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Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply "carrying on the fight," but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

Submission guidelines

Articles will typically range in length from 750–4,500 words, but longer pieces will be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to: review_editor@platypus1917.org. All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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Let's say it stands up and as it has stood would have been incapable of anything without women and without femme folks. It's just patent fact. There have always been women uncompromising in their commitment to the struggle for human liberation. The fact that we don't know their names or most of their stories the way that we know men is a specific sort of violence that's done to memory.

Alexander Kollontai, a Russian revolutionary, wrote a brilliant piece called "The Social Basis of the Woman Question" in 1909. It speaks to the question of bourgeois feminism and reformism:

The followers of historical materialism reject the existence of a special woman question, separate from the general social question of our day. Specific economic factors were behind the subordination of women; natural qualities have been a secondary factor in this process. Only the complete disappearance of these factors, only the evolution of those forces, which at some point in the past gave rise to the subjection of women, is able in a

"Women" continues on page 9

British Society, which is a space that's encouraging discussion and debate and a place where we can all go and say what we think and what we feel. I hope to do that.

It is undeniable that conditions, attitudes, and experiences have changed for women in undergraduate societies. We must acknowledge the gains that the women's movement has made for women in capitalist societies around the world. But what do these gains mean? How widespread are they? Who has benefited from them? They mean that the power of organized women has grown. They mean that we have wrested some concessions from the capitalist system we live in. However, these achievements have in no way weakened or undermined capitalism as a system. I liken the unbalancedness of women to air mail rates: if one portion of college students pay up, say, 50¢, women are now in a disadvantaged position with debt. Yes, many middle class and upper class women have better paid interesting jobs (like being a professor), but millions of women work in unhealthy, non-union jobs where they lack healthcare, security, a livable wage, and respect. The goal of capitalism is to generate profits, and any way to do so is to incorporate smart, creative, and energetic women into that is not only defined and solely inhibited by men. But that is not one of the ways that women are able to, for example, is just the result of some nefarious scheme to co-opt women into capitalism. That would be ridiculous. Rather, the advances women make in a capitalist society are both positive, since they have made life better for

Margaret Power: The organizer presented us with some very challenging questions, but, we like the speakers have already agreed amongst ourselves that we will likely and debated what we all say.

Early socialists had even some later ones referred to the oppression of women as "the woman question." This ontological and discursive framing suggests that "the oppression of women exists in isolation from men and is somewhat independent from and less important than the more general question of class struggle and revolution. Has anyone ever heard it referred to as "the proletariat question"? One of the theory realities that Marxists have debated is the relationship between women's oppression and capitalism and the concomitant connection between the liberation of women and the construction of socialism. Closely related to this discussion is: Which women are we talking about? All women? Or just working-class women?

The oppression of women did not begin with capitalism nor will it automatically end with the construction of socialism. The oppression of women is a reality that transcends it. For much of the history of socialism, the oppression of women has been viewed as a distinct reality that primarily defines the condition of women living in capitalist society. However, that is a false and unhelpful judgment. In the oppression of women or, for that matter, the oppression of anyone. Social systems are an integrated whole, in other words, the oppressions of women in the public sphere more generally is not just about the mistreatment of women or the exploitation of women. It is central to the functioning of capitalism. Women produce and reproduce capitalism in varying degrees depending on their relation to the means of production but capitalism cannot function without women of all classes. Therefore, just as the exploitation of workers is central

[illegible]

some women, and double-edged, since they have succeeded in making the capitalist system. Instead of "learning in," I think we need to learn out. Women alone need not capitalism or build socialism. Women need to work together with men to do this. However, it would be a *huge* mistake for women to think that we will achieve women's liberation by building socialism, in order to obtain the forms, in mixed-gender and in autonomous women's organizations. We need independent organizations and spaces from which to articulate our demands, desires, dreams and to concentrate program for liberation. Women need to lead and participate in all revolutionary and, indeed, in some reformist organizations, but we should be organized autonomously in institutions of our own and not to use them. I think that we are aware of being in a "passive" and consequently, have the material resources and the possibility to fight against it.

So far I have explained as if there is something called "womenism" and just such a word does not exist in order to recognize the conflict and the ways it exists among people.

to the very definition of capitalism, so too is that of women, both in our condition as women and as workers. Should those who espouse socialism advocate the liberation of all women, or just working-class, poor women? Since the oppression of women expresses itself in many ways, so too on many levels, it is really not possible to find the oppression of working-class women without simultaneously abolishing the oppression of all women as women. The economic exploitation of women is fundamentally, but not exclusively, class-based. For example: The economic exploitation of a woman who works in a factory is radically different from that experienced by the wife of the owner of the factory. However, in a patriarchal society, the exploitation of women—and by this I mean the production and reproduction and acquisition of surplus value through unpaid labor—differentiates women's reality (not the totality of women's reality, but just this aspect of it). Unless we fight against the devaluing of women's labor across the board, as mothers, as wives, as workers, across class boundaries in all manifold situations, we will not achieve the emancipation of any woman, including working-class women. Socialism, as it should be, defined and practiced as the human quest and need for liberation. Because women's oppression predates capitalism and has persisted in societies that have attempted (with greater or lesser degrees of success) to construct socialism, one thing we can say for sure is that no economic or social system automatically guarantees the emancipation of women. It is undeniably the case that conditions, attitudes, and

On November 4, 2015, the Loyola University Chicago chapter of the Platypus Affiliated Society hosted a panel discussion entitled "Women: The Longest Revolution?" The panelists were Margaret Power, professor of history at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and the author or editor of several books on Latin American history and the political thought of Rigoberta Menchú, including *Revolution and Hope*; Greg Schulte, a grassroots organizer, founding editor of *Red Wedge* magazine, and current graduate student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago; and Yasmin Nair, a Chicago-based writer, academic, and activist in Chicago, co-founder of the Against Equality editorial collective, and volunteer policy director of Gender JUST. What follows is an edited transcript of their conversation. The full audio recording of the event can be found online at <https://archive.org/details/Women_The_Longest_Revolution_201511104>.

Fast revolution?

Women: The long

The Platypus Review

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SPECIAL ISSUE ON

WOMEN: THE LONGEST REVOLUTION?

Named for Juliet Mitchell's 1966 essay, this panel series explores the long history of the struggle for women's liberation from the vantage point of the Left today. In the essay, Mitchell critiques bourgeois feminist demands such as the right to work and equal pay to posit the need instead for equal work. She calls for a politics capable of taking on the fundamental transformation of society and more immediate demands "in a single critique of the whole of women's situation." Therefore we ask: What is the relationship between the struggle for social emancipation and the particular tasks of feminism. How have Leftists imagined this relationship historically? What do we make of it today?

While the "woman question" has played an important role in the history of the Left, its inclusion in current Leftist politics does not reflect a greater understanding of what the struggle for women's liberation might mean politically. How exactly is it "the longest revolution"? When did it begin? If the crisis of bourgeois society in the industrial revolution posed the need for women's freedom as inseparable from the project of human emancipation, then what do we make of the later separation of the feminist movement from the workers' movement for socialism? What do the successes of feminism tell us when considered in relation to the failure of the proletarian struggle to deepen/realize the task of human freedom?

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Women: The longest revolution?

Cornelia Möser, Lucy Parker, Ursula Jensen, Joy McReady

On November 7, 2015, the Platypus Affiliated Society hosted a panel discussion at its 2nd European Conference in Frankfurt entitled "Women: The Longest Revolution?" The panelists were Cornelia Möser, who earned her PhD in gender studies and political science and is a researcher for the CNRS at the CRESPPA-GTM in Paris; Lucy Parker, a member of Platypus based in London; Joy McReady, a journalist and revolutionary social activist who writes a monthly column on women's liberation for Workers' Power, the British section of the League for the Fifth International; and Ursula Jensen, a founding member of the International Bolshevik Tendency and a longterm member of the works council within the IG Metall. What follows is a heavily edited transcript of their conversation. The full audio recording of the event can be found online at: <http://platypus1917.org/2015/12/18/11-07-2015-women-longest-revolution/>.

Opening Remarks

Cornelia Möser: Juliet Mitchell says that women's liberation has a "totalistic quality," meaning that it is necessary in order to reach human freedom in general. Yet the struggle for women's liberation did not sign up as such for liberating the working class from capitalism. It signed up for liberating women—all women, so also working class women—from patriarchy, male domination, male chauvinism, heterosexism, gender oppression. I know this question very well from socialist and Marxist contexts, and it is almost always expressed in order to reduce feminist struggles to the place of the less important struggle. If you're asking, "What has feminism done for class struggle?" I suggest you also ask, "What has socialism and Marxism done against sexism and male dominance, even if only in their own groups?"

If we understand human freedom to be the freedom of all humans, not only of white worker male humans, we have to take into account a number of struggles, and feminism is one of them. Even Juliet Mitchell brings up the history of how radical feminism can also partly be seen as being the result of white sexism in Marxism and socialism. So I agree with Mitchell when she argues that there have always been feminists who saw feminism as the struggle for human emancipation. Feminists read their Marx, their Engels, their Adorno, and their Foucault, but at the same time, unfortunately that cannot be said of male socialists interested in feminist theory. I feel that feminist theory has remained an accessory to the dominant left until today. So until this situation stops, human freedom is not possible, at least not with left-wing politics.

Women's liberation has been successful in the last decade, and I guess the same cannot be said about man's emancipation. As humans, men, women, and non-conformist genders obviously also need general social change concerning the mode of production, but this is very much linked to feminist struggles as the economy is always already gendered, and this needs to be taken into account. Is revolution needed for women's liberation? That really depends on what you understand by "revolution." This term can imply warlike scenes or riot scenes and some prefer to think of revolution as a radical change that can also happen through persistent politics like reforms or collective mobilizations.

I have heard very often in Marxist circles that feminism is kind of like the result also of changes of capitalism, that it's just the way that society adapted to capitalist change. And then, if that is what you are trying to say, I am always surprised how Marxists forget all about their Marx when it comes to feminism. Because he already has told us that history is the history of class struggle, and that there is no teleological or God-given prescribed forces or nature that forms history. So he insists that societies change because people's struggle over power and influence over rights and over the distribution of living conditions, and that also applies for feminism. So obviously feminists have been part of this historical process. If by that you wanted to say that feminism profited from the failure of socialism, my answer would be absolutely not. Especially in Germany, I feel like there is East German socialism, women have lost many things, along with them the right to abortion that we don't have any more since the fall of socialism.

So, can feminism and Marxism be combined? I have to ask back, how can they not be combined? There is a tendency in Marxism to forget that women are also workers and that workers are also women. So obviously it cannot not be combined.

It is true, the so-called second-wave feminism was kind of detached from the first wave of feminism. When they talk about their starting point, they explain it as kind of like starting from scratch. So they were inspired by the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S., and in Europe often they described their consciousness-raising as being part of the general movement of the New Left in the 1960s, where Marxist frameworks of thought were very popular. But in fact, though they have integrated these frameworks of thought into their own theoretical productions, they have also experienced their limitedness: These Marxist theories could not explain gender oppression the way that feminists were experiencing it. And this is why they not only turned to what people call structuralist and poststructuralist theory, but I would go so far as to say that they even formed the broad part of these theories. For example, Foucault's rethinking of power was also in reaction to the failure of the '68 revolts. The feminists also experienced the same frustration with Marxist explanations of how power works in society. This is what unites them with what is called postmodernist thought, and why there was this strong exchange.

Lastly, has the situation of women in the world changed since the 1960s? Of course it has, with and without feminism, and especially in the dominant rich countries. I am not a demographer and not in any way qualified to tell you the details about the many changes in gender and sexual politics worldwide. Within feminism, there are ongoing debates on how even to quantify or objectify freedom or equality—a question that remains complicated way beyond feminism. From personal political experience, I have to say that in most places in the world, we cannot afford to let go of politics of equality even though we have to bear in mind their limitedness. A feminist revolution obviously is on a symbolic level and also on a cultural and interpersonal level. The feminist struggle has always simultaneously played on all these different levels, and that is good.

Ursula Jensen: Marxists know very well that a worker, about whom we speak when we say “working class,” can very well be a black female gay handicapped single mother. So a worker in our view is not necessarily a man.

While Marxists and feminists often find themselves on the same side in struggles for women's rights, they hold two fundamentally incompatible worldviews. Feminism is an ideology premised on the idea that the fundamental division in human society is between the sexes rather than between social classes. Feminist

ideologues consequently see the struggle for female equality as separate from the fight for socialism, which many dismiss as merely an alternative form of patriarchal rule. In the past several decades, feminist writers and academics have drawn attention to the variety and extent of male supremacist practices in contemporary society. Feminists have taken the lead in exposing many of the pathological manifestations of sexism in private life—from sexual harassment to rape and domestic violence. Prior to the resurgence of the women's movement in the late 1960s, these issues received little attention from either liberal or leftist social critics. Feminists have also been active in international campaigns against female genital mutilation in Africa, female infanticide in Asia, and the imposition of the veil in the Islamic world. Feminist analysis is often useful in raising awareness of sexism in capitalist society. But it typically fails to make a connection between male supremacy and the system of class domination which underlies it.

Marxists maintain that class conflict is the motor force of history and reject the notion that there are irreconcilable differences between the interests of men and women. We do not deny that men are the agents of women's oppression, or that men benefit from it, both in material and psychological terms. Yet the benefits that most men derive from women's inequality are petty, hollow, and transitory, and the costs that accompany them are substantial. Undervaluation of traditionally so-called "female work," while appearing to benefit the men, who are better paid and have more job security, in fact exerts downward pressure on wages generally. The same applies to wage discrimination against any other sector of the work force. In addition to lowering wage rates, male chauvinism, like racism, nationalism, homophobia, and other backward ideologies, obscures the mechanisms of social control and divides those at the bottom against each other, thereby providing a bulwark for hierarchical and intrinsically oppressive social systems.

It is true that female oppression is a trans-class phenomenon that affects all women, not merely those who are poor or working class. The degree of oppression and its consequences, however, are qualitatively different for members of different social classes. The privilege and material benefit enjoyed by ruling class women give them a powerful interest in preserving the existing social order.

The notion that women's oppression would continue to be a feature of life under socialism seemed obvious to those New Left radicals who viewed the economically backward, nationally isolated deformed worker states of Cuba, China, North Vietnam, North Korea, and Albania as functioning socialist societies. While women made very important gains everywhere capitalist rule had been overthrown, the parasitic and overwhelmingly male ruling bureaucracy in these Stalinist police states promoted women's roles as breeder, mother, and homemaker. Leon Trotsky pointed out in *The Revolution Betrayed* that the Stalinist apparatus was an obstacle to the development of socialism and criticized "the social interest of the ruling stratum in the deepening of bourgeois law," in connection with its attempt to prop up the socialist family. Feminist pessimism regarding the prospects for women under socialism, as opposed to under Stalinism, reflects an inability to comprehend the historical origins of women's oppression. It also reveals a failure to appreciate the immense possibilities that socialism would open up through the elimination of material scarcity. The revolutionary expropriation of the productive forces and the establishment of a global planned economy would ensure that the most basic conditions for existence—food, shelter, employment, basic healthcare, and education—could be guaranteed for every person on the planet.

Lucy Parker: What is key about Juliet Mitchell's essay is not that she critiques bourgeois feminism's demands, but that she provides a critique of the history of the Left, through various attempts that have arisen to address the problem of women's emancipation. This is perhaps the what makes a good critique: to help clarify the possibilities presented as well as the limitations in any particular idea or moment of political action. The socialist idea was that women's unfreedom is an index of the unfreedom of society as a whole. Socialism was a project attempting to address concrete crises arising in capitalist society. The suggestion is that capitalism is a social problem, not just an economic problem. The development of modern society, and of capitalism (whether or not necessarily) arising out of it, has posed society and its social relations as the problem. The woman's question only really becomes a question through the development of modern society and later, in capitalism. Marx attempted to add specificity to the socialist project, through critiquing it from within. So Marx and Engels's understanding remains key for her in the essay in terms of addressing a woman's position within the production process. But the other constitutive elements that have produced her relatively marginal position, which they suggested through problem of the "family," are for her still not sufficiently elaborated.

In one sense, these appeared as new aspects of social crisis and new concurrent demands regarding reproduction, sexuality, identity, relationships, kinship groups, and child rearing in the 1960s and 1970s. Mitchell is able to therefore address and critique the possibilities and limitations of such demands as they too only address the problem in a partial manner, failing to consider how these aspects are in turn constituted by social relations of production which women also participate in or are excluded from.

Mitchell uses this moment where the questions are being posed, including by feminists, questions which express a real social crisis occurring, as an opportunity, perhaps against the dominant trend, to return to Marx and Engels. She aimed to underscore how they had already recognized that the ways we live our lives in capitalism are in crisis, meaning that these critical questions of sexuality, identity, kinship relations are all there. What it really means to be human is also a question that becomes increasingly contradictory in capitalism. Marx and Engels characterize humanity as unique in its ability to give itself its own species being, not predetermined. But in capitalism it appears that it may have freely created the conditions of its own unfreedom.

The Bolsheviks, within the first few years after the Russian Revolution, made considerable efforts towards women's emancipation and sexual liberation through the immediate legalization of homosexuality, the right to free divorce, and the socialization of housework and childcare. Trotsky describes how these new attempts to transform society came up against the economic limits of the new society and state that had been forged but was still under pressure from all sides as socialist revolution had failed to spread elsewhere. The return of the ideology of the traditional family as the only means to meet the reproduction of this society expressed a continuing

unmet need as capitalism was still to be overcome, but the idea presented a new form of an old unfreedom.

Discontents continue to play out in different ways: sometimes experienced as desire for greater sexual emancipation, sometimes as the freedom to sustain a family life being curtailed, sometimes as the question of women in the job market, or the right to abortion, sometimes as the demand for societal recognition of one's individual differing or changed gender identity, or for one's personal relationships to be recognized as legitimate by the state.

Whether the existing "Left" is able to address these meaningfully is a real question. Marxism itself is often understood merely as a theory of oppression. Class is reduced to an identity category to be "intersected" with others in a hierarchy of oppression and/or privilege, where once, according to Marxism, it meant something a little different: It expressed the historical necessity for society to overcome itself through and beyond capitalism. How we try to understand or grasp demands made in the present on behalf of women's emancipation as a whole is unclear, when the memory of what socialism was trying to achieve becomes increasingly obscure.

Joy McReady: Juliet Mitchell's essay has a very appropriate title, "Women: The Longest Revolution," because man's dominance over women existed before capitalism. It originated in the development of class society and also class antagonisms. Capitalism has entrenched the subservience of women in society, and it rests on private property, which is owning the means of production, and also the family unit, where the new class of workers reproduce themselves and their labor power for free. And although the capitalist mode of production draws an increasing number of women into the labor force, giving them greater economic independence, the family unit has been maintained and keeps women in domestic bondage. So, we talk about the double burden of working outside the home but also doing the majority of the housework within the home and looking after the children.

But at the same time, it also provides an opportunity for women to overthrow these chains. As Engels said, the emancipation of women becomes possible only when women are able to take part in production on a large scale and when domestic duties require their attention only to a minor degree. While this doesn't guarantee women's liberation in and of itself, it takes women out of the private and isolated experience and pulls them into a socialized working environment where they can begin to organize with other working women and men in trade unions with wildcat strikes, as part of the working class. It was great to come into Frankfurt and to see the whole way along, "flight cancelled, cancelled..." That's the power of the working class.

Women, like men, are divided into classes. Women of the ruling class can offload a lot of their oppression onto working class women, whether they be nannies or housekeepers or personal assistants. Their privileges will always tie them to a defense of their class before their sex. The idea of the "all class" women's movement promoted by feminists obscures the different class interests, in the fact that they seek solutions within the capitalist system. The working class itself is the class with the chains that can't be broken except by uprooting capitalism. The revolutionary communist position on women's liberation takes as its starting point that working class women are the central agents in the struggle against their own oppression, aided at every step by class-conscious, working-class men. So we won't be "liberated." We liberate ourselves.

Many may be thinking that this is just Marxism 101,

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What is Socialism?

but the theoretical starting point becomes crucial when you start to talk about how to organize women within the revolutionary movement. Juliet Mitchell was very correct when she writes that the second wave of feminism was a reaction to the failure of the Left and other revolutionary movements in the 60s to really challenge sexism within their own ranks and to treat women fighters within the struggle as equals.

Of course, this was even worse in the late 1800s when Clara Zetkin of the German SPD and Alexandra Kollontai of the RSDLP, and later of the Bolsheviks, were organizing. In many countries women weren't allowed to join trade unions or political parties, or to vote, and revolutionary women were fighting for these rights. But they also fought within their political parties to create special organizations and movements of the oppressed within and outside the revolutionary party. They recognized that prejudices and oppressive behavior exist among workers and revolutionary communists and have to be fought. Clara Zetkin argued that women need to be organized and their rights defended. She built up a massive organization of working class women within the SPD. There were about 140,000. She also produced a specific newspaper with

a print run of over 100,000. The Bolsheviks also set up their own women's section.

But in the absence of a mass revolutionary party today, what we should argue for is the right of women and other oppressed groups to caucus. In trade unions and all the different working class organizations, it's really important that they are allowed to meet to discuss any issue related to their oppression and the struggle against sexist or oppressive behavior and should be able to submit proposals for dealing with these issues directly to the membership and the leadership of the organizations. We also need to raise the call for a working class women's movement. This would take up the whole spectrum of women's oppression: domestic violence, rape, discrimination at work, inequalities in pay, and cuts in childcare and healthcare. It would also combat the sexist culture of capitalist society. Really, the historic crisis of capitalism that we are living through right now has impacted working class women very severely. They have been impacted as workers, especially in the public sector where they're often the majority who have seen their jobs, wages, and pensions completely cut and their whole workload increased. They have also been impacted by all the cuts to services and healthcare as well.

No organization is entirely immune from the reactionary ideas and forms of behavior in the society as a whole. Working class organizations, trade unions, and reformist parties don't automatically or spontaneously oppose women's oppression just as they do not spontaneously become socialist. It requires a conscious struggle by a revolutionary party with the right policies and program to fight against sexism, racism, and reformism.

Responses

CM: I kind of feel that Juliet Mitchell is a really nice writer, but this work you are citing from is from 1971, when feminism started. There have been decades of feminist theory ever since. When I say there is so much feminist theory that is not read in leftist circles, I am very sad about that. I feel it's not the same the other way around.

Women have profited from alliances with bourgeois women. For example, to get the right to abortion, the vote, or access to universities. All of this is reformist, but I'm kind of happy about it. Working class women have profited from the social, economic, and political capital of bourgeois feminists in these struggles. When you are criticizing feminists who put gender oppression first, I feel that you've used the words "feminists state that..." Precisely what feminists are you talking about?

We also could use a term from gender studies called “intersectionality” of forms of oppression that can help to try and understand what’s going on here, and that, for example, gender oppression will not go away with socialism. We see that in history. It’s important for me to see that socialism as such will not abolish gender oppression.

Lastly, it's not only about being exploited as women; it's also the oppression of having to be a man or a women.

UJ: What feminists am I talking about? All the ones I know, basically. You might be the exception, but I don't know you that well yet. No, gender oppression is not something that goes away after the revolution immediately. But we will not get real women's liberation without it. Not in this society. Now, you said reforms are not bad. No, they are not. We will certainly defend them. But if you fight only for reforms than you have put a limit to your fight. We will fight for a socialist revolution.

JM: We can unite bourgeois feminists, radical feminists, etc., on certain issues, but as revolutionary