meaningful parental care and thus urge parents to develop life patterns that minimize the use of such centers. They will confront the double standard in sexual relations, not by encouraging increased promiscuity and adultery by women, but by pressing for increased commitment and fidelity in men, hoping to create a climate in which both men and women will benefit more from a freely chosen monogamy than from the mandatory polygamy of our present times. Even Frederick Engels, in his radical critique of capitalist sexism, believed that real equality of women would “result far more effectively in men becoming really monogamous than in women becoming polygamous.”

Programs of reform will then seek always to enrich, never to impoverish, in the name of emancipation. In treating, for example, the sexist abuse of language they will prefer reintroducing the distinction between Master (or single men) and Mr. (for married) to reducing Mrs. and Miss to an impoverished “Ms.” (though the universal “M.” for all forms of address might be desirable if limited to formal correspondence and communication). In confronting the relationship between consumer capitalism and the family, they will attempt to insulate the family from contractualization, alienation and other capitalist pathologies rather than aiding capitalism in its

liquidation of marriage. Understanding that the capitalist mentality has produced corrupt marital partnerships, they will use the revival of familial mutualism as a weapon against an interest-infected society. They will acknowledge the power of complex myths in lending meaning to life and oppose the technocratization of interpersonal relations with the same conviction that they support the mystery of committed love. Everywhere they will prefer subtlety to panacea, diversity to uniformity, mutuality to competition, interdependence to separatism.

They will, in short, be deeply and radically subversive of Western society's institutionalized decadence, not by echoing the fashionable scientific iconoclasm that is integral to the civilization it pretends to assault, but by insisting that no civilization can survive—much less remain free and just—unless the human trinity of woman, man and child sanctifies its spirit.

I have not the slightest doubt that such a program of reform will, because it is much more arduous and far more radical, be far less attractive to many of the women and men who would like to see some change occur. To excoriate marriage is easy; it is almost dead anyway. To censure men takes little courage; they are for the most part as confused and impotent and ridden with despair as women. To challenge the ethos of our civilization is far more difficult, far less certain of success. Narcissisms, technocracy, uniformity, simple-mindedness, skepticism, competition, acquisitiveness, impotence and despair are degenerative diseases of advanced cultures that no society has previously cured. To ask that women preoccupied with their own condition concern themselves with the ills of the world is to ask a great deal. Yet if their interest truly is in the elusive liberation after which they have named their movement, they have no choice but to ask that of themselves. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, sexist that he was, understood it perfectly:

Liberty is a food easy to eat, but hard to digest: it takes very strong stomachs to stand it. I laugh at those debased peoples who, allowing themselves to be stirred up by rebels, dare to speak of liberty without having the slightest idea of its meaning, and who imagine that, in order to be free, it is enough to be insubordinate. O proud and holy liberty! If those poor people could only know thee, if they realized at what a price thou art won and preserved; if they felt how much more austere are thy laws than the yoke of tyrants is heavy: their feeble souls would fear thee a hundred times more than slavery; they would flee from thee in terror, as from a burden threatening to crush them.

Women and men shall know this liberty together—secured by mutual struggle, sustained by mutual love—or they shall know it not at all.

(This is the second part of a two-part article.)