

Juggling Contradictions: Feminism, the Individual and What's Left

Joan Braderman

88

In this essay, I would like to suggest where feminism can lead us and what myths must finally be left behind to get there. The nature of these myths—the myths of equality, individualism and democratic liberalism—which underwrote our humanist heritage, account for the weakest elements of feminist ideology. The recognition that feminism *is* an ideology, like Marx's recognition that humanism is an ideology (i.e., not a discourse whose "truth" was inseparable from the world it described) is a necessary step in re-examining what feminism is and what it can do.

I will use as a conceit the form of "the contradiction"—that underlying, dynamic mechanism of history—in a way that is sometimes more metaphorical than concrete. I take the liberty of using this model rhetorically at times to begin to establish a series of interrelationships between ideologies and their culture. I use it to suggest the many ways the several spheres of interest to *Heresies* readers—art, feminism and their political context—are subject to a set of analogous and mutually reinforcing ideological myths. Most feminists and artists alike are still held captive by the power of these seductive belief systems, although they threaten the coherence of our arguments, threaten our interests and threaten the very survival of the ideal of freedom.

A confrontation between the facts and fictions which surround us becomes inevitable within an escalating spiral of contradictions. The first group to experience directly the essential contradictions of the society we live in is, of course, the lowest class: the unemployed, the poorest, least skilled, most exploited working people. Next, the marginal groups, in North America: people of color, immigrants, the elderly, etc. Artists are marginal too. They feel the economic squeeze in recessions, may even become politicized as a result. And across all these groups are women. As groups, then, women and artists have a low priority in the hierarchy of capital.

To give up the humanist myths, those most cherished ideals of our own class, the bourgeoisie, which were forged when it was the revolutionary class, is difficult indeed. But give them up we must, for in the face of heightening contradictions—economic, biological, ideological—we have no choice.

* * * * *

By 1976, the women's movement seems to have nearly as many political lines as there are women in it. This partly healthy, partly disturbing fact reflects with painful clarity both the strengths and implicit weaknesses of the feminist critique of society. What is feminist practice? What is it to be a feminist in 1976? Is it to be an individual woman "making it" in a man's world? Is it to recognize woman's historical oppression and, released from individual frustration and guilt, to take on collective responsibility? What is the nature of such a responsibility? Is it restricted to oneself? To oneself and the women one sees every week? Is this a responsibility to oneself, to women, to men, to history? In short, is feminism, as an ideology, fundamentally dangerous to the sexism it despises? If so, how?

To many women, enmeshed in the growing contradictions of late capitalist society, feminism, by 1976, has proven as much a trap as a liberation. What seemed to so many of us as little as five years ago a potentially revolutionary force now appears to be virtually co-opted. The great capitalist commodity machine has produced a whole new catalogue of cultural commodities: the feminist writer, artist, poet; the feminist academic, professional, journalist, TV persona; the feminist token with that "feminist mystique." She is for sale in the cultural marketplace. She is tough, durable, tireless. She is "sexually liberated" (a great lie). She works harder than a man. She has to. She is still a woman in a world that calls people "mankind." That is, "equality" for women still equals inequality for women. This is a contradiction.

What kind of contradiction? It is a contradiction between the ideology of bourgeois feminism and economic and biological fact. The economic facts of life for the great majority of women remain the same: unpaid domestic labor, ill-paid labor in the work force. Biological fact (which is gender difference along with its cultural baggage) proposes a contradiction, even for those of us who are female tokens of one sort or another, who are members of the bourgeoisie.

Our psycho-sexual behavior, like our economic roles, is wholly determined by an inherited system of power relations, not only in the public sector, but at deeper levels, in the formation—with the family—of the psyche itself. Hence, as Juliet Mitchell so carefully

describes,¹ it is *the concept of equality* which is invalid within our system. The abstract ideal of equality, she demonstrates, provides the philosophical basis for our laws. Our legal system, at its best, functions as if each of its individual constituents were equal. If some people have only their labor to sell, and this labor produces more value than it returns to the laborer, an unequal exchange has taken place. The laborer, then, and the owner of the means to produce that "surplus value" are not equal. If some people are denied, by virtue of their color, access even to the skills of labor, to whom are they equal? If half of all people have babies and half do not, are they all "equal"? Logical incompatibilities arise: what is different is not the same, and gender (among other things) means difference.

Radical feminism has tried to take on this contradiction, indeed proclaimed it *the essential contradiction* in our form of social organization. Between biology and destiny, it proposes, stands consciousness. Woman's oppression vertically crosses class lines, crosses race lines; women, armed with "consciousness," would speak to each other across a history of divisions and change the world. Women's groups would not only clarify the areas of shared experience which foster that consciousness, but would serve as support communities. With sisterhood for strength, women would hit male supremacy where it lived: at home. Yet what, after all, has changed? The quality of life for a few privileged women—a small step. Was all that fervor, sisterhood and revolutionary idealism that was meant to reinvent the terms for a mass movement so easily engorged, packaged and recycled?

For radical feminism too has been partially co-opted. Since it had already dropped out of the broader (sexist) political arena, it provided support systems for women, but toward an uncertain end. Seeing few alternatives and tantalized by a taste of power, women often used that strength to re-enter the dominant culture to become as competitive, as "good" as men. Has the women's movement had so little concrete impact on most women's lives?

Certainly the patriarchy was sufficiently threatened to let the feminist token into the limelight. (Why co-opt without advertising the co-opted product?) But she did not make it into the statistics. The economic facts so far as most women are concerned remain unchanged: unpaid domestic labor; ill-paid labor in the work force. The wage differential between men and women in fact is now greater than it was ten years ago. Even the hard-won victory of abortion (for a price), even the possibility of "equal rights" before the very laws which uphold a system of inequality, are a slap in the face to an ideology which aimed to alter the very "nature" of human relationships. This too is a contradiction.

What kind of contradiction? It is a contradiction between an ideology and a system; an ideology which has placed its profoundly humanist hope in individual consciousness as somehow separable from the structures in which that consciousness is created. Demystifying the contradictory elements of traditional feminism itself, then, is part of our task. In capitalist society, the process through which human labor is translated into commodity, then capital, is a process necessarily affecting not only the production of tractors and bombs but the production of *ideology*. This process puts intellectual labor, like esthetic labor, like factory labor, like reproductive labor, in the service of a system which generates a surplus of wealth for the few and subsistence for the many. This contradiction—between the forces of production (labor) and the property relations of production (ownership) is *the contradiction* which Marxists claim moves history, because it produces class struggle: the power of masses of people to labor becomes the power to revolt.

This contradiction *has* moved history. But, feminists ask, has it altered the basic relation between woman and man, woman and child-rearing, woman and psycho-sexual slavery? For the hypocrisy of bourgeois ideology in relation to bourgeois practice is paradigmatic within the structure of the family. Marriage, ostensibly a contractual agreement between consenting equals, is in fact a property relation between an owner and an exploited, isolated and powerless worker.

It is the belief in the illusion that such social contracts can be fulfilled that has hung feminists on the horns of contradiction. Feminism was born in the 17th century along with the concept of equality of individuals. It was, as Sheila Rowbotham has documented,² heated in the cauldron of bourgeois revolution and simmered in the idealism of 19th-century Utopianism à la Fourier, who claimed that "the change in historical epoch can always be determined by the progress of women toward freedom."³

Bourgeois feminism has begun, then, in its history of leaps and starts, to identify and attack its sexist enemy, and taken a few long strides away from female feudalism for the benefit of some bourgeois women. But the heart of the problem remains. Feminists from Tennessee Claflin to Isadora Duncan have scored high in locating it. "At the ballot box is *not* where the shoe pinches... It is at home where the husband is the supreme ruler that the little difficulty arises; he will not surrender this absolute power unless he is compelled," wrote Claflin in 1871.⁴ Duncan, in her 1927 autobiography said, "Any intelligent woman who reads the marriage contract and then goes into it, deserves all the consequences."⁵ Here is the confounding point. Monogamy asserts a situation in which one individual "owns" another. It is not ownership

per se that is in question now, but again, the mystification of what the individual is and can control. In participating in the compromised "equality" of marriage, each individual agrees to propagate the species in the context of the values of patriarchy. Values are learned, sexuality is formed, ideology is maintained—within the family.

When feminists claim that "the personal is political" they refer, in a sense, to this problem. Their hypothesis is that one can generalize from the individual, internal dynamics of sexist oppression, to a general rule. Freud's revelation of the structures of the unconscious confirms to an extent the validity of that enterprise. But up to now feminists have not taken it far enough. Having accepted the existence of subconscious structural analogues which mirror the differences between the sexes in the world, we can now proceed with the knowledge that, as a group, we are bound not only by the manifest political forms of our oppression but by these internal psychic monsters. In attempting to combat these monsters, however, feminists have often mistaken the cart for the horse. The personal is political—but with few exceptions, this invocation has simply generated a longer list of symptoms of the sexist disease. We must locate the causes of this disease if we are ever to cure it. We must exploit Freud's science of the mind, but only insofar as it is conjoined with the science of history; that is to say out of the context of individualism.

Sisterhood is really powerful only insofar as it is armed with a coherent theory and a mass strategy. We are in and of our culture; so is the feminist ideal. We must pursue, with maximum scientific rigor, the vanguard theories of culture which culture has produced. We must use the best available tools to locate the incoherence—the contradictions—in extant phallocentric models and generate predictive models based in the experience of both halves of the human race. Feminists who wish to throw Freud out the window because of simplistic readings of "penis envy" current in popular psychology might well take a look at Mitchell's *Feminism and Psychoanalysis* for a re-examination of the usefulness of psychoanalysis to feminist analysis. Her effort there is exemplary. We cannot just look back nostalgically to ancient matriarchies. Indeed, fantasies about matriarchy in our era are pure science fiction. But their existence does suggest that alternate models for culture can exist.

Recent controversy over Mitchell's book, among feminists and male psychoanalytic theorists here and abroad, suggests the "hotness" of this issue. Interestingly, this relation of sexuality to political economy is also being strongly developed outside a feminist context, most prominently on a major intellectual front—in the tradition of French structuralism. European

feminists, especially in England and France, have thus been drawn to that tradition as heightened contradictions impel them to seek out means for their resolution. The main tendency in this area is necessarily phallocentric: it is still being written largely through the cipher of a male experience of the world. But if we as women don't begin to write ourselves into history, who will? For so far, compared to the scope of the theoretical, strategic and practical task ahead, the "woman question" has really only been given lip service by the most advanced intellectual sciences—not surprising since they are "man-made."

Engels, Marx and others have, of course, identified the monogamous, patriarchal family as the central prison for woman. Mechanistic Marxists therefore claim that releasing her from this singular prison into the work force (under socialism) must guarantee her freedom. Does it? Has it?

Not significantly; not yet. The major 20th-century socialist revolutions have made some progress, removing, as in China, the most barbaric manifestations of sexist domination. Immediately following the Soviet revolution, Lenin's program included not only the training of women to join the work force at all levels, but the legalization of abortion, free, accessible divorce, communal daycare, etc. Within ten years, however, Stalinist backlash hit these family issues hardest; much harder, predictably, than the building of an extra-domestic women's work force. In China, with the Cultural Revolution and before, ideological struggle against the values of patriarchy has at least begun. But in the U.S.S.R., in the context of their drive to quickly meet economic priorities which created the bastard known as "state capitalism," it was easier to fall back on the ingrained behaviors of the traditional family unit for free work by women in the home.

The American Communist Party reflects this tendency, still defending the "fighting family unit" as a revolutionary force—in America, a reactionary notion. In fact, mothers have been strong revolutionaries. The strength of the women of Viet Nam in the long battle to defeat American imperialism is a case in point. But, as in Algeria, where fighting European imperialism also meant the reassertion of the heavily patriarchal values of Arab and Islamic culture, women's fate has most often been: off the battlefield and back to the kitchen. The contradictions of the double standard apparently are so heightened during periods of revolution that, as with Bolsheviks like Alexandra Kollontai, the preaching and practice of "free love" (and all it implies) becomes acceptable—for a brief time. Despite Lenin's great sympathy and work for women, his Victorianism won out in the area of sex. Even the Soviet woman engineer comes home to work that is still hers, and still never

done.

In the U.S., too, anti-feminist backlash, somewhat reminiscent of the Stalinist attack on women's freedom, splits American feminism down its uncertain center. Though reformists suggest that there is room in a liberal America to heal the wounds of women, liberalism is particularly dangerous since it cleverly masks its own conservatism, its own investment in the status quo. Liberal ideology neatly instantiates the two-part form of the contradiction. "Its progressive side provides a rationale for defending the rights of individuals against the state. Its reactionary side emphasized that capitalism is not a system where one class exploits another but is rather a collection of individuals, any one of whom can succeed if he or she so decides."⁶

I hope it is becoming clear how ideologically messy liberalism really is from a post-humanist perspective in which the individual can no longer be seen as the subject of history. Liberalism is seen by leftists as a joke because it bears so tenuously the wan hopes of a bankrupt humanism and is, ultimately, untenable. Even hard-core conservatism is more internally coherent. Conservatives and Marxists alike might describe capitalism as a system in which the "stronger" individuals make out. The difference, of course, is that conservatives say so approvingly, grounding their argument in the old dog-eat-dog theory of what they call human nature. Marxists have favored the idea that the industrial capitalist system tends to pervert or alienate what is potentially, or at a given historical moment "good" in human beings. Stated so simply, both are inadequate readings but at least they rehearse the consistency of these positions.

The liberal wants to enjoy the fruits of his class privilege while salving his guilty conscience with a quasi-philosophic posture proposing that every individual (being protected by 'equality' before the law, by 'equal' opportunity measures, etc.) could theoretically be enjoying this same privilege if he or she were as hard-working and dauntless as him/herself. Thus the liberal buys off with a little charity or minimal social welfare all those who, by some extreme individual misfortune, can't quite cut it.

Here we return to the underbelly of co-optation. While a bill assuring equal rights before unequal laws is flung in our faces, and even defeated (adding insult to injury), the dominant media simultaneously declare the women's movement to be "over" or somehow "won" because of the presence of one and a half news anchor-women on TV or the financial viability of *Ms. Magazine*. Capitalist propaganda demonstrates before our eyes that by inference, if one woman can do work that one man can do, women are the achieved "equals" of men. The responsibility for change is thus cleverly switched back onto the shoulders of *individual* women;

to change the world, all you really must do is change yourself. And the mapping of contradictions comes full circle.

The liberal feminist, like the liberal social democrat, learns to sate herself on the token goodies she is tendered. Or the radical feminist (who, lacking a viable mass strategy, is a liberal in disguise) tries to build a separatist island on which she and her sisters can be "free." It's a dilemma. I was, and in some ways still am, such a radical feminist. After all, I am a member of the women's group which publishes this magazine. We try to experiment with anti-oligarchic forms, collective practice. But what is an egalitarian island in a sea of capitalist contradictions but something doomed, as it were, to sinking?

Witness a little linguistic contradiction and the issues it raises for us in *Heresies*. We are constituted as a collective. Adopting one of the stronger aspects of feminist practice, we attempt to chip away at the hierarchical authority structures of The System on a micro level by attempting to produce a theoretical magazine on a collective basis. The assumption here is that theory and practice must develop together in a dialectical relationship. But in order to function as a legal entity, we are transformed to *Heresies Collective, Inc.*: an incorporated collective. This is either redundant or ironic. The fact is, we don't even aspire to making profits but are completely dependent on the legal and business structures around us. This dependence relation, the impossibility of autonomy within a given economic structure, has meant about a two-year life-span for most American collectives before us, according to popular lore.

This dependence also means that artists, particularly those artists being forced by heightened economic contradictions to face political realities, must re-examine their place in our culture. The feminist filmmaker, for example, has had to confront this issue head on. Film, more than any other artform, requires the mastery of machine technology. For women, that technology and the authority it connotes has been historically taboo. There are exceptions in the history of film⁷ but the percentage of women filmmakers is dramatically low for a 20th-century art. Feminists with the energy and support of their sisters in the movement have begun to break that taboo. But in doing so, they have been thrown against a major contradiction facing all "independent" filmmakers: the problem of capital. For to make films requires large amounts of capital, capital which is controlled by the ruling classes, middle-class liberals included.

Advocates of independent filmmaking from Maya Deren in the 1940s (implicitly) to Annette Michelson in the 1960s (explicitly in her article "Film and the Radical Aspiration"⁸) have proposed that a stance outside of the commercial market is itself a "political" gesture. It is—to the



This is a still from Julia Reichert's new film, *Union Maids*, in which she makes the necessary connections (through the editing of contemporary interviews with historical footage) of sexism with racism with classism. *Union Maids* is distributed by the New Day Film Collective.

extent that money can be garnered from liberals to make "art" as long as it is not fundamentally dangerous. But can any political art which attempts to attack the assumptions of The System *from within* patriarchal capitalism actually threaten it? This has been and will be an area of debate for many political estheticians and artists and can hardly be answered here.

But we can and must confront the question. From what is the "independent" filmmaker or artist independent? She is not independent from the need to make a living. She is not independent from the need for capital—money which gives the power to make her films and distribute her films within a tight commercial media monopoly. When a feminist wonders why capitalists won't hand over the money to make anti-sexist films, she, like her "independent" male counterpart, must face the terms of her dependence. She has begun to beg, borrow or steal (translated as win grants, go into debt, etc.) the capital to write herself into visual history, making films about the experience of women; viz: the films of Julia Reichert, Yvonne Rainer, Barbara Kopple, Chantal Ackerman, and many others. But who actually sees these films? They are shown in women's festivals, in avant-garde and political forums in a few major cities. She is, in short, caught in that same economic trap. Cooperatives for pooling resources and sharing distribution efforts, such as New Day Films, are beginning to form; they are collectives like *Heresies*. But the absolute dependence on the inconsistent, discriminate charity of liberals is the underside of that ultimately romantic hope for "independence." The terms for independence, then, among artists and feminists, are the very terms of dependence. Yet another contradiction.

* * * * *

I would like to convince all feminists that it is time to realign with the Left. Current economic realities, heightening contradictions, and the topography of world imperialism reaching its limits, are forcing many groups in America to confront their need for unity. The traditionally sectarian American Left itself is beginning to move toward coalition and alliance, toward unity across color lines, across race lines, across

class lines and across gender lines. Within such a potential configuration women *could* speak to other women. We are beginning to recognize that *all* oppressed peoples within capitalism must come together if we are even to begin to be able to defend ourselves against the attacks and backlash of this system, much less to build a new one.

Several feminist strategies for such a realignment of women with the broader struggle for freedom are presented in this issue of *Heresies* (see "Toward Socialist-Feminism" and "Wages for Housework"). This does not mean that women will not have to continue to force the priority of their own demands in relation to the needs of others. Women will need autonomy to develop theory and strategy accountable to our own needs within a broad movement, to avoid the failures of socialist experiments in the past. Thus, we must make our fight in the context of a movement we help to define and build, a movement that can take on the class contradiction as well as the racial and sexual contradictions implicit in the structures of the larger society. For, on these structures, the fate of all women, like it or not, is inextricably dependent. To wed feminism to the myths and false hopes of liberal idealism is to contribute to the systematic liquidation of its potential power.

1. Mitchell, Juliet, "Women and Equality," in *Partisan Review* (Summer, 1975).
2. Rowbotham, Sheila, *Women, Resistance and Revolution*, Vintage Books (New York, 1974).
3. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
4. Schneir, Miriam, ed., *Feminism: The Essential Historical Writings*, Vintage Books (New York, 1972), p. xviii.
5. *Ibid.*, p. xv.
6. Guettel, Charnie, *Marxism and Feminism*, Women's Educational Press (Ontario, Canada, 1974), p. 2.
7. I and others have written elsewhere about the history of women directors. See my article in *Artforum* (Sept. 1972) and Sharon Smith's *Women Who Make Movies*, Hopkinson and Blake (New York, 1975).
8. In *Film Culture Reader*, ed., P. Adams Sitney, Praeger (New York, 1970).

Joan Braderman is completing her doctorate in film and political theory at N.Y.U., writes theory and criticism and makes 16mm films. She teaches film at The School of Visual Arts in New York City, is a political activist and likes to sing.