

The Marriage Question

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Although most American women are married, will be married, have been married or would like to be married, fashionable women's movement rhetoric classifies women who live with men as "unliberated" second-class feminists at best, "collaborators with the enemy" at worst. Certainly anti-marriage and anti-wife sentiment is nothing new, but its introduction into the women's movement is something else again.

To understand the anti-marriage and anti-wife attitudes within the movement, we must first look at their historical precedents in larger male culture. Men have always been dishonest about marriage, claiming they were "trapped" or "hooked," that marriage ended their freedom and tied them down.

Men have proverbially maintained that marriage does nothing for the man, that he is pushed into it, that it is only his benevolence or foolishness that allows it to continue. By denying the wife's contributions (salary, housekeeping, sexual and emotional support, childbearing and rearing) he can maintain that she is lucky to have him and thus keep the upper hand. The image of the freeloader wife, laying in bed eating chocolates and watching TV, is as resistant to the truth of a housewife's life as the image of the welfare chiseler with his Cadillac is to the reality of the welfare recipients' life. Just as the one is used to maintain male supremacy, the other is used to maintain racism.

In the fifties a new threat to women arose in the "beatnik" subculture. The refusal to marry and the abandonment of women and children became a mass movement among men and idealized into a lifestyle. Free love for men became so oppressive to women that where the problem had previously been that a woman who wanted sex was called a whore, now a woman who wouldn't sleep with any and all comers was called frigid and uptight. The beatniks of the 50's became the flower children, the hippies and the "radicals" of the 60's, and as the subculture grew, so did the attacks on marriage. The male supremacy in all these subcultures has been often and well documented. I will just add that whereas the beatniks said marriage was a drag, the hippies said it brought them down and the 'radicals' said it was private property in interpersonal relations, thus counter-revolutionary. Norman Mailer, no friend to women's lib-

eration, wrote in his *Armies of the Night* (1968) how much he admired the flower child peace demonstrators who "shared everything, even their women." How the women felt about being shared by all is not noted.

In 1968, at the New York Radical Women's weekly consciousness raising sessions, the topic of commitment vs. free love was hotly debated. As women testified about the various living arrangements they had experienced, it became obvious that the entire alternate lifestyle revolutionary subculture was in some ways a giant step backwards for women, despite its attractive aspects and the hopes some women had for it being an improvement over "traditional marriage." It was a classic case of the dangers of "men's liberation," because the "freedom" these men gained—freedom from the burdens of wife and children—was gained at our expense. Free love communes were exposed as places in which women not only did all the traditional women's work, cooking, housekeeping, etc., but were also pressured to be available sexually to all, without birth control which was considered "unnatural." As one woman put it, "all of the women were pregnant all of the time," until dirty diapers and crying babies began to "bring down" the men, so they "split" to a newer freer commune, leaving the women to go on welfare and support their children as best they could. The credo that children were not private property in reality meant that the men felt no obligation to support or love them, or even to stick around.

Consciousness-raising on "open marriage" arrangements revealed that in most cases it was the husband who initiated an extramarital affair, and then later, as a way of assuaging his guilty conscience, convinced the wife that she should also take a lover. The women did so because they wanted some emotional and sexual comfort, neither of which they were getting anymore from their husbands, because they felt less humiliated than if it were obvious that they had been rejected, and also because they knew their marriage would eventually go on the rocks and they'd better start looking around. Although some women started off with an acceptance of the free love line, most ended up saying they would prefer a faithful relationship with a man they loved. The sexual revolution, swinging singles, and open marriages have a lot of drawbacks. These multiple "free love" arrangements take a lot of time to maintain, for both men and women, but even more so for women. They can become a career, to the exclusion of the careers we really want. Of the women who lived with men without marriage we discovered that the situation was rarely that he wanted to get married and she refused; the opposite was more often the

case. In cases where he was willing to marry and she was not, the reason was that she was sure he would treat her less well after marriage. Either way, law and custom were on his side.

As women testified about the good and the bad in their relations with men, the question came up repeatedly "Why do we put up with the bad?" Reasons ranged from fear of violence or abandonment to lack of any better alternative if we walked out, to periodic resignation that we couldn't change his behavior no matter how much we tried or hope that we could if we kept trying. Much of the time we did not put up with the bad at all, but fought constantly to change it. We were not, we discovered, masochists, as the psychologists had said; we were making what we could out of the available alternatives.

As we began to tell each other what we had honestly experienced, what we wanted, and what we had settled for, we began to see what was good and what was bad about our relationships with our husbands and lovers, what would have to be changed and what we wanted to preserve. Had those testimonies and that honesty continued, much of the subsequent history of the women's movement would have been different.

THE CHANGE

As the movement exploded into national prominence—even became fashionable, various groups were attracted to the movement who had previously felt it beneath contempt. These were the women who thought themselves 'better than' other women, who assumed they had already been liberated, and could show the other—dumber, slower—women how to liberate themselves. Since these women already possessed all the answers, there was no need for consciousness-raising—speaking from personal experience to discover the truth. Whereas the movement originally organized on the basis of what all women had in common—as revealed by honest consciousness-raising—the incoming groups organized on the basis of their own "special" and, they thought, far superior qualities. If women could just be like them, they thought, the revolution would be over.

The two chief groups whose massive entrance into the movement decisively changed its direction, hopefully for a short time only, were the women of the left and the sexual revolutionaries—the advocates of free love, and lesbianism. Sometimes all these categories merged.

The women of the male left entered the women's movement late and reluctantly, looking for a constituency to buttress their standing with their male associates. Instead of speaking from their own experiences, they made speeches about how whatever the problem, socialism would cure it, so why waste time on trivia: just work for a socialist revolution. On the marriage question they quoted Engels and proclaimed the necessity of "smashing the nuclear family." Basically they parroted the line of the male left—that marriage is a form of private property, and, adding nothing to feminist analysis, they succeeded for a time in blocking its further development.

The women of the hippie movement advocated free love

and sexual liberation as the solution to our 'hang-ups.' Within the movement they established an atmosphere of coercive sexuality similar to that which existed in the hippie subculture. Only instead of putting out for whatever man came along, we now were supposed to put out for every woman. The roots of this are so obviously in the male hippie subculture that even lesbian couples who lived together and were faithful to each other soon came under attack. Whereas the leftists attacked the institution of marriage, the lesbians went one further and attacked any relationships with men. Neither group was interested in finding out the truth about their own and other women's lives—they already assumed they knew it; nor were they interested in what women thought was best for themselves—neither group assumed we were smart enough to know. Women who lived with men were "collaborators with the enemy" went the new line, and they should "liberate themselves" by leaving. Women began to be pressured to leave their husbands against their wishes and *whatever* the consequences. This was supposed to be "freedom." The group called The Feminists founded by Ti-Grace Atkinson, limited the number of women living with men to 1/3 of the group because they were supposed to be less militant and radical and would dilute purity. One could no longer testify honestly about one's married life because anything bad would be greeted with "leave him."

During this time, feminists still living with a man became less than honest about their reasons, and so nothing could be truly resolved. One woman, for example, held that she only married her husband because he was to be deported as an alien. Others have claimed everything from "the children's sake," to "until I finish my education, get a job," etc., etc.

The leftist women thought of us as support troops for their dogma; the lesbians as potential sex partners, the sum of these two attitudes—followers, supporters and sex partners—is exactly the same as men's attitudes towards all women. It is easy to see the derivation of the left-lesbian alliance—they need each other, as two sides of the same coin.

The line used by the Feminists: that married women had a class privilege over other women, that single women were more oppressed, that therefore married women must give up their class privilege of marriage and leave their husbands, was actually contradictory to their other line that married women were more oppressed. The other large anti-marriage bloc, the lesbians, held that women with men were not in touch with their "real, inner nature"—which they saw as being lesbian. As in other areas of feminist issues there is a repetition of the phenomena by which groups whose ideas are opposed to each other nonetheless unite against feminism.

Consciousness-raising sessions underwent a change during this period. We used to say "there are no personal solutions" to male supremacy—meaning that there were advantages and disadvantages to however a woman dealt with her oppression, but the oppression was our common bond. The new groups of women, who felt that they had escaped oppression by being smarter and choosing "liber-

ated" lifestyles, consistently tried to demonstrate the inferiority of everyone else's lives in contrast with the shining example of their own. They used consciousness raising, not to arrive at the truth, but to proselytize for their own solutions. The leftist women said at the Rape Conference that there was no rape in socialist countries (a lie), at the Prostitution Conference that there was no prostitution in socialist countries (also a lie), and at every opportunity that women had been liberated wherever there had been a socialist revolution (even more of a lie). The lesbians portrayed their lives with all the reality of a 1950's movie in which once the lovers find each other, they go off into the sunset to the strains of organ music to live happily ever after, unbeset by the ills that afflict us lesser mortals.

The interests of both groups was in obscuring truth; witness Lynn Phillips from the left making the amazing statement that housewives are not exploited because to be exploited you must be underpaid and housewives are not paid at all, or Rita Mae Brown's equally amazing statement that only lesbians can really love a man. Women who tried to be honest about the problems they had with their men were just told to leave them. And why not, since perfect happiness, to say nothing of our own "true inner selves," was lesbian? Women who lived with men began exaggerating either their virtues—to justify remaining with them—or their faults—to justify leaving them. In either case, truth was sacrificed. Men were portrayed as all-powerful inhuman monsters with whom there was not the smallest chance of forcing equality (hence separating was the only answer) or, equally untrue, as totally worthless blobs whom no sane woman could possibly desire or respect. Women were portrayed as all-powerful Amazons (the liberated ones) or . . . totally worthless blobs (the unliberated ones). After a few years of this, I began to think I was in Disneyland, and failed to recognize any human beings I knew in any of these stereotypes.

The movement no longer looked for the truth about women's lives or sought what was best for women, or even assumed that we are smart enough to know. To admit that

one married out of love for another human being, that one valued the relationship and wished it to continue, and that, even so, one was still determined to force an end to whatever inequality and oppression existed within the marriage, was to open oneself to ridicule and condemnation.

Because the left and lesbian forces infiltrated and seized virtually every independent women's movement center and publication in the years 1969 to 1973, in many cases establishing the now familiar left-lesbian alliance against feminism, the original ideas of the radical women's movement have been suppressed. I encountered an ironic example of this when I was invited to participate in a panel on marriage on the David Susskind show. I had difficulty explaining my position to the producers who first misunderstood and said—"oh, we have somebody with that position, a male marriage counselor who believes in traditional marriage very strongly," and then said, after I had convinced them that there were many things about traditional marriage that could be improved, "oh, now we understand, but we have somebody with that position too, that marriage is a disaster for women." The only person they knew I wasn't the same as was a hip professor from somewhere who thought marriage was a drag and everybody should just live together. They eventually decided that I was the same as the woman who thought marriage was a disaster for women so she was chosen to represent the "feminist" point of view. Lest anyone think that that's just the establishment media, let me add that shortly after that WBAI-Pacific, the "alternate" radio station in NYC, had a similar panel with a similar spectrum of people.

The pro-woman line, the Redstockings line on marriage, has always been "we will not ask what is 'revolutionary' or 'reformist', only what is good for women." To do that, women will have to fight to say honestly what they want and why.

I believe women—and men—would like love, security, companionship, respect and a long term commitment to each other. Women rarely get much of this, in marriage or out, but we *want* it.

I saw a woman sleeping. In her sleep she dreamt Life stood before her, and held in each hand a gift—in the one Love, in the other Freedom. And she said to the woman, "Choose!"

And the woman waited long: and she said, "Freedom!"

And Life said, "Thou hast well chosen. If

thou hadst said, 'Love,' I would have given thee that thou didst ask for; and I would have gone from thee, and returned to thee no more. Now, the day will come when I shall return. In that day I shall bear both gifts in one hand."

I heard the woman laugh in her sleep.

Olive Schreiner, 1901