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Victims or Culprits?

Reflections on Women's Behaviour¹

My title, *Victims or Culprits?*, with its interrogatory inflection, may appear somewhat inane. It is an impertinence to suggest that women might be the *culprits*, and the alternative is such a truism that the answer can be given in a single word and we can all go home and forget the whole matter. Of course, we all know that women are primarily victims. There are abundant proofs of this: women's refuges, the vast numbers of rapes and assaults. Furthermore, women may not practice certain professions. They are denied full access to public life. They are not allowed to enter the high temples of power. They spend their lives in subordinate auxiliary professions. They are barely represented in influential organizations. They are doubly burdened by the chaos of screaming children and housework, while their husbands slump in front of the television, relax with beer and skittles, flirt with their secretaries, have exciting adventures and endlessly clamber up the ladder of success. It cannot be denied that women are the victims. They are mainly the victims of their husbands, but at all events of social relations. Their public standing is low. Then there is advertising. Parts of women's bodies are used extensively to stimulate the purchase of consumer goods. They are also used to excite feelings, for example when you are shown a girl in shorts or just a girl's backside on a motorbike in order to encourage you to buy a particular brand of cigarette.

Or again, you see beer sold with the aid of a woman's breasts. The process reaches the point where you find products such as an ashtray shaped like a

¹ Talk on the First People's University in Berlin 1980; English publication in: Frigga Haug, *Beyond Female Masochism*, Verso 1997.

woman's belly, or nutcrackers modelled on a woman's thighs, and so on.

Women are no better respected at work. Their work and the esteem in which it is held can be summed up in the words of a personnel manager who in other respects was quite amiable and humane. Speaking about working with computers, he remarked, "Once the possible sources of error have been grasped and the test program is functioning automatically, this is just plain prison work and can be carried out by women." And another observed, "Our women must be able to stand for long periods, be accustomed to hard work and be under forty. They must not be overweight, not like an Italian Mamma." In short, women's work is synonymous with unskilled work. This catalogue, which indicates that women are the victims of men and of social relations, reflects the perspective of most feminist writers as well. Thus far we are all in agreement: women are oppressed. What's to be done? How can they rescue themselves?

To simplify grossly: any such rescue has to overcome two obstacles. First, the oppressed bear the marks of their oppression. As we can see from the remark of the personnel manager, the women in this company had not had the same training as the men working there; they have been denied the same work experience, so their expertise is less. Women today cannot do everything.

Second, women have problems in their struggle for their own emancipation because they do not always really want what they want. This makes extra difficulties for women who want things to change and who want to liberate themselves. They do not only have to fight against obstacles in the world outside, they also experience difficulties with themselves. I have in mind here what is often thought of as problems with relationships, problems which act as a brake on the revolutionary impulse. The expression "problems with relationships" is really a euphemism for the breakdowns

in private relationships which thwart their attempts at liberation. The question that arises in my mind in the first instance is this: What is the origin of the structures, the social relations in which women are oppressed and whose marks they bear?

There is no need to dwell on the answer to this, since it is universally known. Women exist primarily for the family. The family is the basic unit of society and women have the task of ensuring the safety and well-being of the next generation. Women's lives, their existence as wives and mothers, looking after the needs of their husbands, the children's upbringing, and in exchange the need to give up all other goals or aims in life – all this can be summed up as the social function of women. This function is commonly identified with women's nature. We have to admit that this is not wholly unjustified. After all it is women who bear the children. But we are then confronted by the question of whether women's nature is really so intractable. Are women so unable to control their lives that this nature should fill their lives to the exclusion of all else? So the question I must now put to myself is: What is the relationship between the “domination of nature” which is so highly regarded in our society, and which has reached such an advanced stage, and the nature of women? Or, to put the question of the extent to which women's social role is based on their nature in a brutally over-simplified way: Is it necessary for women to have such a large number of children that it fills and dominates their entire lives?

The question seems absurd, but a glance at history shows that this has in fact been the position up to a time which seems frighteningly close to the present. I need refer to only two facts which are amply documented in recent research (see Sullerot, for example). Accurate knowledge about birth control is an acquisition of the present century. The possibility of not breast-feeding an exhausting activity which tied mothers down for two or

three years or more – and the development of sterilized baby food did not take place until the end of the nineteenth century. Up to the beginning of the present century, that is, a woman who lived with a man might give birth to as many as nineteen children, of whom barely half would survive. (We may note in passing that there has been much discussion in the women's movement about the capable, independent women working in crafts and trades, such as butchers and other craft-orientated groups. These women, too, had a large number of children and in practice were pregnant for most of the time.) The dramatic increases in population in consequence of such behaviour and in spite of the high rate of infant mortality were modified by the fact that not all women were able to marry and, since some were segregated from society (for example in convents), not all bore children. But if women spend a quarter part of their adult life either pregnant or breast-feeding, it is self-evident that they will scarcely have the time or opportunity to undertake anything else (and we may add that before this century the likelihood of dying in labour was high). In these circumstances it is not unreasonable to assert that such women are at the mercy of their own nature. This subjection of women to their own nature became unnecessary and superfluous with the development of birth control and the possibility of feeding the baby with food other than its mother's milk. Despite this women are still kept in the home as if nothing had changed. The point here is not to campaign against breast-feeding; but if we are to fight for liberation, it is vital to understand the preconditions of that struggle, and a grasp of the ways in which nature acts as a stumbling-block for women is an essential part of this. Only now, when it has become possible to appropriate our own nature, can breast-feeding become a pleasure, since it does not have to be done year in, year out.

Women's function in the family acts as a brake on their development and leads to their exclusion from the core activities of society. It makes them

dependent and is a source of oppression. Beaten down in this fashion, excluded and degraded into instruments for stimulating consumption, women are exiled to hearth and home and, even worse, they are made the objects of public ridicule. Those who laugh at misogynist jokes are all able to agree that women are bad, stupid, vain and useless. Their activities are consistently defined negatively. Whole books could be filled with jokes in which women appear only as viewed through masculine spectacles. Here is a typical one. Fred is asked, “Are you married?” “No, I only look like this because someone has just stolen my car.” Jokes of this sort make me turn my back in a fury. But since women are often exposed to such misogynist jokes, they mainly shrug them off without thinking about them further. These, however, are not the only kind of misogynist jokes.

In search for jokes which would reveal the low esteem in which women are generally held, I came to perceive another, rather different layer of meaning. Here, for example, are two jokes which could be interpreted as the usual anti-women jokes. The learner driver says to her driving instructor, “I always go when the lights are red. Green doesn't suit me” – which implies that women have nothing in their heads but their appearance. In another, a Jewish joke, a husband tells his friends, “My wife is really very clean. She is the only person in New York who washes the rubbish before she throws it away.”

For all that these jokes are based on an agreement to enjoy a laugh at women's expense, they also have another dimension, one which implies and encourages a more critical stance. For they show that women are damaged by the environment in which they exist and even by their own activities. This applies to the stupid joke with the driving instructor in which the woman drives through red lights; and even holds good for the joke which highlights the absurdity of too much cleaning. My claim is that malicious though these jokes are, they contain a consciousness-raising element. They tell us something about the threats to

women implicit in these spheres, which are after all women's own realm. By exaggerating they make the self-evident problematic, and by this means they point to the need to liberate women from their own sphere of activity.

How should we conceive of such liberation and change? Do they not call for a transformation in women, and is this not what the jokes implicitly require? We should remember that motherhood, marriage and the family represent an extraordinary constraint, dependence and blocking of women's potential. If this is generally accepted, how can women possibly still desire these things? Other options are available; women are not forced into this way of life. To overstate the point I would say that by desiring marriage and motherhood, or at least by secretly longing for them or striving towards them, women become willing accomplices in their own oppression.

Jokes clearly reveal both the wasted lives and also the fact that women are starting to defend themselves – but in the wrong way. This is conveyed, for example, by this very nasty anti-women joke: “Many women are like cigarettes. The poison gradually accumulates in their mouths.” Jokes like this show that women are beginning to defend themselves, albeit in a distorted rather than a liberating manner. We must therefore inquire into the source of the oppression which women are so ready to accept. How does it gain possession of women?

To advance the argument I would propose the following hypothesis. All oppression not based on the use of extreme force functions with the connivance of the oppressed.

As we have shown, the assumption that women are pure victims is self-defeating, if we are to consider the possibility of their changing, of their actively bringing about their own emancipation. For it would be quite unclear why liberation should be either possible or desirable and, above all, who would actually carry it out. In short, we would be unable to explain how women, who are victims and objects, could ever become subjects. In other words, the belief that women

are merely victims remains silent about how women could ever be transformed from people who are the subject of the actions of others into people who act on their own behalf. Tied hand and foot, they would be forced to remain silent, they would have to stay as they were and would be unable to raise themselves from their degraded situation, as long as we retain the conception of women as victims. If, on the other hand, we proceed from the assumption that people, and therefore women, create themselves, it will follow that individual women will, of course, find themselves surrounded by ready-made oppressive structures to which they are expected to respond in a subservient way. But these structures only survive as long as they are continually reproduced by those who live within them. This implies in its turn that these structures can be altered by those who reproduce them. This is in fact the only way that we can conceive of changing them. That is to say, the idea that women can change the conditions in which they live is predicated on the assumption that they assist in creating them in the first place. It implies, as we have already observed, that as long as oppression does not rely on external force, it requires the connivance of the oppressed. Every action, therefore, contains an element of acquiescence. Being a victim is also an action, not a destiny.

How does this acquiescence operate? I propose the following thesis. The process of socialization does not imply, as current socialization theories claim, a straightforward process of moulding, the imposition of certain qualities of character from above. The process of socialization is itself an activity which requires acquiescence at every stage. How does it work? According to critical psychology the development of individuals, that is to say, the growth of children into adults and every other kind of development, is a process involving a constant disruption of people's security of mind. You learn something, acquire a certain level of knowledge and the ability to act. In order to progress further you have to abandon the position you have just

reached. This makes you feel insecure or, to put it a different way, you experience conflict. The following stage is an attempt to resolve that conflict and achieve security on a higher plane. In this process, in which development means permanent insecurity and permanent conflict, there are normative social structures or authorities such as the family, parents, and so on, which provide emotional support and help you to advance from one stage to the next.

The fact that development entails conflict implies also that it contains the possibility of non-development. As long as societies are characterized by oppression and exploitation, the all-round development of individuals in society will be prevented by social relations and by the dominant authorities. In our society the efforts of women to develop advanced skills are particularly affected by their exclusion, self-imposed or not, from the social process of production. By such means as bribery, diversion, repression or compensation they are persuaded to accept more restricted spheres of activity. Before illustrating this, I should like to formulate a provisional starting point for empirical research. In every study of oppression it is necessary to make a precise analysis of people's activities and attitudes. It is important to pay heed to the hidden compensations, rewards and soft options which they may contain as a sort of temptation deflecting us from alternative possibilities of action. This applies as much to the past as to the analysis of individual socialization processes in our own day.

Let us illustrate these ideas with reference to the family and wage labour. We shall proceed from the assumption that to be a wife and mother and nothing more than that in modern society is itself oppressive, for reasons that are very well known: women are excluded from participation in social decisions and, in addition, are unable to support and nurture themselves; their earnings are not considered their own; they cannot feed and clothe themselves; cannot rent a room of their own without their husbands' consent; and so on, and so on. This leads us to the question

of why women 'voluntarily' choose such a condition, even though they are often conscious of that oppression and still do not prefer a career. This question can easily be answered.

The disadvantages of being a wife and mother are obvious, but so too are the rewards. These can be quite trivial. For example, the housewife may not immediately perceive her dependence on wage labour. If she has no children as yet, she does not have to get up so early in the morning. She does not need to sell herself; she can dispose of her time as she wishes, or at least it may seem that she can. In many ways, then, she may be choosing a life that has more to offer in the short term over one which is more demanding but more socially integrated and which would bring greater satisfaction in the long term. The difficulty of opting for the more challenging life is increased by the fact that the emotional security of staying at home functions as a kind of temptation, and this is socially supported as the dream of eternal love. Learning has risks, and self-development implies risks as well. The questioning of traditional roles requires emotional support; but at the same time, alternative roles for women are scarcely available and so that emotional support is not forthcoming. Up to now, there has been no opportunity for women to assume positions of power, and therefore no social provision for that assumption of power. Even their participation in wage labour, at least in such a way that they are afforded an opportunity to develop their skills, is something that society has not planned for. There is therefore virtually no social and emotional support, no opportunity to build up their confidence, no chance of being anything but outsiders. It is hard to be optimistic about women's social development, hard to see how they might lift their heads and stand upright and erect.

If women ace to improve their position, then, they need the support of a collective, a culture of their own. For this reason the women's movement assumes an outstanding significance; it becomes a necessity for every step women take away from what is socially expected of them.

Better control of their own nature – through birth control and alternatives to breast-feeding – and the existence of the women's movement are therefore the prerequisites of real emancipation. This also implies that if women are to change themselves, they need individually to dissolve structures of thought and feeling within themselves.

The question I should like to ask is this: What is the point of analysing women's actions from this angle? Or, in other words, what is gained by an analysis which maintains that the oppression of women can only be understood if we accept that women have acquiesced in their oppression at every stage? Of what use is it? My preliminary reply is that if women wish to change matters, and if the women's movement wishes to achieve anything, we must acknowledge that existing personality structures are obstructing the process of change.

Think, for example, of the enormous amount of energy which most women expend on private relationships, energies which they direct against themselves in every – inevitable – crisis. These relationships are, therefore, primarily self-destructive. Furthermore, the need for change is inevitably opposed by an inertia which is already a fixed part of the personality. This inertia reflects the claims of immediate pleasure, of enjoying one's life here and now, instead of the arduous efforts required for change. The private relationships just mentioned are not only self-destructive; they also pose excessive demands on women's feelings. If women desire to bring about change, they must find ways of enabling themselves to act autonomously. This means that they must change their attitudes and this in turn calls on them to change their own personality structure. Why should this be so?

If we proceed from the assumption that women lead oppressed lives and that they have to experience their own oppression day by day, it will follow that their personalities will bear the traces of their lives. If they are thought to be incapable of action, they will only succeed in reversing this judgement by

questioning parts of their own personality. This is true of learning processes in general. As women increase their competence and independence, and as they extend their control to other facets of their lives, they will also encounter areas of experience which they are unable to master. These will include all the areas which protect the dominant structures of society. For women it also includes all sorts of social activities which have been inhibited in the course of individual socialization. The prohibition on women's developing, on 'growing up', would drive individual women mad, or make them ill and incapable of action, if they were to become aware at every step that they are prevented from becoming competent. Of course, many people do fall sick or go mad and this applies particularly to women. But those who do not go mad and who continue to function within a restricted sphere of activity are compelled to *reinterpret, repress or ignore* those activities where their competence is not recognized and not made possible. These reinterpretations then become an integral part of their personality. This may mean that these repressed areas appear not to exist or, if recognized, are regarded as boring. Emotionally they may appear to have no place in a woman's consciousness. But if women wish to change the conditions from which they are suffering, they will have to come to grips with these aspects in their own personality which acquiesce in their own incompetence. In short they will have to change their own feelings. This will result in feelings of insecurity and even crisis, a crisis which women cannot face up to without help. Women will only be able to live through such a crisis if they obtain emotional support.

This brings me to my conclusion. It may be objected that if that social support is not forthcoming — and it certainly isn't — political groups and organizations, a political collective in short, can fill the breach. It is my contention that this is not enough for women because in all attempts to reorganize their feelings or to abandon old structures for new, usually as the

result of a crisis, there is a further as yet unmentioned source of tension which prevents this reorientation. This source of tension is in the men with whom they share these collectives and organizations. After all, men are in part the beneficiaries of the already existing personality structures. They will therefore be unable to provide unprejudiced assistance if, for example, women decide to dispense with the idea that a “personal relationship” should take priority over all other social activities, if they attach less importance to the family, if they want to take decisions and ensure their voices are heard. It is the women's movement's historical right — and need — to make these changes possible and to carry them out.

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