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A Response to 'Re-defining Radical Feminism'

Red Sonja (NEFAC-Boston)

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Traci Harris' article 'Re-defining Radical Feminism' was published in NEA#4 (www.illegalvoices.org), opening the discussion about revolutionary feminism. My reply is an attempt to continue that discussion. Harris' article solidly outlines three important facets of this discussion, which I will address here: that it is our job to (1) Redefine Patriarchy and Radical Feminism for revolutionaries; (2) Show how forms of domination are connected; and (3) Redefine Radical Feminism in practice. My main criticisms are that Harris' agenda boils down to a multicultural liberalism and lacks a class-rooted analysis. Harris wants to re-define revolutionary feminism to a strategy (already problematic) — that of attacking white supremacy, all the while arguing for an analysis which recognizes the interconnectedness of oppressions. Attacking white supremacy is certainly a critical issue for revolutionaries, but what does this say about women's oppression explicitly?

Revolutionary feminism's strength has only come when it has an independent analysis, autonomous demands, and a searing critique

of every social, economic, and cultural arrangement that exploits women. If anarchists are to have a strong critique of hierarchy and domination, culminating in the “triple oppressions” so often referred to, then a strategy of focusing on issues where these issues intersect is a more relevant point of revolutionary potential.

In ‘Re-defining Radical Feminism’ patriarchy is defined by Carol Pateman as “a political system of power based on a “social contract.” Pateman also equates the origin of women’s subordination with the creation of this “social contract” and the consolidation of government of men. This is arguably not the case but the origin of patriarchy is not the issue in this discussion. Certainly the bourgeois revolutions outline this development with the creation of a civil society of men — in both the French and American revolutions women’s exclusion is well known. Also, the development of a public sphere / private sphere division is well known as the entry point of women into a subordinate position, yet whether this was created during the negotiation of the social contract Pateman assesses is doubtful. But let’s not rely on the ‘Rousseauian’ concept of the social contract to describe a world-wide phenomenon of the exploitation of the female sex. We cannot work under the assumption that there is some universal and monolithic Patriarchy that affects social, economic and cultural relations globally. Women are not a homogenous group and our Western understanding of women’s oppression cannot begin to describe other people’s lives in the world. There are however grand paint strokes we can make that in general women occupy the lowest social rung in the various societies in the world, and feminists have grappled with this contradiction for a number of decades now.

Since its coinage by “second wave” feminists, the feminist movement has been persistently plagued with the inadequacy of the term Patriarchy. It has become even more unwieldy for those revolutionaries intent on smashing it. A recent two-day conference on the subject held by revolutionary anarchists had so much difficulty hammering out this concept that it became impossible to reach any

revolution, no matter what gains women may have made in the space created by the waging of the struggle, the force of the necessity to reorganize the economy expediently will again push women to the exploited “subsidiary” sectors or are “sent back to the family.” Unless concrete change in the material production relations occurs, even raised consciousness of sex relations will not stand to the weight of economic realities. “Production” that unsavory term, needs to be understood to include that work that takes place in the private realm to include women in the family and what Rowbotham calls the “production of self through sexuality.” Only when that social division between public and private and the sexual division of labor has been contested, alongside the cultural and social consciousness necessary for revolutionary change, will gains for women stick.

In terms of concrete action, an alternate strategy might be to focus on an issue in which the “triple oppressions” intersect in order to make these connections apparent. Anti-poverty issues are clearly arenas in which sex oppression and racism are pivotal, whether it is in housing, homelessness, in the workplace, or around welfare. Recent marriage incentive laws for women on welfare, restrictive codes on single women’s behavior in housing projects all expose Patriarchy in the grossest, most racist ways. As is understanding why the fastest growing prisoner population is young girls — usually Black, Latina, poor. This is a strategy which is revolutionary, and feminist, for the 21st century.

Yes it should be part and parcel of the feminist agenda . But to re-define the whole thrust of revolutionary feminism towards attacking white supremacy doesn't say very much about how women's oppression functions in society or more importantly, how to overcome it. The revolution is not going to be split open by only focusing on one oppression, just as 'true' radical feminism would have you believe. There are many points of departure and one thing that revolutionary feminists have at least learned is that the issue of women's exploitation is the first to get left behind.

In our attempt to re-visit revolutionary feminism and lessons that can be learned for anarchists the most glaring necessity is to retain a class analysis. Harris states: "Feminism can no longer be seen as a lifestyle choice but it must be seen as a political commitment. Focusing on this political commitment and resistance to domination will engage us in revolutionary praxis and avoid the typical pitfall of resorting to narrow, stereotyped perspectives of feminism." 'Re-defining Radical Feminism' hopes to get feminism out of its lifestyle (i.e. cultural) rut, but the lesson for Western feminism stuck in the cultural context, which is expressed by emphasis on education, language, psychology (which liberal anti-racism is also suffering from) is the lack of understanding of economic production relations which will always trump any cultural advances. We will not get feminism out of its perceived cultural rut by broadening its goals to the extent that it has no coherent analysis of women's particular oppression. The strength of the feminist movement, at least the revolutionary end of it, has been its autonomy. The lesson is there to learn from: men, even our supposed comrades, will not hand us our dignity and freedom whenever we politely ask for it. A women's movement which subsumes its demands for the greater good will be betrayed by the promise of a united front in class, anti-colonial, or national struggles. The plainest examples are the anti-colonial and revolutionary struggles such as those in Algeria, Cuba, Vietnam, China and the Soviet Union. In the case of a successful anti-colonial struggle or

sort of conclusion about what to do about this "patriarchy." The attempt to hone Patriarchy as a useful word to describe what exactly is oppressing women has stretched from narrowly defining it as a "reign of brothers" (like Pateman) to expanding it to a "Capitalist-Patriarchy" (Mies), to Bell Hooks' "white supremacist, capitalist, and patriarchal social hierarchy," to Sheila Rowbotham's wholesale rejection of the term as misleading. I agree with Maria Mies that though inadequate and often inaccurate (for it literally means "rule of the fathers"), "patriarchy" denotes a continuity which has a historical framework and so thankfully it is not a universal constant; and having been embraced by feminists as a tool for describing women's position it is useful enough to continue to tinker with it.

Importantly 'Re-defining Radical Feminism' is a positive step in framing Patriarchy in a way that makes sense to us, but I'd like to direct the argument specifically towards revolutionary anarchists. Without getting lost in labels, it is still important to clarify also the many distinctions within feminism which most anarchists do not understand. We can't talk about redefining "radical feminism" without understanding its own particular history, one which is distinct from anarchist or socialist feminisms (though some lines are blurry).

Most feminist works have outlined the differing perspectives on the position of women in society: Conservative (i.e. sexual division of labor is natural and women's subordinate role is summed up by "biology is destiny"); Liberal (seeks equal status under current system or within the "social contract"); Traditional Marxist; Radical; Multicultural; Global; and Socialist. Traditional Marxism ignores the exploitation of women in the private sphere, ultimately denying the existence of Patriarchy. Radical Feminism developed in part as a response to the lack of a feminist analysis in traditional Marxism and Socialism, and in contrast to Liberal feminism's reformism. Radical feminists developed the analysis of Patriarchy as the primary oppression in the world, and for the first time advanced a critique of gender and sexuality as social forms which are

culturally constructed. They do not believe that women's oppression will end with the abolition of class society as the traditional Marxists argued. Rather, there is almost no class analysis — that all women, despite race, class, ethnicity, etc., share the same oppression. Also problematic for anarchists is the lack of a critique of the State. In fact there were some radical feminists proposing a women-only government as the cure-all for society. Their ideology also tends to rely on biological-determinism notions — that women are by nature superior to men. It is obvious that we would want to re-define “true” radical feminism if we must use this term at all! “Revolutionary Feminism” is a more appropriate term in this discussion

Socialist feminism tries to bring together the best of Radical feminism and a class analysis of women's exploitation, arguing that both class stratification (i.e. capitalism) and patriarchy must be eliminated in order for women to be truly free. Anarchist feminism, in its very small ranks, stands near this perspective, but furthers the socialist critique by pointing to the State (as a culmination of hierarchy and authoritarianism) as a third “tier” of oppression. It is our job to trace the exact nature of how Patriarchy, Capitalism, and the State interact to cause the various oppressions we want to overthrow. In a broad sense anarchist feminism is the critique of domination in all its forms, similar to the analysis offered by “multicultural feminism,” but with a clear anti-capitalist and anti-statist position. In this way ‘Re-defining Radical Feminism’ is emphasizing what is already that broad anarchist position: that revolutionary praxis “must be focused on the eradication of domination.”

Solid examples of how different forms of domination are connected are found in Harris' essay, quoting Bell Hooks, Angela Davis, and radical abolitionist Angelina Grimke, and giving historical examples in the US context. Anarchists often struggle to resolve our critiques of the “triple oppressions” — race, class, sex — with our overarching critique of domination “in all its forms” while explicitly pointing to Capitalism and the State. In fact the

discussion here should not be which direction for the “radical feminist movement” (which should be closer toward anarchist politics!) but how the anarchist movement has so far failed to update its own praxis to offer something relevant to overcome these problems.

‘Re-defining Radical Feminism’ seems to be coming from this direction yet unearths a “hierarchy of oppressions” by pulling white supremacy out as the “strategic” point of departure. There is a triple oppression and we cannot view patriarchy and white supremacy as mere contradictions, or secondary afterthought to the class analysis. They do function as “divisive mechanisms of capital” yet are independent of that. Nor are white supremacy, colonialism, and racism footnotes to women's oppression. We have to consistently challenge this creeping idea among white leftists or run the played out mistake of a doomed revolutionary analysis. But to discard the class lens with which we view these oppressions is to imitate multicultural liberalism which does no one any favors. “A class rooted analysis is where I begin in all my work” says bell hooks.

Valuable in ‘Re-defining Radical Feminism’ is its North American focus, which is not often a popular perspective but revolutionaries here in North America cannot import European or Third World examples to the unique social conditions of the US. Harris' analysis of race and the struggle against white supremacy as the lynch-pin to revolution flows from this position, and rightly that is one crucial point of departure. Some white anarchists, and other leftists have their heads in the sand hoping the Black/White problem will solve itself without any real effort. Any revolutionary struggle in the US requires true solidarity, principled alliances, solid long term work on the part of white revolutionaries and white anarchists to cross this divide, some of which is just beginning to be built. The same can be said for white revolutionary feminists and this is Harris' point, but she is also redefining revolutionary feminism to a narrow “strategy,” that of attacking white supremacy.