

Communization and the Abolition of Gender

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Present day civilization makes it plain that it will only permit sexual relationships on the basis of a solitary, indissoluble bond between one man and one woman, and that it does not like sexuality as a source of pleasure in its own right and is only prepared to tolerate it because there is so far no substitute for it as a means of propagating the human race.

Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*

Communization is not a revolutionary position. It is not a form of society we build after the revolution. It is not a tactic, a strategic perspective, an organization, or a plan. Communization describes a set of measures that we must take in the course of the class struggle *if there is to be a revolution at all*. Communization abolishes the capitalist mode of production, including wage-labor, exchange, the value form, the state, the division of labor and private property. That the revolution must take this form is a necessary feature of class struggle today. Our cycle of struggles can have no other horizon, since the unfolding contradictions of capitalism annihilated the conditions which other forms of revolution required. It is no longer possible to imagine a situation in which social divisions are dissolved *after* the revolution.

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Since the revolution as communization must abolish all divisions within social life, it must also abolish gender relations – not because gender is inconvenient or objectionable, but because it is part of the totality of relations that daily reproduce the capitalist mode of production. Gender, too, is constitutive of capital's central contradiction, and so gender must be torn asunder in the process of the revolution. We cannot wait until after the revolution for the gender question to be solved. Its relevance to our existence will not be transformed slowly – whether through planned obsolescence or playful deconstruction, whether as the equality of gender identities or their proliferation into a multitude of differences. On the contrary, in order to be revolution at all, communization must destroy gender *in its very course*, inaugurating relations between individuals defined in their singularity.

The fact that revolution takes the form of communization is not the result of lessons learned from past defeats, nor even from the miserable failure of past movements to solve the gender question. Whether or not we can discern, after the fact, a winning strategy for the movements of the past says nothing about the present. For capital no longer organizes a unity among proletarians on the basis of their common condition as wage-laborers. The capital-labor relation no longer allows workers to affirm their *identity* as workers and to build on that basis workers' organizations capable of assuming power within the state. Movements that elevated workers to the status of a revolutionary subject were still 'communist', but communist in a mode that cannot be ours today. The revolution as communization has no revolutionary subject, no affirmable identity – not the Worker, the Multitude, or the Precariat. The real basis of any such revolutionary identity has melted away.

Of course, workers still exist as a class. Wage-labor has become a universal condition of life as never before. However, the proletariat is diffuse and fractured. Its relation to capital is precarious. The structural oversupply of labor is enormous. A surplus population of over one-billion people – eager to find a place in the global commodity chains

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from which they have been excluded – makes it impossible to form mass organizations capable of controlling the supply of labor, except among the most privileged strata of workers.¹⁸⁷ Capital now exacerbates, fragments and more than ever relies on the divisions between workers. Once the proud bearers of a universally relevant revolutionary essence, the Working Class, in its autonomy as a class within capitalism, can no longer build its power as a class against capital. Today, *the revolution must emerge from the disunity of the proletariat, as the only process capable of overcoming that disunity*. If revolutionary action does not immediately abolish all divisions between proletarians, then it is not revolutionary; it is not communization.

In the present moment, the very inability of workers to unite on the basis of a workers' identity thus forms the fundamental limit of struggle. But that limit is at once the dynamic potential of this cycle of struggles, bearing within itself the abolition of gender relations and all other fixed distinctions. It is no historical accident that the end of the former cycle of struggles coincided with a revolt against the primacy of the Worker – a revolt in which feminism played a major role. To re-imagine a workers' movement that would not demote women, blacks, and homosexuals to a subordinate position is to think a workers' movement that lacks precisely the unifying/excluding trait that once allowed it to move at all. With the benefit of hindsight, it is increasingly clear that if the working class (as a class of all those without direct access to means of production) was destined to become the majority of society, the workers' movement was unlikely to organize a clear majority from it. The revolution as communization does not solve this problem, but it takes it onto a new terrain. As surveyors of this new landscape, we must assess the present state of the practical movement toward the end of gender relations. We must also expand discussion of this essential communizing measure.

Until recently, the theory of communization has been the product of a small number of groups organized around the publication of a handful of yearly journals. If few of those groups have taken up the task

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of theorizing gender, it is because most have been wholly uninterested in examining the real basis of the divisions that mark the existence of the working class. On the contrary, they have busied themselves with trying to discover a revolutionary secret decoder-ring, with which they might be able to decipher the merits and shortcomings of past struggles. Thus, most partisans of communization have thought the revolution as an immediate overcoming of all separations, but they arrived at this conclusion through an analysis of *what communization would have to be in order to succeed where past movements failed*, rather than from a focus on the historical specificity of the present.¹⁸⁸

For this reason, the tendency organized around Théorie Communiste (TC) is unique, and we largely follow them in our exposition. For TC, the revolution as communization only emerges as a practical possibility when these struggles begin to ‘swerve’ (*faire l’écart*) as the very act of struggling increasingly forces the proletariat *to call into question and act against its own reproduction as a class*. ‘Gaps’ (*l’écarts*) thereby open up in the struggle, and the multiplication of these gaps is itself the practical possibility of communism in our time. Workers burn down or blow up their factories, demanding severance pay instead of fighting to maintain their jobs. Students occupy universities, but against rather than in the name of the demands for which they are supposedly fighting. Women break with movements in which they already form a majority, since those movements cannot but fail to represent them. And everywhere, the unemployed, the youth, and the undocumented join and overwhelm the struggles of a privileged minority of workers, making the limited nature of the latter’s demands at once obvious and impossible to sustain.

In the face of these proliferating gaps in the struggle, a fraction of the proletariat,

in going beyond the demands-based character of its struggle, will take communizing measures and will thus initiate

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the unification of the proletariat which will be the same process as the unification of humanity, i.e. its creation as the ensemble of social relations that individuals establish between themselves in their singularity.¹⁸⁹

For TC, the divisions within the proletariat are therefore not only that which must be overcome in the course of the revolution, *but also the very source of that overcoming*. Perhaps that is why TC, alone among theorists of communization, have devoted themselves to an examination of the gender distinction, as it is perhaps the most fundamental divisions within the proletariat.

TC's work on gender is relatively new, especially for a group which has spent the last thirty years refining and restating a few key ideas over and over again. Their main text on gender, written in 2008, was finally published in 2010 (with two additional appendices) in issue 23 of their journal as *Distinction de Genres, Programmatisme et Communisation*. TC are known for their esoteric formulations. However, with some effort, most of their ideas can be reconstructed in a clear fashion. Since their work on gender is provisional, we refrain from lengthy quotations. TC claim that communization involves the abolition of gender as much as the abolition of capitalist social relations. For the divisions which maintain capitalism maintain the gender division and the gender division preserves all other divisions. Still, as much as TC take steps towards developing a rigorously historical materialist theory of the production of gender, they end up doing little more than suture gender to an already existing theory of the capitalist mode of production (to no small extent, this is because they rely largely on the work on one important French feminist, Christine Delphy¹⁹⁰).

For our context here, TC have a particularly fascinating theory of communization insofar as it is also a periodization of the history

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of class struggle – which itself corresponds to a periodization of the history of the capital-labor relation. This provides TC with a uniquely historical vantage on the present prospects for communism. Crucially, TC focus on *the reproduction of the capital-labor relation*, rather than on *the production of value*. This change of focus allows them to bring within their purview the set of relations that actually construct capitalist social life – beyond the walls of the factory or office. And the gender relation has always extended beyond the sphere of value production alone.

I. The Construction of the Category ‘Woman’

Woman is a social construction. The very category of woman is organized within and through a set of social relations, from which the splitting of humanity into two, woman and man – and not only female and male – is inseparable. In this way, sexual difference is given a particular social relevance that it would not otherwise possess.¹⁹¹ Sexual difference is given this fixed significance within class societies, when the category of woman comes to be defined by the function that most (but not all) human females perform, for a period of their lives, in the sexual reproduction of the species. Class society thus gives a social purpose to bodies: because some women ‘have’ babies, all bodies that could conceivably ‘produce’ babies are subject to social regulation. Women become the slaves of the biological contingencies of their birth. Over the long history of class society, women were born into a world organized only for men – the primary ‘actors’ in society, *and in particular the only people capable of owning property*. Women thereby became the property of society as a whole.

Because women are by definition not men, they are excluded from ‘public’ social life. For TC, this circumscription of the women’s realm means that not only are their bodies appropriated by men, but also the totality of their activity. Their activity, as much as their very being, is by definition ‘private’. In this way, women’s activity takes on the character of *domestic labor*. This labor is defined not as work done in the home, but as women’s

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work. If a woman sells cloth in the market, she is a weaver, but if she makes cloth in the home, she is only a *wife*. A woman's activity is thus considered merely as her activity, without any of the concrete determinations it would be given if it were performed by some other, more dignified social entity. The gender distinction man/woman thereby takes on additional significance as public/private and social/domestic.

Is the unpaid labor of women for men, including perhaps their 'production' of children, therefore a class relation, or even a mode of production (as Delphy calls it, the domestic mode of production)? TC defines class society as a relationship between surplus producers and surplus extractors. The social division between these groups is constitutive of the relations of production, which organize the productive forces for the purpose of producing and extracting surplus. Crucially, these relations must have as their product the reproduction of the class relation itself. However, for TC – and we follow them on this point – *each mode of production is already a totality*, and in fact the social relevance of women's role in sexual reproduction changes with the mode of production. That does not mean that relations between men and women are derivative of the relations between the classes. It means rather that *the relations between men and women form an essential element of the class relation* and cannot be thought as a separate 'system', which then relates to the class-based system.

Of course, this discussion remains abstract. The question now becomes, how do we unite our story about women with our story about the succession of modes of production? For TC, *women are the primary productive force* within all class societies, since the growth of the population forms an essential support of the reproduction of the class relation. The augmentation of the population as the primary productive force remains, throughout the history of class society, the burden of its women. In this way, the *heterosexual matrix* is founded on a specific set of material social relations.

However, we should remind ourselves that the special burden of

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childbirth predates the advent of class society. Historically, each woman had to give birth, on average, to six children – just in order to ensure that two of those six survived to reproduce the coming generations. The chance that a woman would die in childbirth, in the course of her life, was nearly one in ten.¹⁹² Perhaps the insight of TC is that the advent of class society – which saw a massive increase in the size of the human population – hardened the social relevance of these facts. But *even before the advent of class society*, there was never any ‘natural’ regime of human sexual reproduction. Age at marriage, length of breastfeeding, number of children born, social acceptability of infanticide – all have varied across human social formations.¹⁹³ Their variation marks a unique adaptability of the human species.

But we are concerned less with the long history of the human species than with the history of the capitalist mode of production. Wage-labor is fundamentally different from both ancient slavery and feudal vassalage. In slavery, surplus producers have no ‘relation’ to the means of production. For the slaves are themselves part of the means of production. The reproduction or upkeep of slaves is the direct responsibility of the slave owner himself. For both men and women slaves, the distinction between public and private thus dissolves, since slaves exist entirely within the private realm. Nor is there any question, for the slaves, of property inheritance or relations with the state, such as taxation. Interestingly, there is some evidence that patriarchy was, perhaps for that very reason, rather weak among slave families in the American South.¹⁹⁴ In vassalage, by contrast, the surplus producers have direct access to the means of production. Surplus is extracted by force. The peasant man stands in relation to this outside force as the public representative of the peasant household. Property passes through *his* line. Women and children peasants are confined to the private realm of the village, which is itself a site of both production and reproduction. The peasant family does not need to leave its private sphere in order to produce what it needs, but rather only to give up a part of its product to the lords. For this reason, peasant families remain relatively independent of markets.

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In capitalism, the lives of the surplus producers are *constitutively split* between the public production of a surplus and the private reproduction of the producers themselves. The workers, unlike the slaves, are their 'own property': they continue to exist only if they take care of their own upkeep. If wages are too low, or if their services are no longer needed, workers are 'free' to survive by other means (as long as those means are legal). The reproduction of the workers is thus emphatically not the responsibility of the capitalist. However, unlike the vassals, the workers can take care of their own upkeep only if they return to the labor market, again and again, to find work. Here is the essence of the capital-labor relation. What the workers earn for socially performed production in the public realm, they must spend in order to reproduce themselves domestically in their own private sphere. The binaries of public/private and social/domestic are embodied in the wage-relation itself. Indeed, these binaries will only collapse with the end of capitalism.

For if the capitalists were directly responsible for workers' survival – and thus if their reproduction were removed from the private sphere – *then the workers would no longer be compelled to sell their labor-power*. The existence of a separate, domestic sphere of reproduction (where little production takes place unmediated by commodities purchased on the market) is constitutive of capitalist social relations as such. Social activity separates out from domestic activity as the market becomes the mediating mechanism of concrete social labor performed outside of the home. Production for exchange, which was formerly performed inside the home, increasingly leaves the home to be performed elsewhere. At this point the public/private distinction takes on a spatial dimension. The home becomes the sphere of private activity – that is, women's domestic labor and men's 'free time' – while the factory takes charge of the public, socially productive character of men's work.

Of course, women have also always been wage laborers, alongside men, for as long as capitalism has existed. For TC, the gendered nature of

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women's domestic work determines that their work, even when performed outside of the home, remains merely women's work. It remains, that is to say, wage labor of a particular sort, namely *unproductive or else low value-added labor*. Women tend to work in part-time, low-wage jobs, particularly in services (though of course today, there are at least some women in all sectors of the economy, including among the highest paid professionals). Women often perform domestic services in other people's homes, or else in their offices and airplanes. When women work in factories, they are segregated into labor-intensive jobs requiring delicate hand-work, particularly in textiles, apparel and electronics assembly. Likewise, work done in the home remains women's work, even if men perform it – which, largely, they do not.

In this sense, once gender becomes embodied in the wage-relation as a binary public/private relation, TC cease to theorize its ground in the role that women play in sexual reproduction. The fact that women's work is of a particular character outside the home is merely true by analogy to the character of the work they perform in the home. It bears no relation to the material ground of women's role in sexual reproduction, and in that sense, it is more or less ideological. By the same token, TC increasingly define the work that women do in the home by its character as the daily reproductive labor performed necessarily outside of the sphere of production – and not by relation to the role that women play in childbirth, as the 'principal force of production'. If, within the capitalist mode of production, women are and have always been both wage-laborers and domestic laborers, why do they remain almost entirely *female*? As TC begin to discuss capitalism, they phase out their focus on sexual reproduction, which disappears under a *materially unfounded* conception of domestic labor (though their references to biology return later, as we will see).

This oversight is a serious mistake. The sexual segregation of work in the capitalist mode of production is directly related to the temporality of a woman's life: as the bearer of children, the main source of their nourish-

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ment at young ages (breastfeeding), and their primary caretakers through puberty. Over the long history of capitalism, women's participation in the labor market has followed a distinct 'M-shaped' curve.¹⁹⁵ Participation rises rapidly as women enter adulthood, then drops as women enter their late 20s and early 30s. Participation slowly rises again as women enter their late 40s before dropping off at retirement ages. The reasons for this pattern are well known. Young women look for full-time work, but with the expectation that they will either stop working or work part-time when they have children. When women enter childbearing years, their participation in the labor force declines. Women who continue to work while their children are young are among the poorer proletarians and are super-exploited: unmarried mothers, widows and divorcées, or women whose husbands' incomes are low or unreliable. As children get older, more and more women return to the labor market (or move to full-time work), but at a distinct disadvantage in terms of skills and length of employment, at least as compared to the men with whom they compete for jobs.¹⁹⁶

For all these reasons, capitalist economies have always had a special 'place' for women workers, as workers either not expected to remain on the job for very long or else as older, late entrants or re-entrants into the labor force. Beyond that, women form an important component of what Marx calls the 'latent' reserve army of labor, expected to enter and leaving the workforce according to the cyclical needs of the capitalist enterprises. The existence of a distinctive place for women in the labor force then reinforces a society-wide commitment to an ideology about women's natural place, both in the home and at work. Even when both men and women work, men typically (at least until recently) earn higher wages and work longer hours outside the home. There thus remains a strong pressure on women, insofar as they are materially dependent on their husbands, to accept their subordination: to not 'push too hard'¹⁹⁷ on questions of the sexual division of labor within the home. Historically, this pressure was compounded by the fact that women were, until after World War II, *de facto* if not *de jure* excluded from many forms of property ownership, making them reliant

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on men as mediators of their relation to capital. Therefore, women did not possess the juridical freedoms that male proletarians won for themselves – and not for *their* women. Women were not truly ‘free’ labor in relation to the market and the state, as were their male counterparts.¹⁹⁸

II. The Destruction of the Category ‘Woman’

Though TC fail to explain the ground of the construction of women in capitalism, they do have a provocative theory of how women’s situation within capitalism changes according to the unfolding contradictions of that mode of production. ‘Capitalism has a problem with women’ because, in the present period, *the capital-labor relation cannot accommodate the continued growth of the labor force*. As we have already noted, capital increasingly faces a large and growing surplus population, structurally excessive to its demands for labor. The appearance of this surplus population has coincided with a transformation in the way that capitalist states, the workers’ movement, and also feminists have viewed women as the ‘principal productive force’. In an earlier moment birth-rates declined precipitously in Europe and the former European settler-colonies. The response was ‘pro-natalism’. Civilization supposedly faced imminent degeneration, since women were no longer fulfilling their duty to the nation; they had to be encouraged back into it. By the 1920s, even feminists became increasingly pro-natalist, turning maternalism into an explanation for women’s ‘equal but different’ dignity as compared to men. By the 1970s, however – as the population of poor countries exploded while the capitalist economy entered into a protracted crisis – maternalism was largely dead. The world was overpopulated with respect to the demand for labor. Women were no longer needed in their role as women. The ‘special dignity’ of their subordinate role was no longer dignified at all.

However, that is only half the story. The other half is to be found in the history of the demographic transition itself, which TC fail to consider. In the course of its early development, capitalism increased work-

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ers' consumption and thereby improved their health, reducing infant mortality. Falling infant mortality in turn reduced the number of children that each woman had to have in order to reproduce the species. At first, this transformation appeared as an increase in the number of surviving children per woman and a rapid growth of the population. Thus, the spread of capitalist social relations was everywhere associated with an *increase* in women's reproductive burden. However with time, and now in almost every region of the world, there has been a subsequent reduction, both in the number of children each woman has and in the number of children who subsequently survive infancy and early childhood. Simultaneously, as both men and women live longer, less of women's lifetimes are spent either having or caring for young children. *The importance of these facts cannot be overestimated.* They explain why, in our period, the straight-jacket of the heterosexual matrix has had its buckles slightly loosened, for men as well as women (and even, to a small extent, for those who fit neither the categories of gender distinction, nor those of sexual difference).¹⁹⁹

As with everything else in capitalism, the 'freedom' that women have won (or are winning) from their reproductive fate has not been replaced with free-time, but with other forms of work. Women's supposed entrance into the labor force was always actually an increase in the time and duration of women's already existing participation in wage-work. But now, since women are everywhere spending less time in childbirth and child-rearing, there has been a reduction in the M-shaped nature of their participation in labor-markets. Women's situation is thus increasingly split between, on the one hand, the diminishing but still heavy burden of childbearing and domestic work, and on the other hand, the increasingly primary role in their lives of wage-work – *within which they remain, however, disadvantaged.* As all women know, this situation expresses itself as a forced choice between the promise a working life supposedly equal to men and the pressure, as well as the desire, to have children. That some women choose not to have children at all – and thus to solve this dilemma for themselves, however inadequately – is the only possible explanation of

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the fall in the birth rate below what is predicted by demographic transition theory. Fertility is now as low as 1.2 children per woman in Italy and Japan; almost everywhere else in the West it has fallen below 2. In the world as a whole, fertility has fallen from 6 children per woman in 1950 to around 2.5 today.

In this situation, it becomes increasingly clear that women have a problem with markets, *since markets are incompatible with women*. This incompatibility comes down to two facts about the capitalist mode of production. First, capital cannot, if it is to remain capital, take direct responsibility for the reproduction of the working class. It is because workers are responsible for their own upkeep that they are forced to return, again and again, to the labor market. At the same time, labor markets, if they are to remain markets, must be 'sex-blind'.²⁰⁰ Markets have to evaluate the competition between workers without regard to any non-market characteristics of the workers themselves. These non-market characteristics include the fact that *half of all of humanity is sexed female*. For some employers, sexual difference cannot but appear as an additional cost. Women workers are able to bear children and thus cannot be relied on not to have children. For other employers, sexual difference appears as a benefit *for precisely the same reason*: women provide flexible, cheap labor. Women are thus relegated by capitalist relations – precisely because markets are sex-blind – to women's wage-work.

This incompatibility of women and markets has plagued the women's movement. Feminism historically accepted the gendered nature of social life, since it was only through gender that women could affirm their identity as women in order to organize on that basis. This affirmation became a problem for the movement historically, *since it is impossible to fully reconcile gender – the very existence of women and men – with the simultaneous existence of the working class and capital*.²⁰¹ As a result, the women's movement has swung back and forth between two positions.²⁰² On the one hand, women fought for equality on the basis of their fundamental same-

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ness with respect to men. But whatever the similarity of their aptitudes, women and men are not and never will be the same *for capital*. On the other hand, women have fought for equality on the basis of their ‘difference but equal dignity’ to men. But that difference, here made explicit as motherhood, is precisely the reason for women’s subordinate role.

The workers’ movement promised to reconcile women and workers beyond, or at least behind the back of, the market. After all, the founding texts of German Social Democracy, in addition to Marx’s *Capital*, were Engels’ *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*, and Bebel’s *Woman and Socialism*. Through struggle, the workers’ movement promised to bring women out of the home and into the workforce, where they would finally become the true equals of men. In order to achieve this real equality, the workers movement would socialize women’s reproductive work ‘after the revolution’. Both housework and childcare would be performed collectively by men and women together. As it became clear to the most extreme elements of the Radical Feminist movement in the 1970s, these measures would never suffice to actually ensure ‘real equality’ between men and women workers. The only possibility of achieving an equality of workers, at the intersecting limit of both gender and labor, would be *if babies were born in test-tubes, finally having nothing to do with women at all*.²⁰³

In fact, the workers’ movement betrayed its women as soon as it had the chance. Whenever they came close to power, male workers were fully willing to demonstrate their capacity to manage the economy by showing that they, too, knew how to keep women in their place. In the British Communist Party, freeing husbands from domestic work was the main task of women’s ‘party work’.²⁰⁴ How could it have been otherwise? Within a world defined by work – or more precisely, by productive labor (a category of capitalism) – women would always be less than men. The attempt to ‘raise’ women to the equals of men was always a matter of *adjusting a ‘universally’ relevant movement of workers to fit the ‘particular’ needs of its women*. The attempt to do so, within the bounds of capitalism, amounted to

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a minimal socialization of childcare, as well as the institution of a minimal set of laws protecting women from their disadvantages in markets (that is to say, maternity leave, etc). Workers' movements could have gone further along this road. They could have made women more of a priority than they did. But the fact is that they did not. And now, it's over.

The death of the workers' movement has been considered in other texts.²⁰⁵ Its death marks also the passage from one historical form of revolution to another. Today, the presence of women within the class struggle can only function as a rift (*l'écart*), a deviation in the class conflict that destabilizes its terms. *That* struggle cannot be *their* struggle, even if, in any given case, they form the majority of the participants. For as long as proletarians continue to act as a class, the women among them cannot but lose. In the course of struggle, women will, therefore, come into conflict with men. They will be criticized for derailing the movement, for diverting it from its primary goals. But the 'goal' of the struggle lies elsewhere. It is only from within this (and other) conflicts that the proletariat will come to see its class belonging as an external constraint, an impasse which it will have to overcome in order to be anything at all beyond its relation to capital. That overcoming is only the revolution as communization, which destroys gender and all the other divisions that come between us.