

## 9. A materialist feminism is possible\*

The first issue of *Feminist Review* (January 1979) contained a review of my work by two English sociologists, Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh. I replied to this three issues later and sought to show, first, the various ways in which they had misrepresented what I had written; second, what I think the concerns of feminist criticism should be; and third, and most important, the various ways in which Barrett and McIntosh fundamentally misconceive marxism. It is not necessary in this collection to include the first part of the article, since the collection itself makes the relevant articles available in English, but the latter two parts are significant because they expose the widespread theoretical schizophrenia of the left on the subject of women's oppression. The contradictory analyses Barrett and McIntosh produce are due, I believe, to a desperate desire to continue to exempt men from responsibility for the oppression of women.

### Marxism misunderstood: abused and used

Barrett and McIntosh's article rests on a set of attitudes which are common in intellectual circles:

- 1 a religious attitude to the writings of Marx;
- 2 an assertion that marxism constitutes a whole which one must take or leave;
- 3 a confusion between the materialist method, used for the first time by Marx, and the analysis of capitalism which he made using it; or rather the reduction of the first to the second;
- 4 a confusion, voluntarily perpetuated, between these two things and

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the interpretation which 'marxist' sects make of contemporary society; and

5 a presentation of this triple confusion as the whole (to be taken or left) of 'marxism', which is in its turn not only presented as a science, but as The Science having all the characteristics of this pure essence: in particular, neutrality and universality.

The religious attitude builds Marx into an object of study in himself. 'Marxologists', as their name indicates, are interested in Marx *qua* Marx. They lose sight of why Marx is important; or rather they invert the order of priorities. They judge Marx not in terms of politics, but rather they judge politics in terms of Marx. This talmudic attitude may at first sight seem contradictory to the very varied interpretations to be found among the different marxist sects (in itself no bad thing) and the fact that their analyses, all supposedly 'marxist', diverge radically among themselves. But in reality the reverence for the letter of Marx, the constitution of this into the ultimate, quasi-divine reference, the dogma of infallibility, serves to construct the *authority* with which later 'marxists', whoever they may be, adorn themselves. Recourse to *argument from authority* – I am right because I'm a Marxist – is by no means peculiar to marxists, but that doesn't make it any more excusable.

Marxism is erected as the value of values and is seen as not only above the struggles, but outside them. The ultimate perversion, and one which is moreover widespread, is that people then come to judge real oppression, and even the very existence of oppression, according to whether or not it corresponds to 'marxism', and not marxism according to whether or not it is pertinent or not to real oppressions. This perversion is not, of course, a simple diversion of the intellect, devoid of political meaning. For to stress in a revolt, like a women's revolution, only that which is consistent with their interpretation of marxism, allows people eventually to decide that a revolt is invalid or unimportant ('what matters is to be a marxist, not to make a revolution').

In so far as these two linked attitudes incarnate 'marxism' today, it is more than understandable that most of the oppressed, including most feminists, refuse to call themselves 'marxists'. Like them, I stress those things in marxism which are consistent with women's revolt. I won't shed one tear for marxism if it has to be abandoned because it is seen to be useless in analysing oppression. This is an essential difference between my approach and that of Barrett and McIntosh because it

seems to me that the very meaning of marxism rests in its political utility. People who do not have a specific political interest – who are not part of an oppressed group – have diverted this meaning by making marxism into an object in itself. Or rather, in so doing they have revealed that they are not politically engaged. But what does this mean? Is it even possible? Nothing is outside the field of politics: one is simply on one side or the other. If you are not on the side of the oppressed, you are on the other side; and your intellectual approach will show it.

*Marxism and the politics of knowledge*

Subordinating political validity to theoretical 'truth' is a typically reactionary procedure (and, additionally, one contrary to the spirit of marxism). Theoretical truth – whatever theoretical truth it may be – simply does not exist. For where does a theory draw its truth from? In what can it be more or less true than another theory, if not in that it serves a class; that it is true or false from a *political* point of view, from a given position in the class struggle (in the wide sense)? To what 'absolute truth' can one refer to decree a theory 'correct' without making reference to the class struggle? I do not know; or rather, I know only too well. This absolute truth is what bourgeois science pretends to possess; and it is precisely this pretention that materialism deflated. Marx precisely denounced it in saying that all intellectual production is the product of a real situation and practice. Science, capital S, does not exist, and what does must be called 'bourgeois science'.

It is therefore strange to see some 'marxists' (like Louis Althusser) rehabilitating the notion of Science and laying claim to an absolute truth, but this time for marxism. This status is simply not compatible with the very theory – marxism – for which it is claimed, at least in so far as marxism does not break with the approach which engendered it – materialism. But it is more than contradictory, it is disquieting, because the pretention to universality, to the absolute, is precisely the mark of intellectual products coming from dominant positions. Only dominants claim to be above the *mêlée*, and they must claim so to be since all their knowledge, their Science, tries to claim that this *mêlée* does not exist; or – in a secondary fashion – to deny the class struggle. From this it would seem that any claim to universality, in knowledge of no matter what, hides a dominant perspective (of the dominant group in whatever inter-group antagonism is at stake, and varies from case to case).

But Barrett and McIntosh present as a criticism the fact that:

it is clear throughout her work that Delphy's theoretical position is closely related to her political stance, and indeed she has argued that 'each is indispensable to the other'.

They thereby imply not only that *their* theoretical position is *not* related to their political position, but further that this is a good thing: that theory can be independent of the social and/or political position that one occupies, and that it *should* be. In the article which they cite (see p. 211) I say that theory should not be independent of politics, but that anyway it cannot be, even should it want to be. In so doing I am only reaffirming what has been said elsewhere by many other authors, starting with Marx, and which is the basis of the materialist approach. All knowledge is the product of a historical situation, whether it knows it or not. The idea of a neutral science – of a theory which is not related to a social/political position – is not in itself a neutral idea; it does not come from an *absence* of socio-political position, since such an absence is inconceivable. The idea that knowledge does not have a foundation in the social position of its producers is, on the contrary, the product of a very precise social position: the position of dominance.

So, when Barrett and McIntosh see the rooting of a theory in a political position as a weakness, they reveal at the same time that they adopt a notion of knowledge and hence of marxism which is not only profoundly anti-marxist, but above all profoundly reactionary and hence antifeminist. Two of the most serious practical political implications of this situation, which are visible in their article, are that on the one hand it justifies their not revealing the political position from which they speak, and on the other, it implies that people *other than the oppressed* – theorists, scientists – may talk about the oppression. This stance is directly linked to the reactionary content of the political position they are hiding.

We have seen that the reification-deification of Marx serves to construct the *authority* from which the imposition of 'marxist' theses is then *argued*. This is simply a way of evading the discussion: of dispensing, or thinking one is dispensing, with the need to prove the internal coherence of an argument by calling on a principle of authority. It justifiably horrifies feminists – and others – and it distances them from marxism.

*Marxism and the analysis of capitalism*

There are many 'marxist' theses. They all have, however, one point in common: all the different parties and schools which call themselves 'marxists' today agree to perpetuate, under cover of the authority which their talmudic studies have conferred on Marx the man, an unpardonable confusion between the principles of materialism and the analysis which Marx made of the capitalist mode of production (and which in turn they interpret liberally and diversely). Although inexcusable, this reduction of the former to the latter is today so widespread that most 'marxists' – and plenty of others – think that capitalism 'invented' exploitation, that capitalism is exploitation, and that exploitation is capitalism. Here again, it is not just a matter of simple 'error' or 'ignorance' striking by chance. This 'error' has a political meaning which feminists have clearly recognized: it makes the antagonism between the proletarians and the capitalists – which is one of the possible forms of exploitation – into the principal conflict wherever it exists; into the model for all oppression; and finally into the very definition of exploitation. This is evident when 'marxists' say:

1 either that feminism cannot use marxism: 'no concept of relations of production developed on the "model" of Marxism . . . includes the necessity of sexual division' (Diana Adlam (1979) in a review of *The Main Enemy*);

2 or that the exploitation of women does not exist since marxism is indifferent to sexual division (Mark Cousins (1978) in *mf*).

Both here confuse marxism – the method – with the marxist analysis of capitalism – one of the possible applications of this method.

The concepts used for the marxist analysis of capitalist exploitation (or *Capital*, to simplify) cannot actually account for the exploitation of women, for the same reason that they cannot account for the exploitation of serfs, or slaves, or indentured servants, or prisoners in labour camps, or African share-croppers. The simple reason is that the concepts used to account for exploitation by wages – and it is this which is the subject of *Capital* – cannot account for the exploitation of the unwaged. But the concepts used in the analysis of capitalism are not the whole of marxist thought. On the contrary, they are themselves derived from more general concepts. How, otherwise, would Marx have been able to analyse non-capitalist modes of production and exploitation, such as slavery and feudalism? The concepts of *class* and *exploitation* do

not come from the study of capitalism; on the contrary, they pre-exist, it, permit it, and are at the origin of the notion of capitalism in its marxist sense, i.e. as a particular system of exploitation. These more general concepts – class and exploitation – not only in no way require that sexual divisions be ignored, but on the contrary are eminently useful in explaining them. And I mean here 'explain' in the strong sense: not just in describing it, not in describing only what happens after the division exists, but in accounting for its *genesis*.

These concepts are the key concepts of materialism to which I see two foundations. For me, the first foundation of materialism is that it is a theory of history, one where history is written in terms of the domination of social groups by one another. Domination has as its ultimate motive exploitation. This postulate explains and is explained by the second foundation of materialism: the postulate that the way in which life is materially produced and reproduced is the base of the organization of all societies, hence is fundamental both at the individual and the collective level.

*Marxism and women's oppression*

Marxism is, by all the evidence, materialist. To this extent it can be used by feminism. In so far as materialism concerns oppression, and inversely if we accept that to start from oppression defines among other things a materialist approach, a feminist science will tend inevitably towards a materialist theory of history. To me materialism is not one possible tool, among others, for oppressed groups; it is *the* tool precisely in so far as it is the only theory of history for which oppression is the fundamental reality, the point of departure.

This had been hidden across the years by people who have appropriated marxism and, in so doing, have not only reduced materialism to the analysis of the capitalist mode of production alone, but in addition have evacuated the very materialism of this analysis because they have made it one academic analysis among others, and in competition with the others on its 'intellectual merits' alone. They have thus dropped the deep meaning which propels marxist analysis and which distinguishes it as an approach far more than its content – the explanation of and struggle against oppression. It is therefore clear that the non-recognition of sexual division in the analysis of *Capital* in no way prevents the application of materialist concepts to the oppression of women. However, this non-recognition poses a problem – not for women, but for the

analysis of the capitalist mode of production. It is in fact not so much a matter of non-recognition as of non-problematization. The analysis Marx made of wage exploitation is not, as Mark Cousins pretends, indifferent to the division of the sexes, or at any rate it is not so in the sense that Cousins (and others) understand. They think that in the analysis of capital, the positions described – or the classes constituted by the analysis (capitalists and workers) – can be indifferently occupied by men or women. The fact that they are above all occupied by men is seen as an external factor, and one which removes nothing from the validity of the analysis. This implies that the latter would be the same if the classes were constituted in equal parts of women and men. But this is false: the analysis of the capitalist mode of production is indifferent to the sexual division in the sense that the fact that the positions *could not* be occupied indifferently by men or women is not even perceived as a problem. Their theory is indifferent to the problem, certainly, but in the opposite sense: it takes the sexual division as given, it recognizes it and integrates it: it is based on it.

Hence a materialist approach cannot be content with adding the materialist analysis of the oppression of women to the analysis of the oppression of workers made by Marx, and later marxists. The two cannot be simply added together, since the first necessarily modifies the second. Feminism necessarily modifies 'marxism' in several ways: first, because it is impossible for it to accept the reduction of marxism solely to the analysis of capital; second, since the struggle between workers and capitalists is not the only struggle, this antagonism can no longer be taken as the unique dynamic of society; and third, because it also modifies the analysis of capital *from within*. The recognition of the existence of patriarchy – or, for those who are shocked by this term, of sexual division (which no one can deny and which for me is one and the same thing) – makes it apparent that 'the working class' described by marxists and characterized by them as 'theoretically asexual' is well and truly sexed, and not only in an empirical and contingent fashion. It is concerned entirely with only the male part of the working class. All the concepts used by Marx, and then by the others, take as a structural and theoretical definition of the worker's condition the lot of the male worker. Women workers are invisible, they are absent from the analysis of the labour market on the one hand, and their domestic work and its exploitation is taken as given on the other. Thus not only the reduction of marxism to the analysis of capital, but the very content of this

analysis, makes it impossible to apply *this* marxism to the oppression of women. But, still further, taking account of the oppression of women – which is what it means to be feminist – makes, or should make, it impossible to accept this analysis even as it concerns capital.

Two objectives: the extension of the principles of marxism (i.e. of materialism) to the analysis of the oppression of women, and a review of the analysis of capital from the viewpoint of what has been acquired in feminist analysis, are what should define a marxist feminist or feminist marxist approach, if the words have any meaning. But it is the very possibility of such an approach which Barrett and McIntosh try to deny (or rather to forbid) by affirming that their conception of marxism is the only one, and in claiming, in addition, that I would be contradicting myself if I were to 'attempt in my use of marxism' to do what I say is impossible: 'to abstract technical concepts from their "reactionary context"'. Noting in passing that they here qualify marxism as a 'reactionary context', I maintain that this is true of all the overall theories of society or humanity we possess. General accounts of the world, whether they are anthropological, sociological or psychoanalytic, take the oppression of women as given, are unable to explain it, and above all are unable to help in overthrowing it. This applies equally to marxism as Barrett and McIntosh understand it (i.e. to the conventional analysis of *Capital*); and that it would be 'illusory to claim to arrive at different results with the same conceptual tools' is abundantly proven by the failure of the 'domestic labour debate'. This is indeed why I do not use this analysis and why I deem that they should not use it either. *But* this is not true of materialism as a method, and this is why a feminist materialist approach is not only possible, but also necessary, whatever they may say.

### Polemic and feminist criticism

This set of attitudes to marxism is the basic problem in Barrett and McIntosh's approach. This is why I have dealt with it first, leaving aside temporarily their polemic . . . on polemic. For polemic is certainly one of the things at issue in their polemical article. They criticize me for doing something which they themselves are busy doing. I could, of course, have fallen for it in making a reply, and perhaps I should have contented myself with mentioning this irony and let them have the benefit of the doubt: I could have accepted that they did it intentionally,