

Stop Leaving Women Out Of The Proletariat

Rosario Morales

We have entered into an era of retrenchment on the American left. The new left and the women's liberation movement have diminished, to the relief of many. This relief is accompanied by backlash. Mary Lou Greenberg's speech at the Guardian forum on "Women and the Class Struggle," reprinted in the June 27 issue of the Guardian, is an example of one of the forms which the backlash against modern feminism can take.

The "woman question" is not new and has long been part of the revolutionary history of America. My own feminism comes from communist sources that go back long before I was born. However, to retreat to its position now after the upsurge of the women's liberation movement is to put feminism and women back in their place.

The women's movement, no matter how many splinters it was or is in, how many mistaken directions it could be said to have taken, has to be seen as a great, generous creative force. If we don't turn our backs on it, as so many are now doing, we could feed our thinking and action for years to come on what it has produced. The fact that a lot of this thinking has come from the middle class need not stop us. It has not stopped Marxists before. A petty-bourgeois put-down is irrelevant.

The question is not that the petty bourgeoisie is a dying class which vacillates between its fear of bourgeois capital and its doom as proletariat but whether the ideas generated by the women's consciousness in this epoch of struggle, by this class (or these classes) has produced anything of value in our common struggle for liberation.

A summary of Greenberg's main theses reveals the direction and organization of the backlash ideology. Starting from a firm understanding of the women's unenviable position in all parts of the society, particularly in this time of economic crisis, she asks, "How do we go about changing things?" She turns to the upsurge of the women's liberation movement in the late 1960s which set

itself the problem of changing these abysmal conditions. The evolution of this movement is seen to lead in two main directions: one is personalist, self-indulgent and in the end decadent and the other, anti-imperialist but misguided by the myth of sisterhood or the sects of Trotskyists or revisionists. Many of these women have retreated to the National Organization for Women, the National Women's Caucus, etc. Only a small band is led to the path of Marxist-Leninist proletarian struggle which is seen as the wave of the future.

What does this distorted self-serving short history attempt to prove? Clearly, that organizations of women and for women are doomed to petty bourgeois errors, and as later claimed, to bourgeois control. Neither the "how" nor the "why" are made clear in the speech, though some of the attitudes that lead to these conclusions are.

1. Consciousness raising, which is initially progressive because it causes women to see the social roots of their oppression, becomes its opposite, a retreat into self unless it moves into active struggle. The implication is that consciousness raising has abandoned its role of raising consciousness and now only explores the self in ways that do not either raise consciousness or lead to active struggle.

This is not, as implied, a necessary evolution of consciousness raising. Rather it has been the consistent criticism which has been leveled at it from its inception by the traditional, particularly male, left. The dictum of the radical feminists is that the personal is political, that what seem to be "personal" problems of women have their roots in the political system which oppresses women.

Consciousness raising is the permanent struggle against an ever impinging bourgeois ideology that attacks us not only in the form of political doctrine but also as fears, ambitions, resentments, feelings: the stuff of everyday political practice. Under its more congenial name of criticism and self-criticism, its universalization is recognized as one of the great achievements of the Chinese cultural revolution.

2. The rights of women must, according to the Revolutionary Union and Lenin, depend "on the existing conditions and naturally always in association with the general interests of the proletariat." When is the fight for women's rights not in association with the general interest of the proletariat? What about the women proletariat? Would their interests prevail over the male half of allied sectors of the people? In sum, is not that quote, rather than a defense of women's rights, a rationale for the

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abandonment of their rights at the first signs of a clash between their interests and those of men?

To illustrate this, let us examine that section of Greenberg's speech dealing with the Equal Rights Amendment. The question is put: "What about the argument that the ERA will advance working class unity by opening up jobs in production and in key sectors of the economy for women?" Greenberg's first answer to this question is beside the point. She only asserts that the ERA is not needed for that—witness World War 2 employment of women. Her second is that so long as there is a need for surplus labor there won't be full production, "so the question is, where are all these jobs to come from?" The answer is, as it was when women replaced men leaving for the battlefields of World War 2—from the men, of course!

Greenberg doesn't say that. She only points to unemployment, the ease with which women are fired and the uses of the ERA against women. But that unstated answer that women will take jobs away from men lurks there and always has. It is unstated but no matter how often we repeat that women work because they must eat, the assumption is there that men must eat first and women must not threaten men's jobs. According to this kind of Marxist analysis, Blacks, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans and women are special interest groups who earn our support insofar as they do not threaten a narrowly defined proletariat.

3. Black people, "through their development as a nation in the United States, with a common history of resistance against the most vicious forms of oppression and discrimination are bound together because of this in a way that women as women—from different social classes and nationalities—could never be." The arrant sexism of this statement in the speech curdles my blood. Don't women have a long history of resistance against vicious oppression and discrimination? Have women not been bought and sold, raped, murdered? Haven't they, like Blacks, had the status of children in a world of white male adults? Hasn't this bound them together in periods of rebellion? Don't Blacks, like women, have class divisions? And the women of different nationalities, don't they recognize their common problems? Aren't we anywhere in the world the child bearers, the home keepers, the servants of men?

It is the arrogance of the left that feels that it alone can decide what struggles against which oppressors are worthy of their notice. In the pecking order of the Revolutionary Union, Black males have made it and women have not.

PROLETARY: [L. *proletarius*, fr. *proles* offspring]
In ancient Rome, a citizen of the lowest class, without property and regarded as capable of serving the state only by having children.

Websters Collegiate Dictionary, 1940

PROLETARIAT

The word "proletariat" (from the French) means "those who breed." In fact, proletarian women are the proletariat in the proletariat.

— Catherine Henry
Red Women's Detachment, 1971

4. "First we need to understand why the bourgeoisie is coming on strong around women's rights at this time." Why? "First, it is an attempt of the bourgeoisie to direct women's energies and growing concern over sex discrimination into reformist channels and away from the realization of who the main enemy is—themselves, the bourgeoisie."

Strange, but I haven't noticed the bourgeoisie beckoning strongly over my shoulder. What I see is the dilatory, reformist, cooptational response that the bourgeoisie has to any strong movement. And of course the bourgeoisie attempts to direct struggles into safe channels, away from the class struggle. But why assume that the women's struggle, not the working class struggle for example, is the one that has been singled out by the ruling class for cooptation? Don't reactionary union bureaucrats direct workers' energies toward sectional economic issues and away from class solidarity and struggle? Is not the working class sucked into narrow economic issues and away from broad (class) political issues?

In other words, is it not the common plight of revolutionary movements that we are weakened by reformism, that we must struggle always to keep the class enemy in sight? Why does Mary Lou Greenberg single out the women's rights movement, if not to denigrate it? The appropriate response is to struggle against reformism, not to put down the constituency.

5. The women's movement is accused of being divisive. To struggle against sexism is to divide women against sexists in the working class.

We are half the world. There is not one struggle that we could not divide by asserting our rights. It is the unanswerable argument to radical women: Can we really take the risk that raising demands about our rights might not be the decisive, divisive move that might doom the struggle to defeat?

Sisters in the socialist struggle, raise your heads! We are fighting to create a society where we can all flourish. The struggle is long and hard and needs every hand and every head. It is time that we recognize that the revolution cannot be won without women. How many times have we fought side by side with men, only to be shuttled aside in the victory? But we have fought and the struggle to raise the consciousness of our oppression and recognize our revolutionary potential supports all liberation struggles. What divides is not the fight against sexism, it is sexism itself. Sexism dooms half our fighting forces to the stove when the other half picks up the rifle, to the mimeograph machine while they lead the march.

This is not the time or place to plead with women to enter into "comradely struggle" with working class men around their sexism. It is the time to plead with men to enter into revolutionary struggle with their sexism so that more and more women can also "become the real leaders of the united front against imperialism and the struggle for socialism." And to hold these men responsible if with their backward ideology, they alienate their potential allies.

For if the movement turns its back on women now, be sure that it will be the movement, not the "myth of sisterhood" or "retreat into self" or its alleged decadence, that will be responsible for the lack of unity. The retreat from the fight against sexism will exact its own heavy price.



Photographer Unknown Italian Woman

Simone de Beauvoir with militants of the Mouvement de Liberation des Femmes at the day of Denunciation of Crimes Committed Against Women, Paris, May 13, 1972.



Photo by Mariza de Athayde