The not very ‘natural’ oppression of women

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1992

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WE ARE NOW eight years from the year 2,000. Approximately 14,000 years ago the first agricultural communities, and with them human civilisation, were founded. Humanity is 600 generations old.

We hold the position of 'most successful species' because unlike animals we have been able to modify our environment to suit our needs. To early humans nature was a powerful and frightening force, the bringer of plagues, storms and droughts. Nowadays we control our environment to such an extent that nature is no longer a demon spirit or an instrument of the wrath of god. In much of the world nature is way down on our list of worries, it is more likely to fear us. As the capability to control the world around us has increased from the first primitive farmers to the high-technology multinationals, the way we perceive the world around us has also changed. So has the way we perceive each other.

One thing, however, that has remained constant throughout this time is that in the majority of societies half our species (women) has been held in an inferior position to the other half (men). Why is this the case? The answer to this question should explain two things. It should explain why today with all our equal rights legislation women are still second class citizens, and secondly it should indicate the mechanisms and tactics we have to use to achieve women's liberation. If we know what the problem is, we can find a solution.

CIVILISATION DAWNS

Early humans were hunter/gatherers living in nomadic communities, living from hand to mouth. The discovery of agriculture lead to huge changes in the organisation of humanity. Agriculture was the point at which civilisation began. This is because there are a number of ways in which an agricultural community is different from a hunter/gatherer clan. Communities remain in the same spot. Agriculture can support more people than hunting/gathering so communities get larger. Farming leads to the development of new technology. New skills lead to a greater division of labour. Individuals specialise in certain types of work, be it tool making, leatherwork or defence.

However the key difference is that farmed land becomes a valuable resource. Land provides a surplus, that is land provides more food than is necessary for day to day survival. More importantly, land will provide this resource in the future, for the next generation. None of this is true of the herd of wild animals persued by the hunter-gatherer. The concept of ownership developed.

So civilisation began when man began to acquire wealth in the form of land, food and animals. If a rich man wants to ensure that his offspring alone inherit his wealth, he must be sure that his wife is only mating with him. Thus, he has to be in a position of control over her. He needs to portray this as part of the 'natural order'. To accommodate this need society, through the use of religion, developed a rationale to justify the inferior position of woman.

GOD'S CHOSEN RULERS

Rulers have always been good at rationalising unfair practices, take for example the idea of the 'divine right of kings'. Popular for centuries, the church and state argued that kings and queens were appointed by God. The status quo was natural and good, any opposition to it was evil and

doomed to eternal hell. These days kings don't have much power, which is why not many people rush to describe Charles and Di as God's chosen rulers.

In much the same way, it was necessary to have women inferior to men to ensure inheritance rights. In order to keep women in this position a whole mythology of women as second class humans was developed. It was the accumulation of a surplus and the desire of a minority to monopolise it that lead to the class division of society and to the oppression of women.

Now we've established the motive and the cover story, but of what relevance is the status of women in early history to their status today. As capitalism evolved it built on the existing model of the family, adapting it to suit it's own interests. Assurance of inheritance rights isn't as necessary today, however the family provides other services which capitalism does require. Initially, when the industrial revolution first began men, women and children were drafted wholesale into the factories.

DEATH IS NOT ALWAYS ECONOMIC

Quickly, however, the bosses realised that this was not the most economic way to run the system. The labour force was weak and the children who were to be next generation of workers were dying in the mills and mines. The solution was was to be found in the family.

Before the rise of capitalism society was based around a system of slaves/serfs and kings or lords. The problem with slaves or serfs is that the owner must provide food, basic health care and subsistence in old age, i.e. maintain the slave at a cost for those times when he or she is not productive. A much more cost efficient way to keep a workforce is through the nuclear family. In this scenario, it is up to the family to provide itself with food, shelter, healthcare, look after the elderly and young (who will provide the next crop of workers). Within this family unit it is normally the woman who fulfils the functions of housekeeper, nurse, childminder and cook.

There are two knock-on effects of women staying at home minding the family. Firstly they are not financially independent. They do not earn any money and are dependant on income received from their partners. Because nobody gets paid for rearing a family it's status as an occupation is at the bottom of the ladder and because women are financially dependant on their husbands it means they, in the past, have had little input into the major decisions affecting the family.

ISOLATION

This led to women having no input into the decisions affecting society. A woman's place was in the home. A second effect of women's position in the family is that they are often isolated from each other and from society in general. Unlike a paid worker they have little opportunity of meeting and sharing experiences with others in the same situation on a daily basis, and do something about it. They, on their own, have little power to change the conditions they find themselves in.

Today the family is a trap for women as much as it was for women at the beginning of the industrial revolution. Women are paid on average 2/3 of the wage that men are paid, so within any partnership it obviously makes more sense for the woman to undertake responsibility for the care of children. It is for this reason, common sense rather than sexism, that that the vast majority of part-time workers are women, juggling two jobs at the same time.

Having said that, why is it that women are among the lower paid in society? Is it necessary for capitalism to exploit women workers to this degree? The simple answer to that is sometimes it is, sometimes it isn't. The only important difference between a male and female worker is that the female has the potential to get pregnant, that is the potential to want maternity leave and need creche facilities. In other words they are slightly more expensive to employ than men. So when women are asked (illegally!) at job interviews if they intend to marry, such discrimination has a material basis. An employer isn't interested on the good of society at large but in obtaining the cheapest most reliable workforce possible.

DISPOSABLE WORKERS

Historically women have been encouraged to work and have been accommodated when it suited capitalism. When there was either a shortage of male labour due to war as during the 1st and 2nd World Wars or an expansion of industry as in the dawn of the industrial revolution or the 1960s. When times are tough, when recession sets in, women are encouraged back into the family.

The conclusion for most socialists is that women's liberation can only be lastingly obtained with the overthrow of capitalism. This is not to say that reforms should not be fought for at the moment, but to recognise that some of the gains may be short-term ones which can be withdrawn.

This conclusion isn't accepted by everyone concerned with women's liberation, and certainly is rejected by large sections of the feminist movement. A good example of the alternative analysis can be seen in the following extract from the British Survey of Social Attitudes (a survey carried out regularly by an independent body).

WHO MINDS THE CHILDREN

It found that the provision of childcare was one of the impediments preventing women from working. Their conclusion was that "in the absence of changes in men's attitudes, or working hours outside the home or in their contribution within the family it seems unlikely that even a greater availability of childcare outside the home would alter domestic arrangements greatly. Without these changes, it is conceivable that many useful forms of work flexibility — that might be offered to women such as job sharing, career breaks, special sick leave or term-time working — might reinforce rather than mitigate the formidable level of occupational segregation based on gender, to women's longer-term disadvantage."

The authors of the survey note that as long as responsibility for childcare rests with the women they will remain trapped in the family. They also point out that concessions to women in the world of work often result in women being pidgeon-holed into less well paid job. This already happens in regard to part-time workers who are paid a lower hourly wage than full-time workers. They point out that men have to square up to their responsibility as fathers. The key they emphasise is a change in men's attitudes.

However what was not mentioned is that no matter how attitudes change, men are as powerless as individuals in regard to their working conditions as women are. With all the good will in the world they cannot change their employer/employee relationship, they cannot adjust their working hours to suit childcare just as women cannot. A more fundamental conclusion would

be that society at the moment, capitalism, does not want to accommodate any of the problems of childcare preferring to leave it up to the individual to make their own arrangements as best as they can.

CONTROL OF OUR BODIES

It is for this reason that the issue of women's ability to control their own fertility is key in obtaining women's liberation. That is the fight for abortion rights, for freely available contraceptives, for 24 hour quality childcare.

Women will remain as second class citizens as long as they are relegated to an inferior position in the work force. They are now in that position because to the bosses they are an unstable workforce, likely to want pregnancy leave, likely to come in late if a child is sick, likely to require a creche or want to work part time. It is because men in society are seen as the breadwinners that they have slightly more secure, slightly more dependable jobs.

It's a vicious circle, because men are in reality better paid, it makes more sense within the family to assign the role of main earner to the male and the role of carer to the female. The only way to permanently get out out of this circle is to change the system. In a society organised to make profits for a few, women loose out. In a society organised to satisfy needs, women's fertility would no longer be a limiting factor.

INTO THE MAINSTREAM

Women can of course win gains at the moment. In Ireland women are no longer forced to stop working upon marriage (though lack of childcare can make it impossible to continue). Attitudes have changed considerably in the last thirty years. Most importantly, the position of women is now an issue. Whereas before it was only addressed by the few socialist or women's groups, now it's taken up in the mainstream media, in chat shows and newspaper articles. However, any of our new freedoms are very much dependant on the economic conditions of the day. So, while in the booming sixties American women won limited access to abortion, now in recession those rights are being pushed back inch by inch.

When the reality is weighed up equal education & job opportunities and equal pay are limited without free 24 hour nurseries and free contraception & abortion on demand. While a small minority of women can buy control of their own fertility, for the majority family and childcare is still — as it has always been — the largest problem faced by women workers. In this argument capitalism won't concede, it must be defeated.

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Retrieved on 10th October 2018 from http://struggle.ws/ws92/oppress36.html
From Workers Solidarity No. 35, 1992.

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