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Fourth International and women's liberation

# The Liberation of Women

- Features - Sexual politics -

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The following are only simple thoughts giving a general guiding line on the question of women, the family, and children, and are in no way an exhaustive study of the question. Hence it is inevitable that certain notions will perhaps seem schematic, disregarding the necessary nuances and supplementary detailed explanations.

There is much sensitiveness and much confusion about the questions here treated. Certain of them are taboos that one does not dare to touch, even in vanguard circles. And yet the history of human thought on these questions is rich in daring developments – as daring as the economic and cultural conditions of each epoch permitted.

The ideas of Plato on the social education of children are well known.

From the XVIIth century on, the question of women, the family and children began seriously to concern advanced writers and thinkers. It is already possible to feel the approach of the twilight of the patriarchal family and the gradual transformation of that institution. Equally well known are the advanced ideals of the Encyclopedists on this matter, ideas that had immense influence on the legislation of the French Revolution in its first years.

In the XIXth century, side-by-side with the reactionary ideas of a Proudhon, what daring there is in the ideas of a Fourier, an Owen, a Flora Tristan, not to mention also Saint-Simon and the pleiad of feminist women, George Sand, Mme de Stael, et al. The Marxist movement, especially with Engels, takes up and further broadens the most revolutionary themes on these questions.

The apogee of this movement is marked by the legislation of the first years of the Russian Revolution, before Stalinist degeneration set in.

Throughout this historical development, several ideas were put forward, discussed, and clarified: that of the “equality” of men and women, and the notion of the “couple” as a higher unit of complementary beings; that of “marriage for love,” replacing forced marriage or marriage for interested motives imposed by the head of the patriarchal family or the father of the bourgeois family; that of voluntary motherhood and birth control; that of the social education of children.

These ideas have been reflected in action and even in legislation.

It suffices to compare the free unions, marriages, and family of a modern couple – especially of those to be met in revolutionary, intellectual, university, and artistic circles – with the traditional bourgeois family.

But these are only exception, limited in themselves and in a social context that is still steeped in anti-woman and reactionary prejudices.

It is certainly an illusion to believe that, on these questions which touch on the real civilization of man, there can be any solution until the roots of class society have been torn up and a totally different climate and ambience created.

But what is already possible is first of all a clear consciousness of the real problems, the drawing up of a transitional programme on these question, and the greatest possible approximation to correct solution in the circles – the couples and families – of the revolutionary vanguard.

In the article I had started to write on The Eleventh Year of the Chinese Revolution I had intended to deal, among other matters, with the question of the liberation of women in New China.

Circumstances will naturally prevent me from completing this article. [1] I shall therefore have to be content with summarizing my thoughts in this letter.

The Chinese claim they have now really freed women, by delivering them from domestic barbarism and completely integrating them in social, economic, political, and cultural life.

This is no doubt about the great advantage of the communes, that they transfer women's household tasks to social organizations such as community restaurants, day-nurseries, schools, etc. Women who are freed from these duties can thus fully participate in social life as men do.

But when we speak of the Chinese case we must never forget that present Chinese society is still materially very backward, and politically ruled by a bureaucratic system. The first factor has, of course, a considerable influence on the quality and quantity of the social services which take the place of women's household work: restaurants, day-nurseries and schools. The second factor implies a largely administrative and not real solution of the problem, oversimplified in the classical Stalinist style.

That is why, although we welcome the historical experience of the communes and the progressive character of the measures taken with respect to Chinese women compared to their previous state, we must follow this experience with a very critical attitude.

To relieve woman of the besotting tyranny of household duties and to give her a part equal to that of man in economic, political – in a word, social – life, undoubtedly represents a step forward towards her liberation, But what does that really mean?

Let us take the question of her participation in economic life. If a woman can earn her living in exactly the same way as a man in terms of working possibilities, vocational qualification, promotion, and remuneration, it means that the age-old chains which harnessed the slave woman of the past to the cart of her husband, lover, or father – the only possessor of money, and exclusive supporter of the family – have been broken.

But in a socialist society the economic emancipation of women will not necessarily mean equal conditions of work with men; not at all. For women, because of their organic constitution, are not as suited as men for any type of work, in present conditions at least.

The way in which the Soviet state under Stalin economically "liberated" women by tying them down to tasks contrary to their specific constitution, was naturally grotesque and barbarous. It is to be feared that similar excesses might yet flourish in China.

Women are not equal to men in all aspects; they are complementary. Woman and man are the two complementary aspects of the human being. Absolute equality is a basically anti-dialectical notion. Absolute equality or identity does not exist in this world, where each being is, so to speak, a unique unit. Women have particular qualities and

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possibilities which men do not possess, and, naturally, vice versa. All discussions on the inferiority or superiority of women compared to men are therefore absurd. The starting-point of these discussions is wrong, for the complementary character of man and woman (the two aspects of the human being) is forgotten.

Here a remark is necessary: that in the present state of affairs women start out under a handicap as compared with men. Centuries of slavery, during which they have been considered as sexual objects, as procreators of children, and as a means for carrying out household tasks, have inevitably atrophied women physically and intellectually, broken down all their resilience, and deeply deformed their being. It will therefore require a whole period of time for them to develop and for their being to flourish in liberty, so as to show what they are capable of. We do not yet know woman, for conditions are still extremely unfavorable to her development, far more so than for man's.

Woman's liberation starts, it is true, by her economic liberation, but is that all? We now come to a question which has been neglected by all, including the communist movement at its best.

We must base our considerations on the fact that this society is always a society of men which has developed as such throughout a great number of centuries since the very remote age of matriarchy. It has created a deep-rooted mentality in man and in woman. As in a colonial society, so in the present society, even the most civilized, everything seems to voice the general opinion of the inferiority of woman. This opinion, with which women themselves are deeply saturated, is expressed in various more or less subtle ways. A long period of socialism will be necessary to dissipate the miasmas of a society ruled by men and to give women their full place.

Present capitalist society, with its ever more unrestrained idolatry for money – the supreme value of a dying civilization – also encourages women to push to the utmost their disguise as mere frivolous and superficial sexual objects. The way modern women blindly follow the extravagant whims of absurd fashions in capitalist countries, is a distressing demonstration of this regression, rather than progression, of women.

As to the situation of women in the young workers' states, the necessary equilibrium has not yet been found among the various specific requirements of women concerning working conditions, behavior, intellectual development, and sexual morality, etc. We are again approaching problems which so far have scarcely been seriously discussed.

Man's society has glorified the essential procreating function of woman; that of bearing, nursing and bringing up her young. But as for her private sex life freed of the yoke of maternity, nobody dares even think about it, so much is this field still considered to be man's exclusive hunting-ground."

Absurd theories have been worked up to justify the myth of woman as, allegedly, organically uninterested in a full and free sex life equal to that sought by man. But one forgets, or pretends to forget, the specifically unfavorable conditions in which women are obliged to work out their sex life. All social pressure – traditions, religion, public opinion – tend to oppress a complete and free sex life on the part of women.

The sexual behavior of men, egotistic and often corrupted by prostitution, causes serious traumata in women as well as the constant fear of unsought motherhood.

But who could seriously argue that women have less imperative sexual needs than men? On the contrary, there are specifically feminine physiological factors which make women more fit to exercise their sexual functions more frequently and amply than men. But this question has always been put under a taboo with regard to women.

All liberties have been granted to men because of their so-called specific temperament. But the question of the

oppression and exploitation of women is always disregarded. Yet a free and a full sex life is a vital function of human beings, which has an enormous influence on their development and daily individual behavior. This is an overdue scientific truth that XIXth century men, even the most advanced, preferred not to admit. Freud's contribution in this respect is really extraordinary and marks an epoch.

But Freudianism, as a capital scientific contribution to the study of individual rather than collective or social behavior, has not been very fortunate with Marxism. It has not been understood, assimilated, and developed as a real, important, and new contribution to the analysis of man's intimate life, independently of Freud's personal philosophy, his reactionary social elucubrations, and his mistakes even in the scientific field. Even the best men and women of the Second and Third International in the XXth century, Lenin included – Trotsky was the exception – were not able to appreciate and study thoroughly the really scientific and valid part of Freud's work. Later, under Stalinism and the general degeneration of the Marxist movement, Freud was even discredited. The Communist movement almost completely ignored the capital importance of a complete and free sex life both for the harmonious development and the normal, healthy, and euphoric behavior of men and women.

Even Engels's approach to the question of woman's sex life was very timid and reserved, in man spite of the fact that the views expressed in his *Origin of the Family*, etc. were particularly unconventional, bold, and really brilliant with regard to the question of women, the family, and the future relations between the two sexes. On this point he really belonged to his time, as Lenin did.

The Third International, before its degeneration, up until the death of Lenin, singled out only the question of the economic liberation of women. It too neglected the entirety of the specific problem of woman. A real communist movement ought to struggle for the complete liberation of women: that means, among other things, for their fundamental right to a full and free sex life.

Following this view, a real protection of women against the risks of undesired pregnancy is the sacred duty of all really civilized societies.

In present conditions of scientific development, this protection is often made possible only by abortion. Granted, this practice, if repeated, injures woman both physically and morally. But she is the only one who should take a decision on this point, and society should provide her with the best conditions possible for her liberation. including the practice of abortion in the case of an undesired pregnancy. Tomorrow, no doubt, science will provide us with simpler and harmless means to obtain the same result. We have already made progress in this field.

In any case society should make freely available to women all existing measures of birth control, as well as instruction on this subject. Naturally, this demand, of capital interest for millions of women, should be included in the programme of any communist movement worthy of its name, for the communist movement is the only really democratic, liberal, and progressive movement today.

Much has been said on the so-called essential function of woman: that of reproduction. Woman, it seems, is above all a Mother. Proceeding, from a commonplace physiological observation, the apologists for the enslavement of women deliberately exalt this function. Of course, physiologically speaking, woman is a mother, as man is a father, and this reproducing function of humanity is fundamental in these terms.

But it absolutely does not mean that this function must be achieved by jeopardizing a total, full, and free life on the part of woman as well as of man.

Woman most often takes refuge in motherhood and particularly in repeated motherhood because of the lack of real

participation in social life and because her relations with man, within the present limits of the family, very soon become unsatisfactory.

Society and men do their utmost to confine women to their "home" in their function of wives and mothers. Furthermore, as the initial sexual attraction between man and woman dies out and is replaced by the gloomy life of most existing married couples all over the world, motherhood and children furnish woman with a "solution": both an occupation and a protection. It is absolutely false to say that motherhood alone allows woman to flower and gives her the equilibrium which is best suited to her specific nature. As a matter of fact, woman, like man, can develop and find a certain equilibrium only in an active social life and a satisfying sex life. History supplies particularly eloquent and demonstrative examples on this subject.

All women who have distinguished themselves socially, politically, and culturally, and have had a relatively full and free sex life, have granted only a limited amount of attention to children and maternity, which represented to them, as they usually do to men, just one aspect among many in their interesting and active life, and not necessarily the principal one. Far from it. Moreover, all women belonging to the upper classes or to advanced cultural circles, with a satisfactory social and sex life, reserve for maternity and children only a limited place, subordinate to the enjoyment of such an existence.

In reality, the passion for motherhood and children more specifically pertains only to the infinite mass of women excluded from real social life and defeated in their sex life and their relations with man within the framework of the present family.

Let us take up only this last aspect of the problem: it is relatively simple to demonstrate that a woman who has really established a profound, rich, and satisfying relationship with a man, in a couple, has little interest in introducing a third party into this relationship in the form of children. Woman creates her own traditional environment – the "home," with children, in which she shuts herself up and wanes – only as a sort of escape and compensation for her failures in her social, sexual, and love life.

Of course the social position of woman has up till now been determined by the class structure of society. The family centred around the woman as wife and mother has well met the requirements of this society, which is both a class society and one ruled by men. Class society has found in the family the most conservative cell of its structure. Man has found in the family the most economical form for the organization of his individual life, with greater advantage than woman.

In the present conditions of class society and for the transitional phase from capitalism to socialism, the present monogamous family centred, as I said before, upon the woman – is necessary because it has obvious advantages for both men and women. It is, first of all, the most economical form of organization of their material life. Secondly, it often holds out – falsely, it is true – the bright prospect of a haven of peace and protection, compared to a society hostile to man. We thus arrive at the broader question of the Family itself.

Class society has found it to be, as I said above, its most conservative cell.

The family keeps women away from social life, and the housekeeping and motherly occupations which derive from it degrade them from the rank of human beings capable of an ample and free development. The family, furthermore, develops the conservative, egotistic, and anti-social characteristics of men. And lastly, the family brings children up in an environment which is fundamentally unfavorable to their full development into well-balanced and free human beings. Children are generally brought up by ignorant and hysterical mothers who stifle, from the crucial period of infancy onward, the natural impulse human beings feel for beauty, heroism, and human brotherhood.

Mothers become ignorant and hysterical because of the inferior position they occupy in present male-dominated class society, because of their detachment from an active and interesting social life, and the frequent failure of their sexual or love life, as well as because of the prostrating and stupefying effects of domestic chores and the burdens of maternity. The present material conditions, especially with regard to housing, aggravate the position women find themselves in to accomplish their tasks as mothers, that is to say, as educators of humanity.

A new-born child has the potentiality of an immense future; of course heredity bears upon each one. I shall come to that question presently. But the undetermined part is, in any case, with the exception of pathological cases, considerable in the new-born child. The influence of the family environment in which the initial critical phase of a human being's life is spent is highly determinant for its formation.

At this stage, mother play a decisive part. All the degradation society inflicts upon women is turned against society by the function women accomplish as mothers. One could almost say: as the mothers are, so will the sons be – whence the enormous importance of the question of women, which concerns not half but the whole of mankind. Really to free women, to improve their quality, means to free and improve the quality of all mankind. It is not a matter of questioning the special affective atmosphere of the family, or more exactly what is called mother love. Nor is it one of denying the importance and even the need for a bond, a contact, between children and parents, especially the mother, during a certain period of time. What is in question from the viewpoint of creating a new mankind made up, of well-balanced, strong, healthy, and altruistic beings, is the following point: Can the present: family be entrusted with the education of children?

Let us study more closely all the aspects of this problem.

In comparison with the constant traumata that human beings undergo in present-day society for all relations among men are most often antagonistic, based on power, and on economic, intellectual, or sexual exploitation, where each party tries to use the other to his own advantage – the family, with its special affectivity, can be a more comforting environment. But because it is really opposed to society and because of the conditions in which women and therefore mothers are placed, the “best” family, the most affective one, is far from imparting a really sound social education to children. The proper framework for the creation of renewed mankind is that of beauty, heroism, sacrifice, and love for others.

The family atmosphere, on the contrary, is impregnated with moral and material pettiness, cowardice, and individual and family egotism. But it is right from the beginning, from the most tender age, that it is necessary to prompt a child so that the potentialities of beauty, heroism, and human brotherhood will develop in him.

Instead of children being brought up in an atmosphere of misery, ugliness, exasperation, hysteria, intimidation, cowardice, ignorance, and selfishness, they must be allowed to flower into the splendor of man's real virtues and real destiny.

In the new worldwide socialist society, the first civilized society of mankind, there will be eugenics and a social education for children. By eugenics I mean this:

Men will voluntarily learn to leave the reproduction of mankind to those who are most fit physically and intellectually and not necessarily beget children themselves.

They will get rid of the bad habit of considering children also to be “private property” and will learn to love other people's children, the offspring of society, as if they were their own. In a further stage, when the general level, apart from rare exceptions, will be free from the bad aftermaths of a harmful heredity, eugenics may of course lose their

importance. Besides – who knows? – the reproduction of mankind may at that time be carried out by completely new means.

A limited number of civilized groups have already succeeded in understanding the need for “family planning” and birth control. Why then should a really civilized society not understand and apply voluntarily a certain degree of eugenics?

By social education of children I mean this:

Infants will somehow be left under the care of collective education organized by specialists. I am absolutely certain that children can develop in a children’s society, subtly controlled and flexibly guided by really competent specialists, in an infinitely better manner than in the eternal laps of kind and affectionate, but hysterical, frustrated, and ignorant mothers, and within the narrow and self-centred horizon of the present day family. Should they be completely separated from their parents? I should not be able to give an answer to this question, which depends upon the future development of pedagogical science in this field. It seems to me that a bond should exist, although it must not reverse the trend and influence of social education.

At a more advanced stage of childhood, educated children and their parents should have affective relations as friends, companions, and comrades, but without bringing weight to bear upon their mutual lives. Affectivity will evolve from its actual animalist stage to more profound and finer forms of human love, esteem, solidarity, and mutually enriching exchanges.

The general trend of all human relations, moreover, will be toward love for fellows-beings.

Today each of us is made uneasy, and even wounded, by others, so complex and antagonistic are mutual relations among men. Liberation in this field will consist in the elimination of antagonisms, complexes, and imbalances among men, and in the discovery by each of us that in every other person can be found a source of possible joy, a different and unique aspect, experience, or realization of a human being.

But let us return to children, women, and the family. Children must be born and exist for themselves and not just as objects for occupation, consolation, or revenge by their parents, frustrated and defeated mothers or fathers.

Woman can certainly not find a solution to her problems in the care of children, the household, the family. As in the case of man, a solution lies in an interesting and active social life and satisfying sexual and love life. But on what must the latter be based?

In society nowadays the relations between the sexes are warped and deformed. There can be no happy union of a couple unless it is of a well-balanced complementary nature from every point of view.

Naturally there must be, right from the start, a strong and mutual sexual attraction. But this element is the result of a number of organic, constitutional, psychical, and cultural factors. Its duration depends above all on the real affinity which a man and a woman can reach through the gradual discovery and understanding of each other’s entire personality.

The most lasting relations are those established between two human beings each of whom has his own rich life, and who present, create, and develop multiple and deep affinities in their ways of understanding and acting on nature and society.



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The initial sexual appeal is the fundamental basis of all relationships between a couple, but it is already complex in its nature and can last only provided it is accompanied by a number of other factors.

How is the couple formed?

In youth, sexual attraction is very strong and nearly blind. It must be accepted and enjoyed, as it is and as it happens. But this must not necessarily lead to "marriage," family, and children, i e, to a more lasting relationship which cannot be broken in the present state of affairs without damaging the weaker parties: the woman and children. A more lasting bond, in the form of a family, should be established only after a complete and free sexual and love life, full of experiences, during youth, and not until man and woman have reached maturity as human beings.

A sexual and love relationship should not be turned into "marriage," family, and children, unless its deeper validity has been established after a period of free experience.

Usually, on the contrary, people get married young, with no experience of any kind, blindly, so to speak, under the impulse of sexual attraction, or, worse still, so as to "settle down" or rapidly enter into routine and illusory security – whence the rapid failure of most marriages, the gloomy if not hellish relationship soon established between man and woman, which they try to forget, embellish, or hide by means of their children. It is most often the woman who drives man to marriage, family, and children. She does so to find protection against her unfavorable social status and to compensate for her failures in sex and love. Only when young and beautiful can woman reign in an illusion of appreciation and freedom. She sees that she is then admired and desired, not because of her total personality, but because of the sexual appeal man feels for her. But in our present-day society age is a terrible handicap, especially for women, for they are soon depreciated. That explains their anxiety to "get married" and strengthen their bond by children, and their resignation to this role.

In future civilized society the rights of young people to a complete and free sexual and love life will be perfectly ensured, while creating the basis for solid and lasting couples. A society can already be conceived in which the fundamental value of a full and free sexual and love life for the equilibrium, happiness, and development of the human being is recognized, and in which a more or less durable monogamous couple takes the place of the type of family existing today. In such a society, children – the product of eugenics – receive a collective social education.

This stage is naturally very far ahead, for it presupposes a society that is very highly developed from the material and cultural viewpoint, a society that has uprooted classes, property, money, differences between manual and intellectual labor, and all types of prejudices concerning women, countries, religion, etc, a society of men who are free, highly developed, and capable of healthily and fully enjoying life without harming others.

For the time being, we have to deal with a capitalist society and a society in transition to socialism which is still materially and culturally rather backward. We must therefore have a transitional programme for all these problems: for we cannot for a certain period do without the present type of family.

But it is possible and necessary: 1) to recognize the entirety of the woman question, in all its different aspects and all its complexity, and not just to limit the struggle to that of her economic liberation and equality; to recognize the right of woman to a complete and free sexual and love life, and to have society protect her legally against undesired childbirth; 2) to educate the members of the revolutionary party and advanced workers in a spirit that takes into account all that has been said about woman, the family, and children.

If it is a mistake to require this attitude on the part of all workers, it is just as wrong to neglect the education of members of the revolutionary party in this sense. The communist nature of the members of the revolutionary party

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must emerge not only from their political ideas but also from their personal behavior and their cultural and moral conceptions. The relations between men and women, relations with children, the behavior of each person within the present-day family, and , the education of children – these are more important criteria than the profession of communist ideas for a really communist quality of a member of the revolutionary party.

Stalinism has produced an enormous regression of thought and practice on these questions, to the advantage of reactionary and petty-bourgeois conceptions and morals.

It is up to the Fourth International to work out a coherent line of thought concerning these questions, taking into account experience, science, and socialist prospects for future human society.

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[1] The article was written while Pablo was in prison in Amsterdam, after his conviction on charges relating to his practical support for the Algerian FLN. (Note from *Socialism, Democracy & Self-Management, political essays by Michel Raptis*, Allison & Busby, London 1980.)