

Reviews

**WOMEN IN SOCIETY:
INTERDISCIPLINARY ESSAYS**
**The Cambridge Women's Studies
Group**

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**WOMEN'S OPPRESSION TODAY:
PROBLEMS IN MARXIST FEMINIST
ANALYSIS**

Michele Barrett

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Some years ago, in a celebrated essay, the American feminist Gayle Rubin argued the need for a 'political economy of sex'; that is to say, a materialist account of sexuality and gender division comparable with the Marxist analysis of production relations but not reducible to it.

I believe this remains a project of fundamental importance for feminism. The social processes of sexuality and the sexual division of labour are crucial in generating the systematic subordination of women *as women* to men *as men* which is at the heart of feminist theoretical and political concern, the so-called 'feminist problematic'.

It is the intersection of this subordination

with the class relations into which they also enter which determines the form of women's oppression in class society. We cannot derive one from the other; tracing the links is a major task of Marxist feminism.

These two stimulating books are part of an increasingly confident body of work on these themes which forms an important achievement of the women's liberation movement. The Cambridge book comes directly out of the women's studies course run at that university since 1973. The authorities, who did not think women a proper object of academic study, starved the course of funds. The feminists cheerfully responded by tearing up the established subject divisions and starting from scratch; so that what we have here is an innovative, interdisciplinary reader. Its high overall standard testifies to the quality of course discussion over the years.

The first of the book's four sections contains essays on the family and wage labour under capitalism. Engels' prediction that women's inequality in marriage would quickly disappear once they entered into wage labour on equal terms with men has proved doubly wrong. Far from vanishing, the sexual division of labour in the family proved its tenacity and autonomy by dictating the emergence of a parallel sexual divi-

sion in the labour force itself. This in turn reinforced women's domestic dependence. How and why this occurred has long preoccupied feminists, and these essays reflect the substantial work which is being done in this field.

This is the 'safe' area of feminist theory, which is not to deny its importance. The following sections carry us into the quicksands of sexuality, coercion and violence against women. The emphasis here and throughout the book is on the 'return to the social' as a source of understanding.

Exemplary in this respect is a chilling account of the death in an Indian village of a young married woman who stepped out of line, written up collectively from the field notes of Ros Morpeth. As the tale unfolds with a terrible inevitability, events are constantly related to that society's expectations of women, the institutional basis of marriage and the structural features militating against female solidarity. It is surely no coincidence that this most thought-provoking piece is the only one to look outside the confines of our own society.

L J Jordanova gives a lucid and very fair account of different approaches to mental illness, emphasising the need to confront directly how much suffering is involved: no approach is adequate which does not give it some meaning and offer the possibility of relieving it.

My quarrel with this part of the book is that sexuality is not approached directly or critically enough. Jane Caplan gives a convincing account of the emergence of 'homosexuality' as a category and social role but herself questions its relevance to women. Discussion of abortion should be the occasion for scrutinising our assumptions about sexuality, but as is so often the case, here it is not. We desperately need to study the creation and meaning of desire and sexual practices, but we seem to find it very hard to do so.

The final section takes up some basic theoretical and methodological questions, all with great clarity. In particular, the idea that there is something 'natural' about gender division is torn to shreds: compulsory reading, this, for anyone who still believes that because women bear children, they must also rear them on their own, service men in the home and take rotten jobs.

All in all, an excellent, extremely accessible book, and highly recommended.

Michele Barrett's book by now needs neither introduction nor recommendation. It is an indispensable survey of current debates, broad in scope, clear-headed and fair. Its thoroughness makes it an admirable introduction for those newly considering these

questions, but there is much for anyone to engage with.

I recommend in particular Michele's discussion of ideology, which will repay very careful reading, and her chapter on the family. We must look forward to her forthcoming book on this subject written with Mary McIntosh whose ideas have strongly influenced the present book.

The book's basic premise is that women's oppression cannot be fully accounted for in Marxist terms. Every chapter stresses that there is no *logical* reason why the division of labour under capitalism should be organised on the basis of gender (in other words, through the sexual division of labour), for the capital/labour contradiction is 'sex-blind'. And yet we see that in fact the sexual division of labour is central to capitalist production relations.

Michele therefore seeks to unravel the complexities of gender and relate them to the historical development of capitalist production. The integration of the historical



and the theoretical is a key element in the book. It is Michele's thesis that, through the process of historical struggle between the classes but also between men and women, gender relations have become embedded in production relations to such an extent that capitalist production relations now form the material basis of the oppression of women, which no longer has independent material determinants.

The arguments Michele uses to justify this position are fascinating, but I have to say at once that I do not agree with it. It is indeed the case that gender is now crucial to capitalist production relations, but the reverse is not true: we cannot account for the totality of women's oppression in this way. How can the material basis of sexuality — of desire and fantasy as well as sexual practice — be found in production relations however extensively mediated? Or does the erotic have no material determinants?

I have already suggested that women's oppression involves the intersection of two sets of relations: relations of subordination

to men and relations of exploitation by capital. Surely the material basis of women's subordination is to be found not in capitalist production relations but where feminists have always expected to find it, in the structures of marriage, kinship and sexuality?

If we give the name 'partriarchy' to all those material and ideological forces which perpetrate women's subordination, then we are in a position to ask with some precision what is the relationship at any given time and place of capitalism and patriarchy; in other words, what are the general conditions for the liberation of women?

Michele rejects patriarchy as an ahistorical concept. I am not sure that this matters: could we not say the same of class? Does it not depend on how we use it?

These arguments apart, what is it feminists actually *want*? Michele identifies three main areas where fundamental change is required, and goes on to ask whether they might be achieved under capitalism (her conclusion, with which I agree, is no). Firstly, the sharing of childcare by men (not only to reduce the burden on women but even more importantly to break down gender divisions). Secondly, the abolition of the family wage (which posits a male breadwinner with dependent wife and children and directly militates against the achievement of equal pay). Finally, 'the transformation of the ideology of gender'.

I do not share Michele's faith that the reorganisation of childcare would of itself lead to a radical restructuring of gender relations. It is characteristic of this work that it is performed by women on terms dictated by men. Men's greater participation is hardly likely to lessen their control, desirable though it may be on other grounds. The women's movement is just beginning to tackle this contradiction.

The book's final question is the inevitable one, why should socialist men support the aims of feminism when they have so much to lose? The conventional answer is that it is in their interests to do so. This will be mere sophistry until women are so strong that it becomes politically impossible for men to build socialism on our backs. Nor can I accept Michele's extraordinary statement that a socialism without feminism is inconceivable, because I can see that it actually exists.

Perhaps self-interest is not a proper basis for political commitment anyway. I suspect that the appeal of both socialism and feminism is ultimately a moral one, and our politics should emphasise this and the importance of individual responsibility and choice.

Gaby Charing