KAREN SACKS

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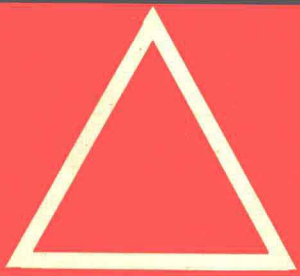
The Past and Future of Sexual Equality



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CONTENTS

SISTERS AND WIVES

INTRODUCTION: SOURCES AND USES OF THEORY

The search for women's overall or fundamental position long ago or far away is an outcome of the confrontation between social darwinist anthropology and the feminist and socialist movements over sexism here and now. I use social darwinism to stand for a world view, the key elements of which include an interpretation of the natural world from an industrial capitalist perspective, as inherently competitive and hierarchical, a belief that such an order is necessary for survival, an interpretation of human social relations as necessarily natural in this sense, and either an advocacy of inequality as natural and progressive or a despair in being unable to overcome our distasteful but inevitable natures. In this world view, nature is an unconscious metaphor for industrial capitalist social relations.[1] Women have been fighting for equal rights for well over one hundred years. The center of struggle lies in changing institutionalized patterns of behaviors and allocations of social roles. All behavior is informed and shaped by ideas, by ways of seeing the world, as well as by standards for what is right and wrong, moral and immoral. A marxist and feminist anthropology can affirm the reality of equality in other times and places and increase our understanding of how to obtain such a social order for ourselves. This book is an attempt to develop such a way of seeing and of informing our actions. But there is something hollow and unreal about simply laying out a marxist and feminist perspective as if it were a self-contained package. Ideas cannot be detached from the social and intellectual experiences that birthed them. Marxism and feminism are really ways of seeing oneself in relation to an industrial capitalist social order. They are world views born of cumulative and analyzed struggles of the working class and of women to end their oppression.

Marxist and feminist perspectives have had to confront social darwinist perspectives, for this is how industrial capitalists have interpreted the world. They are diametrically opposed ways of seeing the same social order(s), and they represent opposed class views and needs. But it has never been an evenly balanced opposition. Communists and plutocrats alike have been early and heavily socialized to view the world through social darwinist lenses, to ask social darwinist questions. That marxist and feminist perspectives have been sustained, developed, and put into practice at all attests to their roots in working-class and women's realities and attests to human abilities to create ways of seeing that speak to one's own needs and experiences.

To develop marxist feminist perspectives on women requires confronting and working through the social darwinist and sexist perspectives with which we have been socialized. Those perspectives are summed up in everyday contexts as stereotypes about how people act or think and why they act and think as they (supposedly) do. Stereotypes are powerful. Even marxist analyses, particularly with respect to women, have not always analyzed the complex reality of class and sex struggle, but often the distorted and simplified social darwinist stereotype of that reality. Thus the starting point of any marxist feminist analysis needs be to confront the dominant stereotypes. These stereotypes come out most sharply in discussions of women's essential being or universal condition. Much of the support for social darwinist stereotypes about "essential woman" comes from anthropology, a field that studies the social orders and cultures of the long ago and far away. As an academic discipline, anthropology has played a significant role in shaping and reinforcing ideas about women's place, nature, and roles (Fee 1974; Martin and Voorhies 1975: 144–77). Until recently, however, anthropology's message has been almost unrelievedly antifeminist and social darwinist in that it has insisted that women have always been and therefore must always be the second sex. Recently a new kind of anthropology has begun to develop, challenging antifeminist perspectives and creating marxist and feminist perspectives for seeing and acting on the world.

This book contributes to these efforts. It is a counterpoint—between what capitalist Euroamerica has said about the precapitalist world it sought to expropriate and refashion in its own image and what part of that world was really like. The resolution of that counterpoint is how the history of humanity looks with the female half at center stage.

The book is in two parts, indicating two aspects of a unified whole. The first part analyzes anthropology's contribution to generating social darwinist stereotypes, particularly those about essential woman, and shows how precapitalist reality contradicts its official academic stereotypes. Chapter 1 is long because it counts and analyzes the ways in which anthropology has interpreted women's place through social darwinist lenses. It is not about the totality of the discipline, for there have been dissidents and resisters in the past, and certainly feminism has become a significant perspective in recent years. Instead I concentrate on those aspects of our intellectual socialization that we need to overcome, for they do not sit well with feminist perspectives. To illustrate, I include some feminist analyses that were undertaken from social darwinist perspectives. I think they come to social darwinist conclusions in spite of themselves. Social darwinism speaks about biology and roots its explanations in tangible or intangible but nevertheless innate attributes. But these explanations are simple assertions and have not progressed beyond this stage for a century. Thus social darwinism is not really about biological roots of male and female places. Rather biology is its unconscious metaphor for social relations. What it has said with respect to social relations is that wifehood-motherhood is at once women's essential and defining social relation and that it is necessarily a relation of dependency.

The validity of an idea is not determined by who holds it or by whether it serves feminist ends. It is determined by how well it explains reality—past, present, future. Feminists and marxists seem haunted by an unrealistic fear: What if the social darwinists are right when they assert that women have never been the social equals of men? I think this fear has retarded inquiry into the question of women's position. Instead of tackling the problem head on, many have often found it easier to make end runs or apologies, conceding that women are subordinate but reasoning that culture, not biology, has put us in that position or that the conditions for equality have not yet been created. These may be consoling or inspirational thoughts, but they are not scientifically convincing or helpful, for they do not speak to what it is in culture that supposedly demands women's subordination. Is it changeable? How do we know? What is it in past and present forms of organization that has made women subordinate? Why should anyone expect it to change in the future?

Chapter 2 refutes social darwinism at the level of social relations

rather than engaging the debate at the level of biological metaphor. Empirically women's social relations are neither universally dependent nor universally subordinate; women have been making culture, political decisions, and babies simultaneously and without structural conflicts in all parts of the world. I discuss women's relationships as sisters, mothers and wives to show that there is not a universal, single, essential relationship that everywhere defines woman and to show that women's social relations include economic autonomy and political and economic decision making. Together the first two chapters are about undoing the hegemony of bourgeois lenses for viewing women's places in precapitalist societies and industrial capitalism alike. Because social darwinism has no room for equality or for change in women's places, it is logically deficient even as an explanation for inequality and its persistence. Even more significant for my own thinking was my realization that the mental category "essence of woman," which I carried in my head, was a social darwinist stereotype and not reality. Until that time, I had been necessarily asking the wrong questions, about some mythical, albeit social, essence of women's and men's relationships. And like others, that essence centered around motherhood in both its biological and social dimensions.

In the second part of the book, I ask different questions, marxist ones, about how women's and men's relations to the means of production create different social relations among them and create complex and multifaceted social beings who do not have universal gender-based essences. These questions are explored in the context of analyzing women's places in precapitalist social orders of Africa.

My goal is to find the kinds of productive relations that give women the economic, political, personal, and sexual equality we seek for ourselves today. My thesis is that the central relations are sisterhood and wifehood, relationships that I think were critical for women's lives in the precapitalist world. *Sister* is a kind of kinship shorthand for a woman member of a community of owners of the means of production: an equal, an adult among adults, a decision maker. *Wife* is shorthand for a woman's relationship to her spouse—she may live with him on her family's productive estate (garden lands or pasture, for example), and he may work for her family—or the reverse—she lives at the estate of her husband's family and works for them. (There are, of course, many more kinds of wifehood.) In the first case wife is generally a relation-

ship of dominance; in the second it is generally one of subordination. In a search for equality, the relationship of sisters—to their brothers and to each other—is the critical one to understand. But the necessary condition for sister relations to exist was a corporation of owners, a social order based on groups of kinspeople who owned the means to their livelihood. Differences in the roles of men and women were compatible with sexual equality (Sacks 1976a). This kind of social order, which anthropologists have variously called tribes, bands, chiefdoms, acephalous societies, or lineage societies, among others, has characterized much of human history and was broken up only a few thousand years ago by the rise of states or class societies. States destroyed the possibility of sister relations and hence of equality of women and men, particularly in the underclasses. In Africa, and I suspect elsewhere, the rise of class societies involved the breakup of these kin corporations by ruling classes, who substituted themselves as private owners or as a class of hereditary state officials for kin ownership. Ironically, as ruling classes eroded men's base of power—their land ownership—they simultaneously undercut the basis of sister relations and hence women's power and autonomy. Women were transformed from sisters and wives, to wives (and sometimes daughters), to perennial subordinates. Motherhood, as a social relationship to the means of production, underwent profound changes as a result of changes in women's other relations to the means of production. It went from a relationship of adulthood to one of dependency.

But every historical or evolutionary current has eddies and countercurrents. The rise of states was not an event but a process, and an uneven one in time and space at that. It is still a process. The other side of that process is that kin corporations were not totally destroyed overnight. Rather they have been and continue to be slowly subverted, transformed, and overcome—only to struggle toward rebirth repeatedly as a defense against ruling-class attacks, as a means of spreading the risks of existence, or as a way of holding one's own against poverty. Women, as sisters, mothers, and wives, have been the central actors in these struggles. This history has yet to be written. Urban anthropologists and sociologists have begun to look at its very recent history under industrial capitalism, in studies of kinship networks within the working class (Stack 1974; Young and Wilmott 1962; Joseph n.d.; Brown 1975; Bott 1957; Sacks 1978). But prole-

tarian kin networks lack their own means of production and hence are very different from kin corporations of the prestate and precapitalist world.

Many class societies, including preindustrial capitalism, did not fully sever the underclasses from control over the means of production. In the history of capitalism, that process was greatly accelerated with the rise of industry (Braverman 1974). In the histories of other class societies, it began under other conditions; and in the histories of still others, ruling classes never gained more than a weak and precarious control over the means of production.

I would like the book to show something of this complex history. It is what I think human history would look like if we put women at its center. It is very different from the prevailing views of human social history, of women, of family and kinship. Different chapters speak to different parts of this history, but they do so unevenly because the data are uneven: historians and ethnographers alike ask about some things and take others for granted. In a sense, the thesis reaches beyond the data to guess at a dynamic way of conceptualizing women's relations to the means of production, and the consequences of these under different modes of production for women as actors, shaping their own lives and their society's transformations. This is an evocative book; it is meant to open a discourse, not to provide the last word on it.

Chapter 3 elaborates a marxist perspective on women in precapitalist modes of production, suggesting that sister relations and the autonomy of adulthood it connotes were critical relations for women in preclass societies and that sisterhood sprang from women's membership—by birth—in a community of owner-producers. Married women's relations as producers enhanced or detracted from the exercise of sisterhood depending on sociohistorical particulars. In this respect, the production of food and tools is central, as are the relationships centering on their production and ownership. Relations of reproduction—of a new generation of people—of motherhood (and fatherhood) I see as derived from and determined by women's and men's relations to the means of production. This is just the opposite of social darwinist priorities, which insist that all women's social relations are explained by the biological relationship of motherhood.

I set out two modes of production for nonclass societies: communal and kin corporate. These were derived from looking at women's social

relationships in precolonial African modes of production. Chapters 4–6 analyze three nonclass African societies. The Mbuti, gatherer-hunters of Zaïre with a communal mode of production and a more or less single community of owner-producers, made no political and economic distinction between sisters and wives. Instead they combined them in a set of age relationships, the most central of which was that of parent-producer-adult. The Lovedu and Mpondo of South Africa both had kin corporate modes of production with patrilineal corporations; wives lived on and labored for the husband's estate. Sister and wife were contrasting productive relationships in both societies. But in Lovedu, the former predominated and shaped wifehood, whereas the reverse was the case in Mpondo. The reason for the contrast rests with differing productive forces and male productive relationships. In Mpondo men of many patrilineal corporations constituted a productive team for the acquisition of livestock. Their relation to these means of production was one of clientship to a chief. Among Mpondo, but not among Lovedu, clientship coexisted with kin corporations as a productive relationship for men but not for women. And clientship was the framework for much of Mpondo political economy.

In Chapter 7, I turn to class societies and the rise of states. I see states as political organizations of class rule, but I do not see clear types of modes of production in African class societies. Instead the critical dimension underlying the persistence or destruction of sisterly places seems to be the extent to which ruling classes expropriated kin corporations. Women's resources for retaining or creating these places in the face of such attacks seem to reside in their work organization. Chapters 8 and 9 discuss women in African states and proto-states. Chapter 8 describes the development of the kingdom of Buganda, sketching the historical process by which a ruling class undercut corporate kin groups and transformed clanship into the framework by which a hereditary class of owners came to rule the kingdom. In the latter nineteenth century, Buganda was the most powerful and cohesive of the states in East Africa. Its ruling class had perhaps proceeded furthest in its destruction of corporate kin control of the means of production. Commensurate with this was the almost total obliteration of sister relations and the elevation of wifehood. As with women in industrial capitalism, Baganda women were defined by the state as wives and wards. Chapter 9 contrasts the city of Onitsha, where women were more sisters than wives, with the kingdom of

Dahomey, where sisterhood was much weaker though not obliterated as in Buganda. In Onitsha corporate lineages controlled the land securely. Sisters' place was reinforced by the collective organization of West African women's principal work, internal marketing. Dahomean women shared in this pattern, but in that kingdom, lineages were much reduced as landholding corporations. It appears that women's marketing organization was important for sustaining something of sisterly relations among the peasantry.

Finally, in a brief conclusion I summarize the shifts in perceptions and conceptions generated by studying women's places in precapitalist African social organizations: to center on productive relations instead of gender as a key analytic concept; to see family, kinship and affinal relations as productive relations; to presume women may have several and contradictory productive relations rather than a single essential relation to the means of production; to see the history of class societies as a struggle between ruling classes and corporate family organizations for control over productive means; and to look for the ways in which kin groups, as well as task groups, have been organizations for class struggle.

Most of the book shows women in other places and times exercising many of the rights, roles and relationships that contemporary feminists have been demanding. They are important to understand not because they inspire but because they teach us about the kinds of changes that are necessary in our struggle for equality. The book tries to contribute to a marxist way of seeing those paths.

CLASS ROOTS OF THEORY

Feminism, socialism, working-class consciousness, imperialism, and anthropology grew up together over the course of the nineteenth century. Their roots are all intertwined, so that to understand anthropological ideas about women requires references to the complex social changes entailed by the development of industrial capitalism in the United States and Western Europe. Older domestic forms of production were being replaced by new wage labor relations for a large part of the population, including women. Thus proletarianization was one side of the process. The rise of a bourgeoisie, owners of the new, industrial means of production, was the other side. Accompanying the economic transformation was a transformation in political theory: the