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Liberation of women: Sexual repression and the family

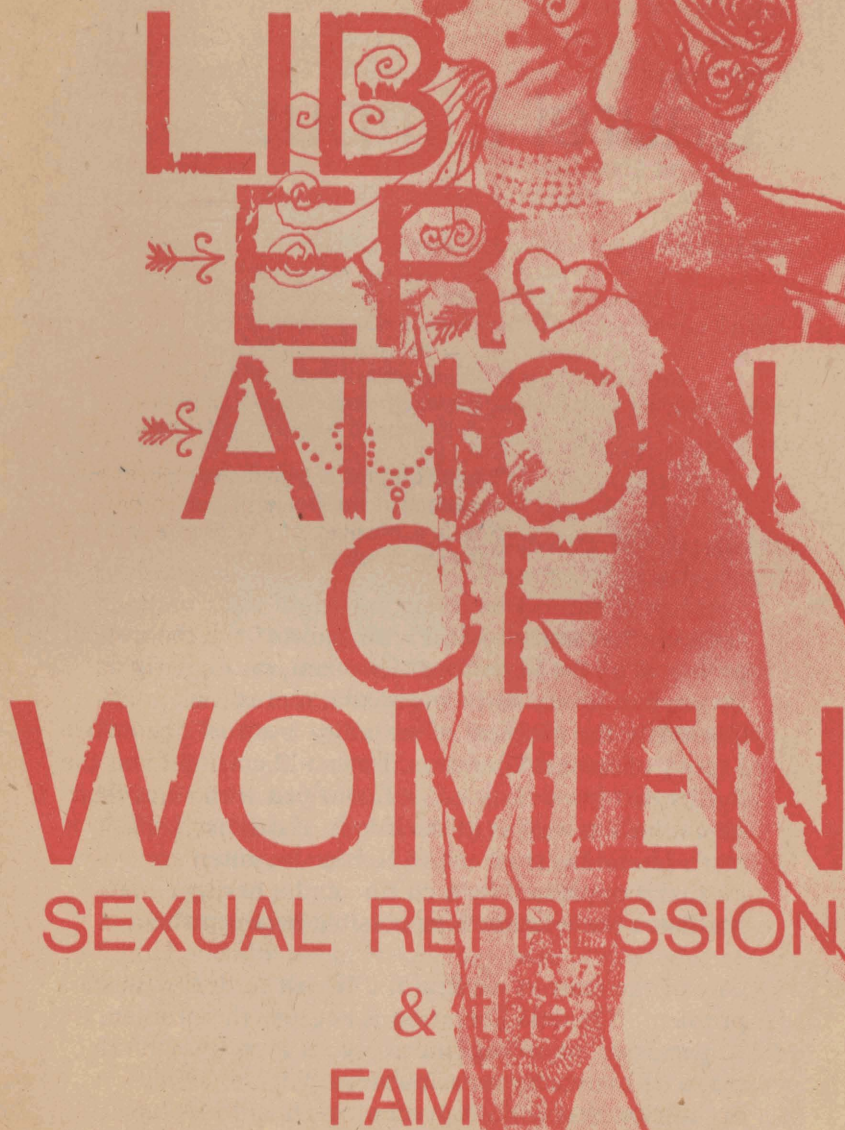
Laurel Limpus

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LIBERATION
OF
WOMEN
SEXUAL REPRESSION
& the
FAMILY

Laurel Limpus

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Laurel Limpus

Laurel Limpus is a graduate student in sociology at the University of Toronto. She is a member of the Woman's Liberation group in Toronto.

THIS IS AN ATTEMPT to deal with some of the theoretical problems of the liberation of women, particularly as they relate to sexuality and sexual repression.

Obviously the problem of sexuality is a dual one: when I speak of female liberation, I mean liberation from the myths that have enslaved and confined women in their own minds as well as in the minds of others; I don't mean liberation from men. Men and women are mutually oppressed by a culture and a heritage that mutilates the relationships possible between them.

One of the reasons we find it difficult to deal with the problem of female liberation is because the problem is so pervasive, so all encompassing; it involves the total realm of bourgeois consciousness. We are facing oppression that is both psychological and ideological; it concerns people's definitions of themselves and of each other and of the roles that are possible between them. It is, therefore, difficult for us to grasp it with any theoretical rigor and clarity. The problem is compounded by the fact that women make up a very

peculiar social group: they are not a class; their position of oppression is unique; and the mental repression that stifles them stifles at the same time the men who on the surface appear to be their oppressors.

Juliet Mitchell, in her article, "Women: The Longest Revolution," has summed up the peculiarly unique situation of women as a group very well:

"They are not one of a number of isolable units, but half a totality: the human species. Women are essential and irreplaceable; they cannot therefore be exploited in the same way as other social groups can. They are fundamental to the human condition, yet in their economic, social and political roles, they are marginal. It is precisely this combination—fundamental and marginal at one and the same time—that has been fatal to them."

I

THE CENTRAL PROBLEM is that this society had produced an image and a mythology of women that has deprived them of their humanity and creative role in society. For a variety of reasons, one of the central agents of this oppression has been the institution of the family. Many factors come together when we look at the family. For one thing, as we shall see later, the family seems, at the present time, to be the primary agent of sexual repression in this society. For another, it is by defining women primarily within the family that this society has deprived her of her humanity and her creativity. If women are to liberate themselves, they must come squarely to grips with the reality of the family and the social forces that have produced it at this particular period in history.

Both Simone de Beauvoir in The Second Sex and Juliet Mitchell have stressed what I have found to be very useful distinction between the mythologized roles of men and women: using de Beauvoir's terminology for a moment, men are encouraged to play out their lives in the realm of transcendence, whereas women are confined to immanence. This simply means that men work, create, do things, are in positions of authority,

create their own histories; whereas women are confined to the home, where their function is not to create, but to maintain: Women keep house and raise children. Of course the reality is not quite like this, since work in capitalist society is usually alienating, stifling, and stunting, and most men engaging in it could hardly be described as creating their own histories by transcending themselves. Within the present social context, however, it is still true that men are trained to go out, work, shape their own lives; and that women are not, and that thus, even within the context of their alienating nature of work, they have often more opportunities to satisfy their needs for creativity than do women. The point that must be made here is that ideologically men are urged towards creativity and that women are not. As Juliet Mitchell says:

“But women are offered a universe of their own: the family. Like woman herself, the family appears as a natural object, but it is actually a cultural creation. There is nothing inevitable about the form or role of the family any more than there is about the character or role of women. It is the function of ideology to present these given social types as aspects of nature herself.” (underlining mine)

Mitchell's use of the word ideology here is very important, because now she is talking about the dimension of consciousness; she is saying that women are ideologically oppressed; that they are defining themselves in a culturally created way which they believe is natural. The myth that women's natural place is in the home and that naturally she will find the fulfillment of her creativity in bearing and raising children and in submitting to a man is just that: a myth. More than that, it is a terribly destructive myth, like most of the mythology of bourgeois society. As long as it is believed and adhered to by women as well as by men, it systematically destroys their real potential to develop as individuals rather than as marionettes. And I firmly believe that it is to women, and not to men, that this point has to be made, because the most disturbing aspect of this whole question is the extent to which women cling tenaciously to these very conceptions of themselves which stunt their humanity.

I want to consider first how a woman's role as a wife and the socializer of children acts as a stunting influence upon her creativity. Then I will look at the very complex question of the repression of female sexuality, and the resulting mutilation of male sexuality and the resulting disintegration of love relations in this society.

One of the most pervading conceptions in the present ideology is that the family is a natural, inevitable phenomenon. Once this is accepted, because of the apparent universality of the family, women are relegated automatically to a separate but (perhaps) equal status. As Mitchell says:

"The casual chain then goes: Maternity, Family, Absence from Production and Public Life, Sexual Inequality. The lynch-pin in this line of argument is the idea of the family."

It is the family, and the ideology that confines women to it, that prevents her from fully entering into the arena of production, not her relation to a man. A woman may still work while living with a man, although much of the mythology of the "wife" who maintains a home for her husband and lives for him and through him rather than for and through herself remains to be dealt with; but it is her relationship to her children which prevents her from seriously committing herself to a job. That doesn't mean, of course, that the job is going to be creative.

Most of the jobs open to most women are unpleasant—(waitresses, salesclerks, nurses, secretaries, clerks, typists, etc.). The mere opening up of job opportunities to women thus does not solve the problem of women in production. Further, the nature of these jobs often makes marriage seem more attractive, thus backing up the mythology. As Simone de Beauvoir says:

"Modern woman is everywhere permitted to regard her body as capital for exploitation. It is natural enough for many women workers and employees to see in the right to work only an obligation from which marriage will deliver them. As long as the temptations of convenience exist—in the economic inequality that favors certain individuals and the

recognized right of women to sell herself to one of these privileged men — she will need to make a greater moral effort than would a man in choosing the role of independence. It has not been sufficiently recognized that the temptation is also an obstacle, and even one of the most dangerous. Here it is accompanied by a hoax, because in fact there will only be one winner out of thousands in the lottery of marriage.”

Marriage, finally, which is made to seem attractive and inevitable, is a trap. For girl children as well as mothers. Most women do not grow up to see themselves as producers, as creators—instead they see their mothers, their sisters, their women teachers, and they pattern themselves after them. They do not see women making history. As de Beauvoir says again:

“She has always been convinced of male superiority; this male prestige is not a childish mirage; it has economic and social foundations; men are surely masters of the world. Everything tells the young girl that it is for her best interests to become their vassal.”

But to become a vassal, to live through another human being, is a deeply frustrating experience, and the subjected wife takes the revenge of the frustrated. Ultimately, it is a terrible revenge.

I should note here that much of this pattern of wifely subservience is changing, and I would like to make it quite clear that I am referring to those women (who still comprise a large part of the total population) who would define themselves as wives and who do not work or have another project. Their husbands have projects; they do not. They revenge themselves upon the agent of their own emptiness, and thus the man is mutilated by his supposedly subservient wife. I also want to make it clear that I am not talking about men oppressing women here. This is a situation which arises out of expectations and role definitions that are ideological and that imprison both men and women:

“Men,” writes de Beauvoir, “are enchained by reason of their very sovereignty; it is because they alone earn money that their wives demand checks; it is because they alone engage in a business or profession that their wives require them to

be successful, it is because they alone embody transcendence that their wives wish to rob them of it by taking charge of their projects and successes. If the wife seeks desperately to bend him to her will, it is because she is alienated in him. He will free himself in freeing her." (underlining mine).

Martha in "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" is exactly the kind of wife who is out to get her husband for both his transcendence and his lack of it. George's worldly failure is a constant source of humiliation to her for which she continually torments him. Her own energies have found no other outlet, except in fantasies of motherhood, which brings us to the next aspect of women's exploitation in the family.

The myth that childbearing and rearing is the fulfillment of a woman's destiny is by far, in my opinion, the most damaging and destructive myth that imprisons her. Having children is no substitute for creating one's own life, for producing. And since so many women in this culture devote themselves to nothing else, they end up by becoming intolerable burdens upon their children because in fact these children are their whole lives. Juliet Mitchell has caught the situation exactly:

"At present, reproduction in our society is often a kind of sad mimicry of reproduction. Work in a capitalist society is an alienation of labour in the making of a social product which is confiscated by capital. But it can still sometimes be a real act of creation, purposive and responsible, even in conditions of the worst exploitation. Maternity is often a caricature of this. The biological product — the child — is treated as if it were a solid product. Parenthood becomes a kind of substitute for work, an activity in which the child is seen as an object created by the mother, in the same way as a commodity is created by a worker. Naturally, the child does not literally escape, but the mother's alienation can be much worse than that of the worker whose product is appropriated by the boss. No human being can create another human being. A person's biological origin is an abstraction. The child as an autonomous person inevitably threatens the activity which claims to create it continually merely as a possession of the parent. Possessions are felt as extensions of the self. The child as a possession is supremely this. Anything the child does is therefore a threat to the mother herself who has renounced her autonomy through this misconception of her reproductive role. There are few more precarious ventures on which to base a life."

So we have the forty- or fifty-year-old woman complaining to her grown child: "But I gave you everything." This is quite true; this is the tragedy. It is a gift the child hardly wanted, and indeed many children are daily mutilated by it. And it leaves women at the waning of their years with the feeling that they have been deceived, that their children are ungrateful, that no one appreciates them because they have come to the realization that they have done nothing.

This is not to say that there are not women who genuinely love their children or anything of the kind. It merely points out that the prevailing ideology leads many women into the mistake of thinking that having children will be the ultimate project (to use de Beauvoir's terminology again) of their lives. Just because women bear children does not necessarily mean that they must rear them. It certainly does not mean that this is all they should do. But this society has seen to it that there are no other institutions for the rearing of children except the nuclear family.

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THE SECOND PROBLEM — that of repressed female sexuality — is so vast, unexplored and variegated that what I have to say only represents a few scattered thoughts largely taken from my own experience and those of my friends. I'll try later to relate them to the work of Marcuse and Wilhelm Reich.

The problem of sexuality again clearly illustrates that men and women are oppressed together in an institutional framework which makes inhuman demands of them and inculcates destructive beliefs about themselves. I want to stress, though, that we women shouldn't become obsessed with freeing ourselves from sick male sexuality. It is more important to free ourselves from the structures which make both male and female sexuality sick. The male definition of virility which makes woman an object of prey is just as much a mutilation of the human potential of the

male for a true love relationship as it is of the female's. Although we as women experience this predatory attitude and are often outraged by it, we must realize that our own hangups often contribute to it, and that in any case we will get nowhere by venting our hostility upon men. We must both be liberated together, and we must understand the extent to which our fear and frigidity, which has been inculcated in most of us from infancy onwards and against which most of us have had to struggle for our sexual liberation, has hurt and mutilated them.

Since the myths emphasize male virility and female chastity, within the family men have been inculcated with predatory attitudes while women have been filled with profound sexual fear. From early infancy women have had deep sexual inhibitions instilled within them, and these fears and inhibitions are so tenacious that even when you consciously reject the morality of your parents, you often find that your body will not obey the dictates of your mind. You can believe in sexual freedom and still be frigid. For many years that was certainly true for me.

I have talked to very many women about this subject and have found that almost all of them have had the same experience or similar ones; they found that their ideas had changed, but that they still could not respond sexually. Many of these women, including myself, have finally succeeded in responding sexually, but only after a long and anguished period of doubt and fear and struggle. Many young girls, who feel only revulsion when they think they should feel ecstasy, react with immense relief when they are told that this is a quite common experience. Since of course this is not the kind of problem one ordinarily talks about, they did not know that anyone else had been through this, and they had thought that they were monsters.

The repression of these young women is matched only by their sexual ignorance, which is of course integrally related to it. When I went into the dorms at the

University of Toronto to talk about birth control, about half of the girls there didn't understand the mechanics of menstruation. One of them asked me if when a man comes the sperm can actually be seen, like little tadpoles. This may sound funny, but it is really tragic. How will women like this react in a sexual situation, and what will be the effect upon the men who initiate them. Although there is a great deal of talk about sexual liberation and promiscuity floating around, my guess would be that the reality of the situation of many couples engaging in sexual relations is frigidity, fear, impotence, inhibition, and ignorance.

One of the most subtly destructive effects the myth of female chastity has had is to make women lie about the nature of their own sexuality. While the prevailing myths about virility make men feel they must be predatory, the prevailing myths about female sexuality often make even semi-liberated women demand to be treated as prey. This is a very complicated point; but I think it is important enough to be treated at length because it illustrates the interrelationship between male and female sexual sickness. Even though it is generally admitted even now that women have desires and are supposed to respond sexually, I have noticed that even in supposedly radical circles girls can still be labelled "promiscuous." There are tremendous residual moral condemnations of female sexuality in all of us, in spite of our radical rhetoric. A woman, even a relatively sexually liberated one, often finds it hard to approach a man sexually the way a man can approach her. Needless to say, less liberated women will be even more dishonest about their desires. A man I know once remarked that he knew few women who could look at him sexually (for example, stare at his genitals without embarrassment) the way he could look at a woman. I have found these residual fears in myself, and I know other women who experience the same thing. This means that since women will often be dishonest about their desires and encourage the man to pursue them, they force him to become the very predatory person that radical women object to.

Sexual repression is clearly structural, and the central agent of repression is the family, which has inculcated both the subservience of women and sexual taboos. From infancy onwards we are all subjected to this process, and this process is obviously related to the institutions of society.

Much of the resentment of liberated women against men is sexual, because they feel they are being treated as objects (as in fact they are). Fashion, advertising, movies, Playboy Magazine, all betray the fact that women are culturally conceived of as objects and, worse still, often accept this definition and try to make themselves into a more desirable commodity on the sexual market. We must remember, however, that every month some woman is more than willing to be the playmate of the month and that the problem exists in her consciousness as much as in that of the men who stare at her. This is ideology, self-definition, conscious acceptance of myths, and these things are related to institutions, to economic and social structures.

Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse both tried to deal with the institutional background of this mutilation of erotic life. While the agent of sexual repression and mutilation is the family, it reflects, in microcosm, the demands of society. Reich argues that our society is systematically producing people through the family who are incapable of love and sexual surrender because it needs such people in order to perpetuate itself. Parental repression in childhood, especially of sexuality, cuts down the vital vegetative side of life – the antithesis to the present mechanization of existence – and has led to the building in the individual of an intricate character armour. A neurosis has been created; and most of us share it. This armour is essentially fearful and protective, and prevents one from loving, because it keeps repressed and dammed up those life energies which would ordinarily flow outwards as love, which would let us surrender. So we fear love and sexuality, and are anxious and guilty about love-making.

Reich postulates that sexual orgasmic impotence is directly related to the existence of this character armour, and that when this armour is broken down, the individual's loving, creative, and sexual energies are released. He also postulates that the neurotic character armoured individual is a necessity for the present authoritarian mechanized capitalistic society, and that people freed of this armour find that they can no longer function in this society as successfully as before:

“Quite spontaneously, patients began to feel the moralistic attitudes of the environment as something alien and queer. They began to feel a strong need for some vital work in which they could have a personal interest. If the work in which they were engaged lent itself to the absorption of real interest, they blossomed out. If, however, their work was mechanical, as that of an employee, a merchant or a clerk, it became an almost unbearable burden, and they felt a sharp protest of the organism against empty, mechanical work.”

These same people also found themselves, because of their new sexual responsiveness, much more serious about the importance of interpersonal relationships than before:

“Their previous behavior had been the result of the fact that they experienced no sensations in the sexual act whatsoever; whereas now, they experienced full sensation in the act and therefore regarded it as an important part of their lives, not to be dealt with as lightly as their former behavior would indicate. That, in other words, they became more ‘moral’ in the sense of wanting only one partner—one who loved and satisfied them.”

Thus, a released sexuality appeared to lead not to the so-called promiscuity of the frigid woman, but to the desire to establish a serious love relationship.

It is obvious that the changes that Reich observed in his patients who became capable of full sexual response has deep social and political implications. As he says: “The picture presented at the end by all of them was that of a different kind of society,” namely one in which work was human and creative, sexuality was unrepressed and spontaneous, and love relationships

replaced the present moralistic compulsive and often repressed marriage system. This leads Reich to hypothesize that the present system of sexual repression has a social function:

“The purpose of the demand for sexual abstinence is that of making the adolescent submissive and capable of marriage. The children destined for this kind of marriage are brought up in sexual abstinence; they show neuroses and those character traits with which we are familiar. Their sexual abstinence has the function of making them submissive. Sexual suppression is an essential instrument in the production of economic enslavement.” (underlining mine)

It is important to realize exactly what Reich is saying here. He is saying that a society of sick individuals has been created, largely through the suppression of sexuality, the life function, in order to create men fit to work in a social order where the priorities are not human, but profit. He also makes it clear that in order to change society we must also attempt to change the individuals created by it: “The cultural revolution requires the alteration of the psychic structure of the mass individual.”

While this analysis may seem oversimplified to some, it clearly points in the direction of the kind of exploration that has to be done about the social function of sexual suppression.

Marcuse moves in the same direction, although in dealing with the question of sexual suppression in its social context, he expands it throughout history.

Marcuse begins with what has been considered to be the Freudian idea that the suppression of the libido at an early age is absolutely necessary for the continuation of society; otherwise civilization would not continue to exist, since men must work to survive, and the libido militates against work. Eros uncontrolled is a fatal danger; therefore the history of mankind has been a history of repression. This Freud formulates in the opposition of the Pleasure and Reality principles: the first geared to erotic gratification and constantly

suppressed, finding relief in fantasy, art, or psychological distortions; the second, the Reality principle, geared through the maintenance of civilization through work. Marcuse, however, points out that all societies have been maintained according to certain systems of domination; certain classes have been in control and have not worked. Therefore simply to postulate scarcity of resources as the reason for sexual repression in order to make men work is not enough. He also points out that the advances of technology now make the argument of scarcity untenable, at least in the developed countries, and yet there is still repression.

In other words, technology would now make it possible for necessary work to be reduced to a minimum, and that, if sexual repression persists, there must be some other reason for it than scarcity. This reason according to Marcuse is the interests of domination, and he calls the repression necessary for this surplus repression. Even though it would now be theoretically possible for men to be comparatively freed from work, they are still being suppressed to make them work. The Reality principle does not operate independently of history; it is not just the fact, but also the organization of scarcity, that creates repression. In other words, as Reich also said, psychological realities are related to political needs, and men are being sexually repressed in order to exploit them.

As Reich does, Marcuse identifies the sex instincts with the life instincts, and he further postulates that the suppression of these instincts was necessary to the development of Western civilization, which defined itself in terms of reason, productivity, and the domination of nature.

With the development of a different kind of civilization with different values, made possible for the first time by advanced technology, Marcuse sees the possibility of a change in the Reality principle, which is not something inevitable and mystical, but historically determined. With the passing away of both resource scarcity and he

hopes the present systems of political and social domination and economic exploitation, he sees the Reality principle merging more and more with the repressed Pleasure principle, and a whole new form or erotically liberated life possible. As he says:

“We have suggested that the prevalent instinctual repression resulted, not so much from the necessity of labour, but from the specific social organization of labour imposed by the interest in domination – that repression was largely surplus repression. Consequently, the elimination of surplus repression would per se tend to eliminate, not labour, but the organization of human existence into an instrument of labour.”

Very much like Reich, Marcuse envisions man freed from surplus repression as capable of a much more receptive relationship both with the environment and with other people. He is therefore postulating a new form of social organization related to a new kind of character organization. He calls this “a total revolution in the mode of perception and feeling” and makes it clear that it is only possible in a society in which production is the means, and not the end, of human activity: “Possession and procurement of the necessities of life are the prerequisite, rather than the content, of a free society.” He describes at length during the second half of Eros and Civilization what the content of such a free society and a free consciousness might be.

Both Marcuse and Reich have begun arguments that I think are crucial for any discussion of female liberation. All the oppressive phenomena which we experience as women clearly are related to social institutions and structures, and this includes the sexual inhibition which we experience and the problem of the woman's role as defined in the family. Since the problems that face women are related to the structure of the whole society, ultimately our study of our particular situation as women will lead us to the realization that we must attempt to change this whole society.

HOW DOES THE FUTURE LOOK, GIRLS?

“Almost everyone is concerned with working for a living. Your career in the world of work can be one of the most important things in your life.

If you are a boy, the kind of work you do will determine how well you provide for yourself and your family, what kind of home and neighbourhood you live in, what kind of friends you have, and it may even determine the kind of girl you meet and marry. Certainly, it will have a great influence on your ability to lead a full and satisfying life.

If you are a girl, marriage is the career you may have in mind. You will probably work in paid employment for a while before marriage. You may want to return to work after your family is grown up. You may even combine marriage with a career. Women are most numerous in such fields as teaching, office work, personal and domestic service, health service and welfare work. But they are making careers for themselves in practically all fields of work, and girls can find many interesting and rewarding opportunities if they care to look.”

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