

ELEANOR LEACOCK:  
PORTRAIT OF A RADICAL SCHOLAR

Jeanne Cameron

\* \* \*

Background on Her Life and Work

Eleanor Leacock, an anthropologist, was born in 1922. Educated at Barnard College (B.A. 1944), and Columbia University (M.A. 1946, Ph.D. 1952), she worked as a Senior Research Associate at the Bank Street College of Education (1958-1965), as a member of the Department of Social Sciences of the Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn (1963-1972), and as Professor of Anthropology at the City College of New York (1972-1987).

Eleanor Leacock was a teacher, an activist, and a scholar. She died in Samoa, in the spring of 1987, while conducting fieldwork. Given the extensive contributions she made to feminist thought and to progressive struggle in general, her death marks a tragic loss for theoretical and practical progressive work in the U.S. for she made a number of important contributions to both.\* First, she persistently and persuasively argued that women and minorities belong at the center of social analysis. Second, she developed a thoroughly social and historical analysis of both gender and race oppression. Her work consistently challenges biological explanations of both. Third, she consistently connected oppression by gender, race, and class, reasserting that the successful struggle against one demands a unified struggle against all three. Finally, her concrete involvement, as an activist, in progressive struggles gave her work insights that are never gained through theory alone.

\*I became acquainted with Eleanor Leacock's work while preparing for a comprehensive exam in the field of Women's Studies. I had reviewed an extensive amount of

literature from the various schools in feminist thought, and was struggling--as all feminists do--to better understand the causes of gender oppression. Like many other feminists, I was convinced that oppression by gender was somehow connected to race and class oppression, but the connection remained elusive. Leacock's work became pivotal in my quest, and I owe much of my present understanding of oppression to her. In many ways she had become my mentor, both intellectually and spiritually, and I was devastated to learn of her death.

*separate "woman's role" hides the reality of the family as an economic unit, an institution as crucial for the oppression of women . . . Relegation of family forms to secondary questions about "woman's role" has hindered us in our search to comprehend the origins of class society, the dynamics of its perpetuation, and the shape of its full negation. (Leacock 1975:601)*

For a significant group of Marxist feminists, placing gender relations at the center has meant developing a theory of dual systems. They hypothesize the existence of separate systems or structures, semi-autonomous from the economic system, to account for oppression by gender (and race). Common terms for the second system are patriarchy, mode of reproduction, and sex-gender system. According to Anthropologist Gayle Rubin, all three concepts

• .. have been made in order to introduce a distinction between 'economic' systems and 'sexual' systems, and to indicate that sexual systems have a certain autonomy and cannot always be explained in terms of economic forces (1975:167). Evidence to support this assertion often comes from two sources, Marx's *Capital* Volume I, and Engels' The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State.

The evidence from *Capital* may be viewed as evidence by omission; it is what Marx did not make explicit that is seen as important. According to the

theory of capitalist development outlined in Volume I, capitalists benefit from an ever expanding, flexible labor force. As long as the labor force is available and plentiful, the sex of the workers is unimportant. In fact, at the same time Marx was writing *Volume I*, a great number of women and children were entering the labor force largely in response to the introduction of machine technology. According to Marx, this increase in the labor force signalled a significant triumph for capital by increasing the rate of exploitation or decreasing the value of labor power:

*The value of labor power was determined, not only by the labor time necessary to maintain the individual adult worker, but also by that necessary to maintain his family. Machinery, by throwing every member of that family into the labor market, spreads the value of the man's labor-power over his whole family. It thus depreciates it. To purchase the labor-power of a family of four workers may perhaps cost more than it formerly did to purchase the labor-power of the head of the family, but, in return, four days' labor takes place of one day's, and the price falls in proportion to the excess of the surplus labor of four over the surplus labor of one. In order that the family may live, four people must now provide not only labor for the capitalist, but also surplus labor. Thus we see that machinery, while augmenting the*

*human material that forms capital's most characteristic field of exploitation, at the same time raises the degree of that exploitation. (Marx, 1977:518)*

Marx's conclusions stem from the notion that, due to technology, women and men enter the labor force as competitive equals. The structure of the labor force has changed dramatically over the past century. Women, by and large, are not in direct competition with men on the labor market. Instead, women have become a very specific type of labor force--secondary and poorly paid. According to a number of Marxist feminists, the trend Marx witnessed has been circumscribed by the dynamics of a second system. According to Marx's logic, anything that serves to restrict the entry of potential workers into the labor force hinders capitalist expansion. If the dictates of capital reigned supreme, there would be no restrictions. Yet the emergence of the family wage and gender-specific labor legislation did act to restrict women's labor force participation. Likewise, formal and informal restrictions on the labor force participation of minority workers are abundant historically. At the expense of the working class as a whole, white male workers have benefited from restrictions on female and minority labor force participation. Because there is nothing explicit in Marx to explain why women and minorities have specific and inferior relations to production as a whole,

many Marxist feminists argue that you need to introduce a second--and sometimes a third--system or structure to a Marxist theoretical foundation in order to examine oppression by gender and race.

Evidence to support a theory of dual systems also comes from Engels' The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State. The following, widely quoted in Marxist feminist literature, supports the argument that separate systems exist:

*According to the materialist conception, the determining factor in history is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction of immediate life. This, again, is of a twofold character: on the one side, the production of the means of existence, of food, clothing and shelter and the tools necessary for that production; on the other side, the production of human beings themselves, and the propagation of the species. The social organization under which the people of a particular historical epoch and a particular country live is determined by both kinds of production: by the stage of development of labor on the one hand and of the family on the other. (1972:71-72)*

A similar discussion is provided by both Marx and Engels in The German Ideology (1978).

To my knowledge, Leacock never directly addresses the dual systems analysis employed by Marxist

the dualism in Engels' work. In addition, some of her criticisms of the male left can be applied to arguments posited in dual systems theory. Leacock's own work offers an alternative way of suitably extending Marxist theory to account for gender relations. Rather than positing a second system, Leacock relies on the connection between the forces of production (i.e. raw materials, technology, labor) and the relations of production (ownership and/or control over the forces of production) found in Marxist analysis.

In Origin, Engels posits the existence of egalitarian relations

between women and men prior to the emergence of private property and class society. Consistent with the theory of historical materialism, Engels argues that this equality had a material base. In the second form of production--reproduction (see above quote)--Engels locates the foundation for women's power and autonomy in pre-class societies.

Relying heavily on Darwin's theory of human evolution, Engels argues that the family evolves to higher stages through the progressive limitations on inbreeding. Until the advent of private property and monogamy, however, mating remains quite loose. Hence, biological parentage is traceable through the mother's line alone. During this stage in development, no surplus production exists. The direct and immediate relation between production and consumption meant that the survival of

the individual depended upon the survival of the group. Hence, social arrangements were communally structured, with matrilineal descent providing the organizing principle for the structure.

As the mode of production advances, surplus production--private property--emerges. Engels believed that the domestication of animals provided the first surplus, and since men controlled this productive activity they became the first owners of private property. In the discussion of gender relations, the emergence of private property has two related consequences.

First, the communal structure breaks

down as surplus production eliminates the individual's dependence on the group. This provides the basis for class society as well as the privatization of women's labor. Second, loose mating gives way to strict monogamy (for women only). Now that men own property, it becomes important to them to pass it on to their children. Hence, matrilineal descent gives way to patrilineal descent.

Engels writes, "The overthrow of mother right was the world historic defeat of the female sex" (Engels, 1972:120, emphasis in the original).

Leacock agrees with Engels' claim that, prior to the emergence of private property, social relations were communal and egalitarian and that gender oppression did not exist. However, she rejects the distinction he makes between relations of production and reproduction (1972), and argues

and reproduction (1972), and argues that his reliance on biological factors to explain women's status in pre-class society is misguided:

As I stated earlier, Leacock's work consistently challenges ethnocentric analysis of the social structures of non-Western societies. When a researcher brings her/his own social concepts and values to the study of a different society, the society in question appears to be quantitatively different than her/his own--" . . . it is merely our society minus, so to speak" (Leacock, 1975:606). Not only is this racist, it also obscures **qualitative** differences "in social relations, structure, and organization. Engels' preoccupation with biological parentage is a case of imposing Eurocentric cultural values onto a society in which they do not exist: "certainty of biological parentage, one reason given for counting descent through women, is important to Western society, but of little importance in more egalitarian cultures" (Leacock, 1981a:113). Matrilineal descent, according to Leacock, is characteristic of specific forces and relations of production. Among certain groups it is the organizing principle for all productive activities:

*The origins of matrilineal systems are probably sought in technology, division of labor, organization of work groups, control over resources, types of subsistence activities, and the ecological niches in which these activities occur. In*

*genera matriliney is associated with horticulture, in the absence of major activities carried on and coordinated by males, of the type of cattle raising or extensive public works. It tends to disappear with plough cultivation and vanishes with industrialization. (Aberle, 1961:725 cited in Leacock, 1981c:114)*

Leacock supplements Engels' analysis of the dynamics of "pre-class" societies with her own research on the Montagnais-Naskapi, a band society of Eastern Canada (1954, 1958, 1969, 1974, 1975, 1980, 1981, 1981c).

Leacock's analysis comes from ethnographic and ethnohistoric research on the Montagnais dating back to the seventeenth century, and extensive fieldwork among the Montagnais in the 1950s. Leacock maintains that the social structure of the Montagnais, prior to colonization and incorporation into the economy of the World System, was qualitatively different than Western society in three ways. First, economic dependency linked the individual directly to the group. Second, there existed no dichotomy between public and private spheres.

Third, the 'structure of decision-making was different--consensus was obtained in collective activities, and individual autonomy and control was obtained in individual activities. I wish to quote at length Leacock's description of the social relations of

*In egalitarian band society, food and other necessities were procured or manufactured by all able-bodied adults and were directly distributed by their producers (or occasionally, perhaps, by a parallel band member, ritualizing the sharing principle). It is common knowledge that there was no differential access to resources through private land ownership and no specialization of labor beyond that by sex, hence no market system to intervene in the direct relationship between production and distribution. It is not generally recognized, however, that the direct relation between production and consumption was intimately connected with the dispersal of authority . . . The basic principle of egalitarian band society was that people made decisions about the activities for which they were responsible. Consensus was reached within whatever group would be carrying out a collective*

*activity . . . The dispersal of authority in band societies means that the public-private or jural-familial dichotomy, so important in hierarchically organized society, is not relevant. (198J c:J39-140, emphasis in the original)*

From this, Leacock argues that there existed a material base for female autonomy and power in band systems that was not dependent, as Engels thought, on recognition of biological parentage. Women's high status

derived not from "mother right," but rather from the combination of contribution to and control over productive activities. Within this context women's labor was recognized for its crucial importance.

The economic dependency of the individual upon the group insured that all activities were interdependent and reciprocal. This applied equally to the division of labor by sex. The structure of decision making necessitated by the laws of group survival insured that women had as much autonomy over their labor as men did theirs. And, finally, the absence of a public/private dichotomy insured women visibility and recognition for their work. These aspects of band life are qualitatively different from those of Western society. Women in the United States today contribute to the economic well-being of their families in proportion to seventeenth century Montagnais women. But their labor is characterized by neither the social recognition nor the autonomy of the labor of Montagnais

women. On the one hand, their labor at home lacks visibility, and is non-wage labor in a society where wages are the equivalents to status, power, and survival. On the other hand, their wage labor lacks control and autonomy, and is further circumscribed by their non-wage labor. Hence, it is not production, per se, that insures women power and autonomy, it is the relations of production under which they labor: "women make an essential economic contribution in all societies, but their

"Women make an essential economic contribution in all societies, but their status depends on how this contribution is structured. The issue is whether they control the conditions of their work and the dispensation of the goods they produce" (Leacock, 1981c:152).

\* \* \*

Leacock's work deserves the attention of both the traditional Marxists who view gender relations as superstructural phenomena, and the Marxist feminists who employ dual systems analysis to explain gender oppression. By using Marxist theory as Marx intended, Leacock bases her analysis of capitalist development and the consequent emergence of oppression by gender and race on history, rather than theoretical dogma. And, by giving history its rightful place in the construction of theory, Leacock avoids the chauvinistic and Eurocentric trap that many historians and social scientists fall into:

*Consider . . . how the history of capitalist development has been written as if wholly white, deriving almost totally from internal European processes. Relations with Africa, Asia, and the New World are seen as extras, as gravy, unimportant until quite late when they set off Europe's final imperialist explosion . . . It is as if the victory of bourgeois market relations over feudalism, and the "freeing" of workers to sell their*

*labor were largely internal European developments that involved only white men. In fact it was the uniting of class, race, and national exploitation and oppression on a world scale that made the triumph of the European bourgeoisie possible. " (Leacock 1975:603)*

Historically, wage labor has been combined with non-wage labor in the reproduction of the working class throughout the world. To ignore this, just because Marx never addressed it, is to ignore historical reality. Whether women worked on the line or in the home, both kinds of productive work were central features of capitalist development as it historically unfolded. Of equal importance, some Marxists often miss the significance of current trends in labor force participation. The changing structure of the capitalist economy in the U.S., with the shift from capital intensive manufacturing to labor intensive service sector work, has dramatically altered the shape and gender content of the U.S. working class (Smith 1984). Other Marxists, recognizing these trends, were among the first to begin analyzing them. Despite this, for many the concept "proletarian" still evokes images of a white male auto or steel worker. Rejecting this image is as important to the class struggle as it is to the liberation of women. Rejecting this image demands recognizing that gender relations are not secondary but central to social and historical analysis,

To her the left had not met this challenge.

*The contribution from the left has mainly been to stress that the black experience must be added. Recently, some American Indians, and now women, are being tacked on as well--as if it were a matter of merely adding these extras to make the whole, rather than a matter of fundamental rethinking. (1975:603)*

Leacock's work also challenges dual systems theory. Like Marxist feminists, she acknowledges that women and minorities are victims of gender and racial oppression, and that these forms of oppression demand special attention. In contrast to dual systems theorists, Leacock attempts to give them the attention they deserve within the context of Marxist theory alone. She does this, once again, by allowing the theory to respond to history, instead of writing history to the dictates of theory. She writes, "... Marx analyzed the nature of exploitation as a principle, and as a principle it was and is colorless, raceless, and sexless" (1975:602). In other words, Marx developed a principle that could and should respond to historical change. She goes on to argue that the white, male left destroyed the "unifying power" of the principle with the "... hardening into dogma of a pernicious dichotomization, whereby the exploitation of the industrial worker, white and male, was pitted against the compounded exploitation and cruel

oppression of the nonwhite and nonmale" (1975:602).

Ironically, dual systems theory, by introducing separate structures to explain oppression by gender and race, creates a similar dichotomy. Moreover, these conceptual structures lend themselves to ahistorical analyses. Marxist feminists who employ dual systems theory often attribute the existence of the separate system to the sexual division of labor. In many analyses the division is frozen in time, as if the process of bearing and raising children remains unchanged, despite transformations in social relations over time. Sociobiologists would be the first to concur. Most feminists agree adamantly that gender, not sex, is the important category for their analyses, and that gender was, is, and always will be a social and historical construction. Within this context, it is possible, as Rubin suggests (1975), to examine the ways in which biological sex is transformed into the social construction of gender. Marxist feminists need to consider whether a separate system is either necessary or desirable in this process. At the same time, it remains essential that issues of gender and race not be placed on a back burner to "wither away" after "the real revolution" has been fought and won. There can be no real revolution until these issues are given a central place on the agenda. Leacock was optimistic that we could and would move in that direction: "Today there are many of us who recognize that it is crucial to sort





direction: "Today there are many of us who recognize that it is crucial to sort out true and false oppositions in joining the struggle of the world's people to

bury class society before it buries us

an• (1975:604).

### WORKS CITED

Engels, Frederick. 1972. The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State. New York: International Publishers.

Leacock, Eleanor. 1954. "The Montagnais 'Hunting Territory' and the Fur Trade." American Anthropologist 78.

----- 1958. "status Among the Montagnais-Naskapi of Labrador."

Ethnohistory 5.

1969. "The

Montagnais-Naskapi Band,• in Contributions to Anthropology: Band Societies. David Dumas, ed. National Museums of Canada Bulletin 228. Ottawa: Queens Printer for Canada.

----- 1970. "Education, Socialization and the 'Culture of Poverty,' in Schools Against Children.

the Case of Community Control.

Annette T. Rubenstein, ed. New York: Monthly Review Press.

----- 1971a. Culture of Poverty a Critique. New York: Simon and Schuster.

----- 1971b. North American Indians in Historical Perspective. Nancy Lurie, ed. New York: Random House.

----- 1972. "Introduction." to Engels. The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State. New York: International Publishers, 1979. pp. 7-67.

----- 1974. "The Structure of Band Society." Reviews in Anthropology.

----- 1975. "Class, Commodity, and the Status of Women." in Ruby Rohrlich-Leavitt, ed. Women Cross-Culturally: Change and Challenge. Paris: Mouton Publishers.

----- 1980. "Montagnais Women and the Jesuit Program for Colonization," in Women and Colonization: Anthropological Perspectives. Eleanor Leacock and Mona tienne, eds. South Hadley, Bergin and Garvey Publishers.

----- 1981. Myths of Male Dominance: Collected Articles on Women Cross-Culturally. New York: Monthly Review Press. .

----- 1981a. "Introduction to Lewis Henry Morgan, Ancient Society, Parts I, II, III, IV,• in Myths of Male Dominance. Eleanor Leacock. New York: Monthly Review Press.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1981b. "Preface," in  
Myths of Male Dominance. Eleanor

Leacock. New York: Monthly Review  
Press.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1981c. "women's  
Status in Egalitarian Societies:  
Implications for Social Evolution," in  
Myths of Male Dominance. Eleanor  
Leacock. New York: Monthly Review  
Press.

Marx, Karl. 1977. Capital. Volume  
I. New York: Vintage Books.

Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels. 1970. The German Ideology. New York: International Publishers.

Rubin, Gayle. 1975. "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in Toward an Anthropology of Women. Rayna R. Reiter, ed. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Smith, Joan. 1984. "The Paradox of Women's Poverty: Wage-earning Women and Economic Transformation." SIGNS 10.