## TOWARDS THE DEVELOPMENT OF FEMINIST THEORY

## by Patricia Hughes

If women hope to realise their truly human qualities, it will be necessary to eliminate both productive and reproductive alienation; in respect to this dual goal, feminist theory both builds on and extends present theories which place great importance on production but pay little attention to reproduction. Thus, while socialism is necessary for the elimination of productive alienation, it does not in itself necessarily eliminate the alienation currently associated with reproduction.

The dependence of women on theories whose primary aim is other than the liberation of women has limited women's ability to seek an end to their own oppression. The time has come for a theory which is unique to women's experience, a feminist theory which has as its core a concept of reproduction which entails the entire process of recreating the species.

We need a theory which recognises the importance of reproduction as the organising focus of society which proposes a communal means of production and links these two issues into a single theoretical approach.(1)

It is clear—and by now a commonplace—that most political theories have been developed by (usually) male (usually) bourgeois theorists and are generally

inappropriate to the needs of women's liberation. They are written in a different language than that of the feminist perspective and they speak of a different future than that of the feminist vision. Reproduction in such theories, if it is analysed at all, generally arises out of shameful, if not sinful, activity which is best kept secret in the home. And yet it has been designated as the main purpose of a woman's life, prohibiting her access to the political or public realm where the capabilities the society has deemed most desirable are expressed. Men, however, while performing in the public sphere, have not had to deny themselves some role in the private Their role in this private sphere. sphere may have been inadequately performed but they have obviously been concerned to reproduce themselves -- and that is just what they were trying to do: reproduce themselves, not their wives. Women have been intentionally placed in an either/or situation: usually they have had to choose between fulfilling their "proper" destiny as mothers or succeeding in the "important" (male) fields and thereby being thwarted forever in the realization of their true nature, their womanliness. Thus Engels could write that in the early communistic family, there was "high esteem for the women, that is, for the mothers."(2)

The views nearly all theorists have held about women can be traced to women's biological capacity to bear children; for these theorists, that capacity de-

termines or impedes all others. main ramifications associated with this perspective have been that women must bear children to be truly women, that this role then necessarily restricts them to the home and that they are unsuited to any other kind of activity. Women have been deemed intellectually and emotionally inferior to men and therefore subservient to father, brother, husband, grown son and just about any other male they might encounter. But they have also been deemed morally superior with the corollary that their sexuality is at best purely functional or non-existent, a myth finally being laid to rest in recent years. Reproduction has been used to define women negatively, exclusively and restrictively.

The position of women is also related to the type of economic system integral to these theories. Liberals and liberal-democrats of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for instance, wanted to ensure the continuation of private property and so they seized on the family unit as a significant instrument by which property could not only be passed on but indeed accumulated. Since the man, the property owner, wanted to ensure that his property ended up in the "right" hands, he had to exert control over his wife's sexual activity (thereby burdening our legal system with the notorious double standard). As part of the family unit, furthermore, women could take care of the family's needs, either directly or

through supervision, for love rather than for money or simply exchange those services for bed and board. Almost any work performed by women outside the home was, and in many cases still is, treated as secondary labour. Liberal-democratic theorists did introduce the acceptability of single women's involvement in the public sphere, but they wrote at a time when there was a surplus of single women, too many to find a niche in the family.

Socialist theory which eliminated the wage relation and encouraged women's participation in the workforce, constituted a significant theoretical advance for women. Yet Marx's recognition of the importance of reproduction in its relation to the workforce. that is, the recreation of the exploited class, did not include any extended assessment of the part reproduction has played in oppressing women. More importantly, he did not consider the role of reproduction in freeing women. For the most part, socialist thought retains the traditional sex relation despite the introduction of communal services and despite the integration of women into the public sphere.

None of these theories can be viewed, therefore, as a reasonable theoretical base for women's emancipation. Women's oppression derives from both a system of economic relations and a system of reproductive relations.

Initially it would seem that modification of socialist theory to include women more specifically would fulfill the task of developing an appropriate feminist theory. Indeed, there has been a real reluctance to discard Marxism and to start anew. Feminists have had no difficulty rejecting the classical Greek theorists, the medieval Churchmen, the blatant chauvinists such as Rousseau, but they have had considerable difficulty in disavowing Marxism; for most of them, that would be heresv. Many feminists have been, and still are. socialists. The outstanding debate among "socialist feminists" revolves around the question of whether socialism should predominate (i.e., class is the fundamental contradiction and thus the theoretical emphasis should be on production) or whether feminism should be the primary concern (i.e., sex is the fundamental contradiction and therefore the emphasis should be on reproduction).

Some socialists would have the women's movement form one branch of the socialist movement, "an indispensable bargaining tool for setting the terms of any alliance to ensure that women's particular interests are not cast aside."(3) In other words, these are socialists with a special concern with women's rights. The women's movement has already taken that route and it has not worked; feminists are now more interested in making the rules, than in being subsumed within some other move-

ment. And socialism <u>qua</u> socialism cannot offer women liberation. During the nineteenth century:

women and men alike, whether Saint Simonians, anarchist socialists, or Marxist socialists, all saw the necessity for society to deal with the burden of the breeder-feeder role that entrapped women by providing childcare and domestic maintenance for everyone. However, no one looked back to the time when men had shared part of the breeder-feeder role. Everything (except biological child-bearing) was to be taken over by the state.(4)

Socialist theory did not and does not come to grips with the special place of reproduction. An analysis of capitalism alone does not explain women's oppression which, of course, existed and exists as well in precapitalist society. (5)

Some feminist socialists follow Engels in arguing that it was the introduction of private property which brought inequality to the relations between men and women. The countervailing argument states that the reason for the inequality has always been there but that initially it did not surface and now it can be overcome.

When both men and women operated within a small circumference of home base, the biological differences between them and their inability to control the process of reproduction had little impact on the way in which they satis-

fied their basic requirements. difficult to imagine, though, that childbrith did not take on an aura of mystery which permeated to the women themselves. It has been suggested that the original family unit was composed of mother and children and that men's introduction to it was simply to serve the needs of the women and children for animal food and protection. When the search for food began to require people to leave the camp for varying lengths of time, the most obvious people to leave were the men; the women staved at home to look after the children and, indirectly, the camp. Over time, the tasks divided into two spheres, the public and the private, and the separation between the two became more apparent. The development of property ownership primarily on the part of men made significant biological differences which had remained latent until the environmental situation changed. other words, it was not that the women were considered incapable of hunting (although they would have less opportunity to learn since the capacity to bear children and the time to learn hunting tended to coincide), but rather that the environment impeded their involvement. In order to maintain the population, all women had to be pregnant or nursing most of the time; otherwise women could at least have taken turns with each other to Thus, to deal with economic hunt.(6) class or production only does not come to terms with the underlying basis of the oppression of women: would property ownership have divided the sexes if they had not already been divided by their relationship to reproduction? (7)

Without an understanding of the reproductive processes, it was not possible to control them. Eventually the primitive separation of labour became more sophisticated, equipped with its own set of psychological, political and economic rationalisations. And the fact that the original division was simply a logical one under the circumstances, has been lost. Circumstances no longer require it--and they have not for some time. Now it is possible to accept the biological division without its adjuncts of political, economic and social distinctions. Thus, "radical feminism recognizes the oppression of women as a fundamental political oppression wherein women are categorized as an inferior class, based upon their sex. . . Through (the) institutions (of marriage, motherhood, love, and sexual intercourse) the woman is taught to confuse her biological sexual differences with her total human potential."(8) understand that these "biological sexual differences" are an important part of our "total human potential" because, we have a role in reproduction which men cannot have. Such biological differences should not, however, determine a woman's whole potential.

What feminists want is an integration of the qualities which appear to have

developed among men and women because they have carried out different tasks in society. The development of these qualities began during early social history, the period referred to earlier. when men and women were engaged in almost diametrically opposed sets of behaviours: women raised life, they cultivated, they conserved, whether children, domesticated animals or grains; on the other hand, men destroyed life, whether animals through hunting or (later) human beings, through war. Accordingly, women evolved nurturing, preserving characteristics while men became aggressive and competitive. A society in which these qualities are modified and shared is the integrated society I am talking about. Rossi calls this type of integrated society her "hybrid" model; (9) Boulding terms it the "Gentle Society;"(10) Yates labels it the "androgynous perspective"(11) and this is probably its most common name.

Many feminists no longer believe that the "hybrid, gentle, androgynous" society can be achieved through socialism alone. Many radical feminists concur that Marx made a great contribution in his analysis of the relations of production, but they are very concerned that the relations of reproduction were for all essential purposes ignored by him or subsumed under relations of production, a situation not corrected by subsequent socialist thinkers. There is, therefore, no

guarantee that activity which may overcome productive alienation will also overcome reproductive alienation.

The hallmark of feminist theory is synthesis, the merging of the public and the private, the objective and the subjective; its differentiating characteristic lies in its statement about the realm of reproduction which best symbolises this synthesis. Feminist theory is based on the hypothesis that the distinguishing element of human nature is the ability to make rational, conscious decisions as well as to act emotionally, not only, but most notably, in the spheres of reproduction and production. In both spheres there must be, in the objective sense, options, and we must be able, in the subjective sense, to choose among those options. The fact that we can both produce and reproduce rationally identifies us as human beings; until we experience the conditions which let us activate that capacity, we shall not be fully realised human beings.

Feminism also considers the denial of rational options around reproduction to be a denial of human nature, to mark the alienation from our human essence by providing conditions necessary to the development of choice in reproduction and of conditions conducive to the operation of the capacity to choose.

The core of feminist theory, then, is a recognition of the fundamental role of reproduction. This recognition of the supreme importance of reproduction along with the awareness of the necessary integration of production and reproduction, of public and private, of natural and artificial, marks the point at which feminist theory transcends, while building on, Marxism.

This concept of physical or natural reproduction of the species (which in one respect can be experienced only by the woman but in others by both the man and the woman) relates also to the "artificial" reproduction of the culture of the species through the objectification of ideas in the form of art, literature, music, and so forth. O'Brien has argued that artificial reproduction has been used by men as compensation for their inability to reproduce naturally (12) but here I am primarily concerned with physical reproduction or natural creativity. This concept refers to the whole range of activities which takes place between the point at which it is decided to conceive or not and, the end of the child's dependence on parent(s). Reproduction encompasses the entire scope of activities involved in reproducing the species and in creating a new human being. It is of necessity, then, concerned with childcare systems, education, family networks, recreation, nutrition and media. And it concerns people who have not only become parents biologically but also those who have chosen to work in all spheres of life which are involved in the process of reproducing the species.

Choice in these matters is maximised by certain mechanisms of production. Since production constitutes the technology necessary for rational, conscious decision-making, it is subordinate to reproduction. socialisation of production is prerequisite to a humanist society, but it is not the final stage, for an emphasis on that aspect merely obscures the need to revolutionise natural reproduction. Technology must permit us to develop safe, easy methods of contraception or provide childcare services in the workplace or arrange work schedules of parents in order to allow both to look after their children.

The approach to reproduction taken here requires and perpetuates a synthesis of roles, rather than complementary division; its use recognises that that harmony should come from the whole, not from the union of two separate parts or spheres as manifested each in one sex. As Firestone has stated: ". . . the feminist movement is the first to combine effectively the 'personal' with the 'political.' It is developing a new way of relating, a new political style, one that will eventually reconcile the personal -- always the feminine perogative -- with the public, with the 'world outside' to restore that world

to its emotions, and literally to its senses."(13) Yet her methods surely seems to contradict that ideal:

. . . just as the end goal of socialist revolution was not only the elimination of the economic class privilege but of the economic class distinction itself, so the end goal of feminist revolution must be, unlike that of the first feminist movement, not just the elimination of male privilege but of the sex distinction itself. . . The reproduction of the species by one sex for the benefit of both would be replaced by (at least the option of) artificial reproduction. . "(14)

My concern with this approach at the present time is that it will also radically transform what Firestone herself calls "the female principle," necessary for androgyny. To describe the female reproductive functions or biology as exercising "tyranny" is to subscribe to the "male principle." Replacing human physical reproduction with artificial reproduction prevents the synthesis of our human and animal qualities, prevents the merging of our rationality and our instincts. Marx's intention was not to abolish labour, but to reestablish it in its rightful relation to human beings; similarly, we do not wish to abolish reproduction, but to reestablish it in its rightful relation to human beings. Feminists do not want assimilation into male society by the removal

of their child-birth functions as the norm.

Some lesbian theories are based on the premise that heterosexuality is an ideological system, the foundation of male domination which can, therefore, be transcended only by women identifying with women in all aspects of life. While some lesbians believe in complete separation from men, others argue that it is not necessary for all women to reject relations with men, as long as heterosexuality is recognised as an ideology to be "attacked and exposed" as more militant lesbians contend that to reproduce means to "bear and raise (men's) heirs for them; "(15) others suggest purely physical relations with men or artificial methods of reproduction. One of the few groups of women to have explored the whole notion of reproduction more thoroughly are the radical lesbians.

It is clear though, that some of the proposals made in these theories are also overly mechanistic and if applied universally with no choice involved would also denigrate human reproduction and deny the synthesis in human life which reproduction can truly represent.

Feminist theory obviously and intentionally places the treatment of women in a central position and thus marks a prominent departure for women.

It has always been difficult for women to develop a theory which responds specifically to our own needs and for which we would constitute the agent of its realisation. This difficulty has its roots partly in women's perception of ourselves as subordinate and is a psychic reflection of the objective state of our lives. Now we are beginning to see that the assertion of ourselves and of our needs is a necessary development. No longer do women have to serve and fulfil the needs of others, namely men and children, often to the exclusion of our own needs and to the point of being defined by the terms of that service (wife, mother, daughter, mistress). We can define and express our own needs and wants.

The transitional period from patriarchy to androgyny will be marked by an inversion of current emphasis: the private realm will take on a greater importance than the public realm and so-called "feminine" characteristics will take on greater importance than "masculine" characteristics. The "sexgender system"(16) will be turned on its head before it finally merges into a synthesis of public and private, of political and erotic, of objective and subjective, of intimate and shared, most fully symbolised by reproduction.

While a woman does have a special relation to this process of reproduction, she is not limited by that relation as she has been in patriarchal theory and society. In her is embodied the synthesis of private and public. Feminist theory claims that only women can return us to our essence as human beings by bringing an end to our alienation from the process of human reproduction; that is why women must be the agent of the humanist revolution. It has been argued before, by Marcuse, (17) for example, that only women possess the qualities necessary to be agents of a socialist revolution because they have not had the opportunity to acquire the characteristics necessary to function in the public market place as men as a group have done. Whatever the validity of this notion, it does highlight the principle of Marxist methodology that only the oppressed can free both themselves and their oppressors.

Feminist theory points out that women are at the crucial historical juncture: they have both the conceptual vision of a human society and for the first time the technological capacity to realise it. Feminist theory depends on this technology for its realisation. It is not possible to develop a useful theory about reproduction until we can control it effectively and only now is that becoming a realistic possibility.

Thus one might ask whether it is fair to expect earlier theorists to understand reproduction and to treat it appropriately as the centre of social relations when it was not possible to have free choice in reproduction and

sexuality? Even when the technology can or has been developed, it still has seemed difficult for theorists to understand the significance of reproduction. It is not, therefore, lack of technology alone which has prevented the development of feminism. In addition, at least a few thinkers were able to glimpse the future and, even if they were unable to provide solutions or a sophisticated analysis of the problems they perceived, were at least able to ask questions, to raise criticisms, and to propose possibili-In other words, the necessary ideas were in circulation, and socalled "minor" theorists from the Epicureans to William Thompson and, to a lesser extent, Mary Wollstonecraft, as well as late nineteenth and early twentieth-century feminist writers, were able to make use of Although the association bethem. tween the development of birth control and the emancipation of women has been clearly shown, (18) it is only now possible to transform the fact which restricted women into the fact which places women in a special revolutionary position.

The advantage of feminist theory is that it provides a framework for critical analysis of existing sexist conditions and for assessing the value and purpose of reformist measures. It also provides a focus for discussion among members of the women's movement which is composed of groups with disparate ideas and attitudes. It allows

both for a discussion with those who disagree with us and for a basis of unity among ourselves; by providing a cohesive frame of reference, it facilitates both communication and power. We cannot expect that all women are going to agree; we cannot pretend that there has been or is now a union of women; indeed, it is an achievement to provide a basis for rational disagreement and, perhaps, of rational conversion. Such a theory can acknowledge the different levels of consciousness women have reached and it can acknowledge the divisions which mean that women do have different needs and thus are asking for different injustices to be remedied. It would be foolish to claim that professional women, working class women, black women, native women, all have the same problems. But it should be clear also that we do share problems merely by being born women: born "professional" women and factory workers must contend with ridicule the difficulties of combining career and family, the general lack of acceptance of their competence.

At this stage, there has to be, no doubt, a series of independent "submovements" which concentrate on different injustices with the aim of coalescing in the future. Some people, for example, have argued that the women's movement can offer nothing to Third World women; yet others assert that "it should be our position as Third World women that the struggle

against racism must be waged simultaneously with the struggle for women's liberation, and only a strong independent women's movement can insure that this will come about."(19) Similarly, Indian women must appreciate that their differentiated status under the Indian Act has occurred because they are women and that they cannot work for the preservation of native culture until they have been recognised, as they once were, as full human beings themselves. Finally, feminist theory permits these submovements to concentrate on specific issues (childcare, abortion, equal pay, improved working conditions, or whatever appears relevant or necessary to strengthen the sub-movement's position) because it can place those issues in a unified perspective; it can bridge theory and practice.

By asserting that women's special function is the core of human existence, feminist theory argues for the predominance and universality of so-called "female life experiences:" it makes birth, not death, the centre of human existence. Feminist theory realised would transform our motivating principle into one directed at life and creation instead of destruction.

Feminist theory is unabashedly about women; it blatantly attempts to appeal to women; accordingly, it says little about what men can do to hasten the millenium. Traditionally, men have been the mainstay of revolutionary

activity; now men must realize that they and their vision have become outmoded and that they, temporarily, have no revolutionary activity except as fellow-travellers. Men indeed have a place in a humanist society: they can help us build it; but they cannot take us there--we must take them.

Feminist theory proposes to give men a new relation to reproduction. While they cannot bear children, they do play a part in their conception and thus have an obligation to consider the effect they might have on the development of the foetus. should share equally in the caring of the children; they should parent along with the mother, not merely helping her. When we understand what reproducing the species really means, we can see that men have tasks not only in families which might continue to exist, but also working in childcare, in the development of technology related to natural reproduction and so forth, as well as the part they have always taken in the areas of cultural reproduction. The part men play in natural reproduction and that played by women in cultural reproduction must be seen as equally valuable and valid-and ultimately as one and the same. The culture they will be sharing, however, will be an androgynous, not a patriarchal one, and it will form an element in the network of natural reproduction.

It is important to note that the defin-

ition of reproduction which I have postulated does not require that all women actually give birth to children, nor that if they do, that it must be accomplished within a particular family structure. The options which revolve around reproduction include the decision not to reproduce physically--feminism is not a "back to the home" philosophy. Similarly, it does not require a specific type of sexuality: both heterosexual and homosexual people will participate in childcare; both heterosexual and homosexual people will choose not to have a personal relation with children but will be involved in cultural reproduction; and both heterosexual and homosexual people will engage in raising children. core of reproduction is less the physical act of giving birth but rather the web of attitudes and motivations surrounding a decision to concentrate on creation rather than on destruction.

The strategy or strategies which are necessary in order to realise feminist theory need more consideration, than can be given here. I should, however, like to suggest some approaches which might be taken. Feminist theory does permit us to pursue some immediate goals which would normally be considered reformist but which can be considered radical when seen through the perspective of feminist theory. The problem with the suffrage movement was that it sought suffrage as an isolated goal; the suffragettes rarely questioned societal structures in any broader

sense. From the perspective of feminist theory, we do not seek childcare as a goal but as a means, nor do we seek it alone. This is also true of abortion law repeal, of equal pay, of any kind of specific issue around which women unite. We do not need to reject these alliances or the work they are doing; on the contrary, it is a decided advantage that women are able to fight for specific intermediary goals which they find suitable to their own lives, even as they co-ordinate with the broader movement.

The crucial point is, that we can act now, within the confines of the present system, knowing that the cumulation of what we need and demand has to transform that system. Rosemary Brown, for example, has chosen to fight for feminism through the conventional political system because "politics is part of the vital network through which our oppression is channelled and maintained;" in a sense, she is infiltrating, attempting to radicalise the conventional, to "turn that structure around" and make it into "one of the most useful and effective tools in our struggle for liberation."(20) More unconventionally, women can engage in "guerrilla warfare," as Hennessey, in her series of strategic steps, (21) terms such activities as store boycotts and workplace sabotage.

Women's assertion must be reflected in language. Much fun has been made of the attempts by women to change our language to include women, to use "humankind" instead of "mankind," "chairperson"instead of "chairman" and so on; but language is built on and at the same time reflects the society in which we live: the forms of those words derived from a very specific—and anti-woman—reality; therefore, if we expect our reality to include women, so must our language. We must develop a language of androgyny to replace the language of patriarchy.

We are involved in a slow battle with few really major campaigns, but with many diversionary tactics. We are in the process of transforming a culture. We must take every opportunity to educate, to propagandise and to reach out to other women. Even as we acknowledge that women in different situations must fight their own battles at a certain level now, we must establish liaisons among us all and a network which spreads ever wider, in order to maintain and extend contacts and to mobilise. And we must be prepared for a long fight. Hennessey is perhaps too sanguine about the ease with which the effects of her strategy will spread.

Is it possible to deny that all women qua women are oppressed? That is what should unite us now; our special relationship to reproduction, to life and to creation, should unite us in the future.

Lesbians are harrassed; single mothers are still condemned; housewives and

professional women alike find themselves in conflict with themselves, black and native women experience almost constant discrimination; working class women who labour in the marketplace and raise a family find they have two fulltime jobs: these are all different problems and to some extent these women find parallel concerns with men--nevertheless, they all share the oppression women suffer as women. And the source of that oppression is found in women's sexuality and biology; thus, to overcome women's oppression requires a theory which turns the way in which women's sexuality and biology have been manipulated on its head; it requires a theory which makes them the locus of the paradoxical merging of opposites, the core of the androgynous society.

## NOTES

- The embryonic theory presented here owes much to a conversation between myself and Angela Miles at a conference run by London, Ontario women in the fall of 1977, at that time, and subsequently, I found that discussions with Angela helped me flesh out what had been stray ideas. I hope that proc.ss continues--as it needs to do.
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- Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in Rayna R. Reiter, ed., Toward an Anthology of Women (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), pp. 157-210.
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- For a concise history of this period, see Elise Boulding, <u>The Underside of History</u> (Boulder: Westview Press, 1976).
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- 10. Boulding, op. cit.

- Gayle Graham Yates, What Women Want (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1975).
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- 13. Shulamith Firestone, The Dialectic of Sex (New York: Bantam, 1972), p. 38.
- 14. <u>Ibid.</u>, p. 11.
- Judi Morton, "When I grow up I want to be a Lesbian," in <u>Pedestal</u>, vol. 7, no. 1 (1975), p. 10.
- 16. Rubin, op. cit., p. 165.
- 17. Herbert Marcuse, "Feminist Socialism: The Hard Core of the Dream," Georgia Straight (May 16-23, 1974), pp. 12-13.
- J.A. and Olive Banks, Feminism and Family Planning in Victorian England (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), p. 7.
- 19. Maxine Williams, "Women's Liberation and Nationalism" in The Second
  Wave, vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring 1971), p. 20. Cf. Cory Logan, "From a
  Black Sister," in Women, vol. 1, no. 3 (Spring 1970), pp. 46-47.
- Rosemary Brown, "Running a Feminist Campaign," in <u>Branching Out</u>, vol. 4, no. 5 (November/December 1977), p. 18.
- Caroline Hennessey, The Strategy of Sexual Struggle (New York: Lancer Books, 1971), pp. 302-306.