

# **Women, The State, And The Family**

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Today, as we begin the twenty-first century, how can we sum up contemporary feminist struggles? As a start, we can establish that these struggles have constantly asked for integration into the system. Even through the intense struggle of the '70s, patriarchal and capitalist institutions were left intact.

## **Women and the State**

Inherent to the structure of capitalism are a number of contradictions. These contradictions are put upon and resented by the oppressed and exploited groups within society. They generate movements of dissent, such as the workers movement, struggles against racism, student movements and the feminist movement. In this article we will look specifically at modern feminist struggles, within the context of capitalism and a class-divided society.

What we must further clarify is that within all of these struggles, including the feminist struggle, there is a moment where the movement must confront the State. In fact, the main function of the State, in a capitalist society, is to resolve the tensions that arise from the contradictions it creates. As a result of this focus, no movement can escape the State's efforts to control struggles against it. The State puts forward whatever resources it deems necessary to ensure this control. It can use violence, to varying degrees, or make reforms in the system that alleviate tensions just enough to allow the system to better adapt itself to its internal contradictions.

The history of the feminist movement shows well the different statist readjustments in capitalist society. Indeed, women have obtained the recognition of many rights and the bettering of conditions primarily from the State. And even if the contradictions that nourish women's revolt still exist, the State has thwarted the dynamism of their movement by dissolving its subversive potential. The fact that many parts of the movement were aligned with powerful institutions, such as political parties, churches and government agencies, made it possible, and still makes possible, the creation of new forms of family organization; these are social order adjustments necessary for capitalism's survival.

Because feminist struggles failed to succeed in organizing a global movement against capitalism and patriarchy, the victories of the feminist movement are often still victories for the State. But before beginning this analysis, we must examine what pushed women to demand that their social status, and living conditions, improve in the first place.

## **The Birth of Feminism: The Origin of Contradictions**

The feminist movement can trace its roots to the contradictions that arose with the development of capitalism. This can be seen when examining the fact that capitalism was the force behind the transformation of social production. The changes that capitalism brought on influenced both domestic, and non-domestic spheres of production. The following is a brief description of this process, beginning with some comments on the two spheres of production.

The sphere of domestic production occurs within the family unit. Men and women are designated positions within this sphere based on their gender. The relationships within this sphere are conditioned around the idea of property ownership, and designed so that men have control and authority over women and children. Trends of exploitation and domination are thus prominent. Within this sphere, domestic production, taken on by women, includes giving birth to children,

raising them, nourishing the family, taking care of health needs, doing housework, etc. All these tasks can vary depending on the society, the class or the era, but women have to deal with them because they are women. Clearly, it is not the tasks that women do that define their place in the domestic production, but their sex. The family is the ideologic and legal institution within which domestic production is organized.

Non-domestic production is the sphere in which class struggle takes place. Relationships within this sphere are those of exploitation and domination by the ruling class. The ruling class uses its ownership and control of the means of production, products and workers, to ensure its domination. Non-domestic production is carried out by a variety of administrative institutions, State organizations, private companies, etc.

These two spheres of social production intersect with each other. The ruling class ensures this intersection, as it is critical for social cohesion. This is accomplished through the ownership and control of the essential components of the non-domestic production sphere. The way in which the two spheres interact differs between societies, eras, and the stage of development of society. The ideal representation of social development can be seen as a two-pole axe. At the first pole, the majority of economic production occurs at the heart of the family. At the other pole, the family is submitted to non-domestic production, and most production transfers to this sphere. The relation between the family and the system can also be seen as a two-pole axe; at one point, the father has the right to control and decide the lives and deaths of children, women and slaves. At the second pole, the father must answer to the State regarding the welfare of children.

With the development of capitalism, the non-domestic sphere expanded to its detriment. Capitalism brought on an important reduction in domestic production (which was little by little absorbed by institutions outside the family). At the same time, the relationship between the two spheres of social production, were also transformed. The tasks, duties and relationships of women and men within the domestic sphere were thus modified. These modifications created a paradox for women. For them, as a product of femininity, their place in domestic production carries specific tasks and functions. With the development of capitalism, these tasks and functions did not remain in their place. Moreover, the place of women in the domestic sphere affected negatively the conditions of their participation in the non-domestic production process.

The birth of feminism was the result of this paradox, as women sought new outlets for their time. Let us now examine how changes within the domestic and non-domestic spheres of production played out over the centuries. We will attempt to evaluate the impact of feminism on the organization of social order.

## **The State: The Family Gardener**

The beginning of the industrial revolution brought with it changes which obliged the ruling class to pay attention to some of the new realities affecting the working class. The development of huge industries had brought many problems to the working class, affecting their health, their sexuality and their reproductive abilities. First, the need for large amounts of manual labor in urban areas drove a huge migration away from the countryside. This obliged the ruling class to control waves of populations to keep a demographic balance. Secondly, as a result of the surge in urban populations, urban problems such as dense cohabitation, contamination of air and water, disease, prostitution and venereal diseases, boomed. During this era, in these conditions, the

working class survived by living anyway, and anywhere, they could. In huge cities, due to the lack of space, many people shared apartments. Within the same household it would not have been uncommon to find a 5-year-old girl, 20-year-old woman, and a 57-year-old man, connected by no family relation, but sharing a space. The lives of the working class also took place in the street, a place for discussion, games, and nightclubs. In these conditions, the institution of marriage crumbled, replaced by concubines, due largely to the fact that many industrial workers led nomadic lifestyles. The ruling class began to realize that with all the changes of the era, the working class had become less easy to exploit. In other words, the disorder of the urban migration, that helped begin the industrial revolution, was incompatible with the model for smooth running industries and families. Facing this problem, the State thus began to demonstrate its ability to manipulate society.

The goal of the State was to put to work a population that lived by the rhythm of the streets, not the beat of industry. Using a number of repressive forces, the State began a campaign to clean up the street. Anti-homeless and anti-beggar laws were put into effect, and particularly run-down neighborhoods were destroyed. The street became the place for the State to enforce its control. The first step toward the reorganization of the family emerged from these changes, as the population began to lose its control over the streets. The reorganization emphasized, and enforced, the difference between public and private spaces. While the state firmly grasped the public spaces, the state also took control of private spaces, by forcing the public into the private spaces where new family norms would have to be established. The home became the new center of life, in place of the street, and closed connections to anyone but those within the family. This transformation was reinforced by new ideologies, began to make people recognize previously less important differentiations between private and public spaces.

## **The Bourgeois Family Model**

The model for the bourgeois family emerged from the growing sense of distinction between people's private and public lives. Public life was recognized as everything that happened outside of the family, in politics, careers, religious activities, etc. Private life was considered to include everything that had to do with parenting and married life. Within the sphere of private life, the responsibilities involved in the maintenance of the nuclear family were divided based on gender. The family thus became a private, autonomous unit, isolated from the outside world, and self-sufficient in terms of affection. The bourgeois family model dictated that a woman's primary and natural role was that of wife and mother. The ruling class viewed this system to be a guaranty of prosperity and social order.

The "privatization" of the family, and the model for the bourgeois family, were enforced by the State. Indeed, the State implemented laws and policies that worked directly to mold families. These policies were put into practice by the government, and public, private, secular, and religious agencies who were all directly influenced by the State. The State functioned as a centralizing force (and also as a source of funding and services for those private organizations). All these resources were provided to regulate, supervise and control the working class.

The articulation of the family with these different institutions of social control involved a reduction of its own dominating structure. In fact, the absolute character of the marital and paternal authority in the domestic sphere, was widely moderated by bourgeois civil rights, like freedom

and equality between people. This led to what some historians named the “normalization” of the practices in the private sphere. From the economic production unit, the family became a control unit, made by and part of the State, as it is henceforth tightly overlapped in this network of social control institutions and their articulation is assumed by men’s responsibility.

Another consequence of industrial development was that the demand for large amounts of manual labor called upon women and children to enter the work force in factories. This event coincided with the birth of modern feminism, towards the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. During this era the feminist discourse primarily focused on pointing out the physical and emotional consequences of working both in the home and also at a factory : “the hours of work are too long, salaries too low, it is too difficult to accumulate a dowry, to find a “solvent” husband, to take care of children, etc.”<sup>1</sup>

To relieve the hardships of working women, the ruling class enforced the bourgeois model of “domesticity” and “conjugalité” by making government assistance programs for the working class one of their priorities.

Indeed, “children were obliged to go to school and forbidden from being vagrants. They were put under maternal surveillance, and were under the vigilance of social workers. To women, legitimate union and procreation, home assignment, housework responsibilities and children’s education were imposed [...]; finally, marital guardianship and doctor supervision beyond the priest’s one.”<sup>2</sup>

The delegation of men to factories, women to the home, and children to school was a further step in the division of the working class into family units and the State’s assertion of more political and economic control.

It is important to understand that during this first phase of the reorganization of the family, within the capitalist context, the ruling class felt that in order to discipline, and control the working class, the priority was to organize them into stable cellular families by will, or by force. The dominant discourse of the times, asserted that women were to be “queens of the home”. The feminists radically condemned this notion, as well as that of marriage, but this point of view was beaten by the valorization of marriages based on romantic love, on parental bond also based on love, but primarily maternal love, and the natural ability of women to educate and procreate

Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after a few signs that the feminist movement was running out of momentum, the movement suddenly began again with new vigor. The priorities of feminists became obtaining the right to vote, gaining access to professional careers, and gaining the right to obtain high-school and college educations. This period of the feminist struggle coincided, again, with another phase of reorganization of the family, responding to changes in how production occurred (within and outside the family), and how the two spheres of production interacted. On the one hand, women were becoming more frequently employed in production outside the home. On the other hand, new industries began to provide goods and services that had traditionally been provided by the family and households started to be more technologically advanced.

These changes were all associated with the increasingly “privatized” role of women as wives, mothers and caretakers of the household. This process, with its roots in the previous century’s

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<sup>1</sup>Nicole Laurin-Frenette, “Féminisme et Anarchisme: Quelques éléments théoriques et historiques pour une analyse de la relation entre le Mouvement des femmes et l’état.” *Femmes, Pouvoir, Politique Bureaucratie: Atleir de creation libertaire*. 1984. p. 27.

<sup>2</sup>Nicole Laurin-Frenette, op. cit., p. 27.

defense of bourgeois domesticity principles, now grew stronger with new ideological backing. New propaganda emerged that spread the myth of professionalism in housework and motherhood (encouraging adhesion to strict rules) that created a new ideology of femininity. “This new femininity put a heavy burden on the shoulders of women, particularly those in the working class who had a hard time accessing the resources necessary to meet the high standards that the obligations demanded”.<sup>3</sup>

This new feminist discourse was in response to demands, particularly bourgeois feminist demands, concerning the need for education of women, and the need to have an identity and a value. With the importance placed on housework, women had to gain knowledge of specific scientific methods and formulas for the proper completion of housework. Now, it is more the “privatization” process than the family-dominating structure that ensures social control.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the feminist struggle was heavily influenced by the fact that women were in the process of changing their role within society. One of the primary goals became participation of women in public and political life. This participation, however, was to be mandated and supervised by the State, the Church and the organizations which effected social control (such as political parties, charities, and aid organizations). Society will consider that women should bring to the public sector a contribution which is properly feminine such as gentleness, love, peace, the spirit of sacrifice, altruism, maternal instincts, etc. Society will thus explicitly appeal to women using a reformist vocation to canalize their participation in social life into activities that are useful in preserving the social order. The agencies of control will orchestrate and drive the feminist social and political engagement to their own interest.

Social and political work of women was allowed, and encouraged, as long as it did not effect women’s expected role and responsibilities as wives, mothers and housekeepers. Participation was thus limited to the free time that a woman’s family and household were able to afford her. Changes in women’s roles during this time did nothing to actually change the ideology of femininity, but rather only enforced and followed the traditional model. Basically, “At the same time as women became more involved in public activities, and were able to escape some of the subordination within the family, by husbands and fathers, their activity outside the home put women, ironically, under direct control of larger and higher social control agencies”<sup>4</sup>.

As far as education, women slowly began to be allowed to attend colleges. Education for women then developed much more outside traditional religious communities. As women entered schools, new fields involving care-taking roles were rapidly developed, such as nutrition, child welfare, etc. in order to direct women along the proper road. In the workplace, women were forced into a ghetto of female jobs, such as teaching or nursing. Although from the 1930s to the 1960s (and even ’70s) the feminist movement eclipsed, wage-earning women did not return to their stoves. Rather, they continued on with their work, and participated in a number of struggles to gain women rights.

## **The 1970s To The Present: The Decline Of Domestic Production**

As we saw in the previous sections, certain changes associated with the development of capitalism affected domestic production, non-domestic production, and the relationship between

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<sup>3</sup>Nicole Laurin-Frenette, op. cit., p. 29.

<sup>4</sup>Nicole Laurin-Frenette, op. cit., p. 31.

the two. Perhaps it would be good to go over this again, to ensure that this point can be well understood.

First, the introduction of new goods, services, and tools related to domestic work greatly changed the traditional family model, particularly affecting the gender roles within the family. As a result of the new technologies, cooking, cleaning, and other housework became so simple that they could easily be taken care of by any adult, regardless of their experience or training. Society thus no longer needed women to stay in the home in order to specialize in household work.

The downward trend in reproduction was also important during this time. Because families were having less children, the amount of time and energy, women were expected to put into childcare, also greatly diminished. It was the era of zero-population growth. However, children were being brought into the world, and need to be fed, amused, protected, supervised and socialized. But in place of women, these tasks were little by little, taken over by the State and other institutions outside the family that had control over the non-domestic sphere. For example, children's education was taken over by schools and daycares, health-care by hospitals and clinics, and socialization by the media. For example, the youth subculture notion, fueled by the media, demonstrates how certain members of the family, in this case youth, have become attached to other units outside the family.

Poor families are the exception to the rule of the above trends. This is primarily because they continue to have many children but it is also due to the fact that they do not have the financial means to obtain the products and resources that would enable them to cut down on domestic work. Paradoxically, bourgeois families see a trend in increased tasks to be done around the house. Due to new amounts of leisure time, the rich can change their bedsheets twice a week, accompany children on activities, and bake treats for the family. In this way many domestic tasks are transformed into hobbies. Many bourgeois families thus doubled their housework, but instead of becoming problematic, the increase is celebrated as a pass-time.

The above changes combined with the growing number of women being integrated into the workplace, and bringing home salaries, led to serious modifications in accepted gender role divisions within the family. While these divisions still exist and are private, the relations of domination and exploitation of men over women that these divisions cause appear to be deemed unacceptable and unjust to women. Feminists responded by taking on these issues with vigor, and seized the streets.

## **The Roadblock to the Women's Movement**

During the 1970s traditional roles were first put into question by and for women. Patriarchy, and assignment to the domestic sphere were denounced. The movement attacked the family, marriage, and also the State, by pushing a critical analysis of patriarchy and capitalism. The question of sexual liberation arose, and women's right to pleasure and enjoyment was strongly defended. Bras were burned and other restraining products, such as perfumes and deodorants, which masked the body's natural smell, were thrown in the trash. The idea of simple existence was promoted: nudity was endorsed and sex-shops denounced. The desire to achieve one's goals naturally was supported. Within some political movements (from the far left to the libertarian movement), women denounced masculine domination and the machismo of activists. New forms



of intervention were invented: parties, color, humor, noise, and spectacular shows were endorsed. Taboos such as incest, rape, and homosexuality were brought to the public light, demonstrating that the personal was political. However, the women's movement of the 1970s could not help hitting walls, and being stuck in traps. Why?

The first problem, was the continued celebration of feminine values, such as maternity, which revealed a paradox within the movement. In fact, the identification by certain feminists with patriarchal norms left in place the dysfunctionnal character of this so-called femininity that encloses women in their traditional roles instead of liberating them from their oppression. The valuing of "feminine" behavior was thus one of the major traps into which certain feminists fell.

Next, women participated very little in politics and were underrepresented in leadership positions, thus maintaining the belief that power and public discussion were affairs of men. At the same time, the internal dynamics of certain feminist groups pointed to the falseness of this idea. In fact, authoritarianism, hierarchy, domination, and hunger for power, were often equally present in these all female groups.

Women's participation in sororities brought up another problem, often causing women to lose sight of the link with class struggle. In fact, denouncing patriarchy without denouncing capitalism creates a cross-class alliance, giving the movement no voice beyond mere lobbying. Even if all women faced oppression by men, their situations differed drastically depending on the material realities that each woman faced. Ruling class women profited from the capitalist system, and thus did not reject this system. Women did not, therefore, share a common interest in challenging the oppressive economic order. Besides, fighting against male domination did not necessarily mean fighting against power, or for sexual equality.

In general, the fact that most feminist movements were all women hindered their participation in other social movements. Indeed, no revolution can transpire if one of the sexes is in ignorance. In this case men too hold an interest in combating patriarchy. If women are victims of patriarchal oppression, men too are alienated by the role that society imposed upon them. From this comes the necessity to promote a general social project, to prevent a "war" between the sexes amongst the exploited. Unfortunately the feminist movement of the 1970s was unable to accomplish this unity, and without a real contestation of the system, the feminist demands have been institutionalized by the integration of women into capitalist society. Again, the State responded to this demand for integration by jumping in to canalize the change, so that it would fit the State's interests.

## **The Family-State**

The response of the State to the demands of the feminists again will coincide with a restructuring of social order. The focus, this time, is on a transformation of the family, the State, and their reciprocal relationship. This restructuring will be taken on by the State, and its affiliates, but also with the participation of women. On the one hand, this transformation will rest on the elimination of the domestic sphere of production by the progressive absorption of the family functions by the State who seeks to convert them into political functions. This process will favor the transformation of the domestic sphere in a private space for sociability. Then, the family will become the only refuge, and the guardian, for relationships between people that are free and spontaneous, stripped of constraint and authoritarianism. All personal relationships and personal

affairs become delegated to the family unit, because there is no longer any public solidarity. This transformation will favor a gender division and isolation between men, women and children, and will allow the State to more easily control and intervene in people's public lives.

At the same time, the State will begin to set up, orient and regulate programs and services of health and safety to satisfy the demands, and needs, of women. This move will assure the State of direct control over women and children. For example, it is the State who gain the power to distribute contraceptives and abortion services. This power gives the State the potential to impose itself on, and manipulate, the fertility of women. Also, with the growing rate of single parent households (in which the head of the house is usually a woman) the State is able to take on the role of virtual father by providing financial aid.

## **Moral Liberation**

The decline in the need for domestic production led to a relative equality within the domestic sphere between men, women and children. For women, the change often led to an improvement in living conditions within the family, but more importantly led to improvements outside of the home. Because the accepted inequality of women within the family had long permitted owners of production (and still does today) to impose worse conditions on women workers than male workers, this new relative equality led to changes such as syndicalization, job security, and equal salaries. Still, obtaining these rights necessitated State intervention, which guaranteed, and still guarantees, its control over women and their movement.

We often hear that women have been liberated, even emancipated, because they have gained the right to equality with men. This view looks only at a liberation which is limited by the capitalist economy, and by the politics of the State. If a woman, now, has the same rights as a man, in work, marriage and social life, etc, she is still "different". After all, she is a woman. With this idea comes in the eternal discourse on the topic of what defines femininity. Right now, society is undergoing a change in view on the properties of feminine nature, to adapt them to modern life. Some interesting trends within these changes can be seen. If women have really asserted their right to take control of their own bodies, it is funny that feminine lingerie and countless beauty products still have a huge market. The myth of beauty has always been, and continues to be, a limiting, and alienating force for women, and a lucrative business for capitalism. In addition, the gender divisions of work still exist for working class women who have no more choice to have a job in the feminine ghetto categories, which results in low paying, precarious work that profits only the owners and the capitalist economy.

At the same time as the above changes, we are also talking about sexual liberation. Funny conception. The possibility of living in a free union with someone, with or without children doesn't mean at all the right to choose what type of relationship we want. In fact, these new forms of "congeniality" were often imposed by the State through politics, legislation and interventions having to do with marriage, divorce and childcare, etc. Heterosexuality and monogamy are still the dominant models imposed and conditioned by the State. In the end, if today, living in concubinage is a respected choice, it is only because it is not threatening to the State and capitalism. This choice corresponds more to a personal desire, than to an attempt at a radical change of society.

## Return to Moral Order

Since the 1980s we have been experiencing a return to the moral order fueled by people's fears of unemployment, and the precarious nature of jobs. The absence of social solidarity, and dynamics of change, re-ignited people's interest in marriage, as a social refuge. In the face of AIDS, which introduced new norms for sexual behavior, fidelity became critical and stable relationships as well as safe sex, are advocated. Reactionary ideas, as well as sexist behaviors, flourish in the press and in the publicity.

Today, "The dominant message from society is that you shouldn't take risks in sexual matters, as in everything. One must think of protecting one's family, one's body, one's life and the lives of loved ones through adhering to a series of individual and collective rules and norms. This is a message which certainly avoids all forms of social agitation, and contestation of the established social order."<sup>5</sup>

## Conclusion

In summary, contemporary feminist struggles demonstrate that feminism has provided an important influence for the rearrangement of the capitalist order, and has been indispensable in maintaining the status quo. With the help of feminism, everything moved, but nothing changed.

Because the feminist movement was linked to the State, and because all demands were formulated in the language of the State, the struggle ended up turning against itself. It is not surprising that feminist's demands were met, but none of the problematic contradictions that provoked them, were knocked out of place.

We must admit that women did gain certain rights, and it is unquestionable that certain aspects of the quality of living were greatly improved. Even so, these gains all carried the negative baggage of allowing the State to more readily control women's movements. To prove this all we have to do is look at all the organizations, councils and commissions set up to research women, to listen to their demands, their opinions and to present them with "solutions," and even take on feminist projects. In institutionalizing feminism, its potential to be a subversive force was greatly diminished.

The struggle of women against patriarchy has, without doubt, a potential to be a subversive force. It puts into question traditional social roles, the family, property ownership, sexual oppression and domination. In other words, this struggle demands that all of society be questioned. The potential of the struggle will never be met unless women engage in a revolutionary struggle.

To arrive at this point, it is important that class struggle, again, be brought to the forefront. Feminist struggles are too often defined as a war between sexes, which takes priority over all other struggles. There is only one fight, however, the struggle for achieving libertarian communism — the abolition of a class society and the complete destruction of exploitation and domination. For in this struggle it is not possible to work towards liberation if we are divided along gender lines, forbidding men from participating in the struggle against patriarchy.

What's more, it is critical that we stop drawing divisive lines between struggles. It is high time that a real class unity, and class confidence be developed, so that there can be a unified

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<sup>5</sup>Inspired by *Liberation des femmes et projet libertaire*, Organisation Communiste Libertaire, Editions Acratie, 1998, pp.68-73.

offensive against the system. With this unity an attack on one would be viewed as an attack on all. In this sense, "All actions aiming at property destruction or destruction of the State, are in agreement with the objective of the liberation of women. And, reciprocally, all actions taken to reverse patriarchal oppression, contribute to the abolition of property and the State."<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup>Vanina, Corps. *Rapports Sociaux et Ordre Moral*. Courant Alternatif. Novembre 2001. Organisation Communiste Libertaire. Nicole Laurin-Frenette, *Travailleuses et Feministes*, Montreal, Borel Express, 1983.

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