SEX, RACE & CLASS

SELMA JAMES

There has been enough confusion generated when sex, race, and class have confronted each other as separate and even conflicting entities. That they are separate entities is self-evident. That they have proven themselves to be not separate, inseparable, is harder to discern. Yet if sex and race are pulled away from class, virtually all that remains is the truncated, provincial, sectarian politics of the white male metropolitan Left. I hope to show in barest outline, first, that the working class movement is something other than that Left have ever envisioned it to be. Second, locked within the contradiction between the discrete entity of sex or race and the totality of class is the greatest deterrent to working class power and at the same time the creative energy to achieve that power.

In our pamphlet which Avis Brown so generously referred to,[1] we tackled ". . . the relation of women to capital and [the] kind of struggle we [can] effectively wage to destroy it" (p.5), and draw throughout on the experience of the struggle against capital by Black people. Beginning with the female (caste) experience, we redefined class to include women. That redefinition was based on the unwaged labour of the housewife. We put it this way:

> Since Marx, it has been clear that capital rules and develops through the wage, that is, that the foundation of capitalist society was the wage labourer and his or her direct exploitation. What has been neither clear nor assumed by the organizations of the working class movement is that precisely through the wage has the exploitation of the non-wage labourer been organized. This exploitation has been even more effective because the lack of a wage hid it . . . *Where women are concerned their labour appears to be a personal service outside of capital.* (p. 28)

But if the relation of caste to class where women are concerned presents itself in a hidden, mystified form, this mystification is not unique to women. Before we confront race, let us take an apparent diversion.

The least powerful in the society are our children, also unwaged in a wage labour society. They were once (and in tribal society for example still are) accepted as an integral part of the productive activity of the community. The work they did was part of the total social labour and was acknowledged as such. Where capital

1 "The Colony of the Colonized: notes on race, class and sex," Avis Brown, *Race Today*, June 1973. The writer refers to *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* by Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James (Falling Wall Press, Bristol 1972), as "brilliant." The third edition was published as a book in 1975. Unless otherwise stated, all quotations are from *Power of Women*, 1975. (We were later to learn that Avis Brown was a pseudonym for A. Sivanandan, a man who is now head of the Institute of Race Relations, London.) *Sex, Race and Class*, the replay to "Avis Brown," was first published in *Race Today*, January 1974.

is extending or has extended its rule, children are taken away from others in the community and forced to go to schools, against which the number of rebels is growing daily. Is their powerlessness a class question? Is their struggle against school the class struggle? We believe it is. Schools are institutions organized by capital to achieve its purpose through and against the child.

> Capital . . . sent them to school not only because they are in the way of others' more "productive" labour or only to indoctrinate them. The rule of capital through the wage compels every ablebodied person to function, under the law of division of labour, and to function in ways that are if not immediately, then ultimately profitable to the expansion and extension of the rule of capital. That, fundamentally, is the meaning of school. Where children are concerned, their labour appears to be learning for their own benefit. (p. 28)

So here are two sections of the working class whose activities, one in the home, the other in the school, appear to be outside of the capitalist wage labour relation because the workers themselves are wageless. In reality, their activities are facets of capitalist production and its division of labour.

One, housewives, are involved in the production and (what is the same thing) reproduction of workers, what Marx calls labour power. They service those who are daily destroyed by working for wages and who need to be daily renewed; and they care for and discipline those who are being prepared to work when they grow up.

The other, children, are those who from birth are the objects of this care and discipline, who are trained in homes, in schools and in front of the telly to be future workers. But this has two aspects.

In the first place, for labour power to be reproduced in the form of children, these children must be coerced into accepting discipline and especially the discipline of working, of being exploited in order to be able to eat. In addition, however, they must be disciplined and trained to perform a certain kind of work. The labour that capital wants done is divided and each category parceled out internationally as the life work, the destiny, the identity of specific sets of workers. The phrase often used to describe this is the international division of labour. We will say more of this later, but for now let the West Indian mother of a seven-year-old sum up her son's education with precision: "They're choosing the street sweepers now."

Those of us in the feminist movement who have torn the final veil away from this international capitalist division of labour to expose women's and children's class position, which was hidden by the particularity of their caste position, learnt a good deal of this from the Black movement. It is not that it is written down anywhere (though we discovered later it was, in what would seem to some a strange place). A mass movement teaches less by words than by the power it exercises which, clearing away the debris of appearances, tells it like it is.

Just as the women's movement being "for" women and the rebellion of children being "for" children, appears at first not to be about class,

> The Black movement in the U.S. (and elsewhere) also began by adopting what appeared to be only a caste position in opposition to the racism of white male-dominated groups. Intellectuals in Harlem and Malcolm X, that great revolutionary, were both nationalists, both appeared to place colour above class when the white Left were still chanting variations of "Black and white unite and fight," or "Negroes and Labour must join together." The Black working class were able through this nationalism to *redefine class*: overwhelmingly Black and Labour were synonymous (with no other group was Labour as synonymous-except perhaps with women), the demands of Blacks and the forms of struggle created by Blacks were the most comprehensive *working class* struggle . . . (p. 8)

It is not then that the Black movement "wandered off into the class struggle," as Avis says. It was the class struggle and this took a while to sink into our consciousness. Why?

One reason is because some of us wore the blinkers of the white male Left, whether we knew it or not. According to them, if the struggle's not in the factory, it's not the class struggle. The real bind was that this Left assured us they spoke in the name of Marxism. They threatened that if we broke from them, organizationally or politically, we were breaking with Marx and scientific socialism. What gave us the boldness to break, fearless of the consequences, was the power of the Black movement. We found that redefining class went hand-in-hand with rediscovering a Marx the Left would never understand.

There were deeper reasons too why caste and class seemed contradictory. It appears often that the interests of Blacks are contradicted by the interests of whites, and it is similar with men and women. To grasp the class interest when there seems not one but two, three, four, each contradicting the other, is one of the most difficult revolutionary tasks, in theory and practice, that confront us.

Another source of confusion is that not all women, children or Black men are working class. This is only to say that within the movements which these form are layers whose struggle tends to be aimed at moving up in the capitalist hierarchy rather than at destroying it. And so within each movement there is a struggle about which class interest the movement will serve. But this is the history also of white male workers' movements. There is no class "purity," not even in shop floor organizations. The struggle by workers *against* organizations they formed there and in the society generally - trade unions, Labour parties, etc. - is the class struggle.[2]

Let's put the relation of caste to class another way. The word "culture" is often used to show that class concepts are narrow, philistine, inhuman. Exactly the opposite is the case. A national culture which has evolved over decades or centuries may appear to deny that society's relation to international capitalism. It is a subject too wide to go into deeply here but one basic point can be quickly clarified.

The life-style unique to themselves which a people develop once they are enmeshed by capitalism, in response to and in rebellion against it, cannot be understood at all except as the totality of their capitalist lives. To delimit culture is to reduce it to a decoration of daily life.[3] Culture is plays and poetry about the exploited; ceasing to wear mini-skirts and taking to trousers instead; the clash between the soul of Black Baptism and the guilt and sin of white Protestantism. Culture is also the shrill of the alarm clock that rings at 6a.m. when a Black woman in London wakes her children to get them ready for the baby minder. Culture is how cold she feels at the bus stop and then how hot in the crowded bus. Culture is how you feel on Monday morning at eight when you clock in, wishing it was Friday, wishing your life away. Culture is the speed of the line or the weight and smell of dirty hospital sheets, and you meanwhile thinking what to make for tea that night. Culture is making the tea while your man watches the news on the telly.

And culture is an "irrational woman" walking out of the kitchen into the sitting room and without a word turning off the telly "for no reason at all."

---

2 For an analysis of the antagonistic relationship between workers and trade unions see S. James, Women, The Unions and Work, or what is not to be done, first published in 1972, republished with a new Postscript, Falling Wall Press, Bristol, 1976.

3 For the best demystification of culture I know which shows, for example, how West Indian cricket has carried in its heart racial and class conflicts, see C.L.R. James, *Beyond a Boundary,* Hutchinson, London 1963.

From where does this culture spring which is so different from a man's if you are a woman and different too from a white woman's if you are a Black woman? Is it auxiliary to the class struggle (as the white Left has it) or is it more fundamental to the class struggle (as Black nationalists and radical feminists have it) because it is special to your sex, your race, your age, your nationality and the moment in time when you are these things?

Our identity, our social roles, the way we are seen, appears to be disconnected from our capitalist functions. To be liberated from them (or through them) appears to be independent from our liberation from capitalist wage slavery. In my view, identity-caste-is the very substance of class.

Here is the "strange place" where we found the key to the relation of class to caste written down most succinctly. Here is where the international division of labour is posed as power relationships within the working class. It is Volume I of Marx's *Capital*.

> Manufacture . . . develops a hierarchy of labour powers, to which there corresponds a scale of wages. If, on the one hand, the individual labourers are appropriated and annexed for life by a limited function; on the other hand, the various operations of the hierarchy are parceled out among the labourers according to both their natural and their acquired capabilities. (Moscow 1958, p. 349)

In two sentences is laid out the deep material connection between racism, sexism, national chauvinism and the chauvinism of the generations who are working for wages against children and old age pensioners who are wageless, who are dependents.

A hierarchy of labour powers and scale of wages to correspond. Racism and sexism training us to develop and acquire certain capabilities at the expense of all others. Then these acquired capabilities are taken to be our nature and fix our functions for life, and fix also the quality of our mutual relations. So planting cane or tea is not a job for white people and changing nappies is not a job for men and beating children is not violence. Race, sex, age, nation, each an indispensable element of the international division of labour. *Our feminism bases itself on a hitherto invisible stratum of the hierarchy of labour powers - the housewife - to which there corresponds no wage at all.*

To proceed on the basis of a hierarchical structure among waged and unwaged slavery is not, as Avis accuses the working class of doing, "concentrating . . .

exclusively on the economic determinants of the class struggle." The work you do and the wages you receive are not merely "economic" but social determinants, determinants of social power. It is not the working class but organizations which claim to be of and for that class which reduce the continual struggle for social power by that class into "economic determinants"-greater capitalist control for a pittance more a week. Wage rises that unions negotiate often turn out to be standstills or even cuts, either through inflation or through more intense exploitation (often in the form of productivity deals) which more than pay the capitalist back for the rise. And so people assume that this was the intention of workers in demanding, for example, more wages, more money, more "universal social power," in the words of Marx.

The social power relations of the sexes, races, nations and generations are precisely, then, particularized forms of class relations. These power relations within the working class weaken us in the power struggle between the classes. They are the particularized forms of indirect rule, one section of the class colonizing another and through this capital imposing its own will on us all. One of the reasons why these so-called working class organizations have been able so to mediate the struggle is that we have, internationally, allowed them to isolate "the working class," which they identify as white, male and over 21, from the rest of us. The unskilled white male worker, an exploited human being who is increasingly disconnected from capital's perspective for him to work, to vote, to participate in its society, he also, racist and sexist though he is, recognizes himself as the victim of these organizations. But housewives, Blacks, young people, workers from the Third World, excluded from the definition of class, have been told that their confrontation with the white male power structure in the metropolis is an "exotic historical accident." Divided by the capitalist organization of society into factory, office, school, plantation, home and street, we are divided too by the very institutions which claim to represent our struggle collectively as a class.

In the metropolis, the Black movement was the first section of the class massively to take its autonomy from these organizations, and to break away from the containment of the struggle only in the factory. When Black workers burn the centre of a city, however, white Left eyes, especially if they are trade union eyes, see race, not class.

The women's movement was the next major movement of the class in the metropolis to find for itself a power base outside the factory as well as in it. Like the Black movement before it, to be organizationally autonomous of capital and its institutions, women and their movement had also to be autonomous of that

part of the "hierarchy of labour powers" which capital used specifically against them. For Blacks it was whites. For women it was men. For Black women it is both.

Strange to think that even today, when confronted with the autonomy of the Black movement or the autonomy of the women's movement, there are those who talk about this "dividing the working class." Strange indeed when our experience has told us that in order for the working class to unite in spite of the divisions which are inherent in its very structure-factory versus plantation versus home versus schools-those at the lowest levels of the hierarchy must themselves find the key to their weakness, must themselves find the strategy which will attack that point and shatter it, must themselves find their own modes of struggle.

The Black movement has not in our view "integrated into capitalism's plural society" (though many of its "leaders" have), it has not "been subsumed to white working class strategy." (Here I think Avis is confusing white working class *struggle* with trade union/Labour party *strategy*. They are mortal enemies, yet they are often taken as identical.) The Black movement has, on the contrary, in the United States challenged and continues to challenge the most powerful capitalist State in the world. The most powerful at home and abroad. When it burnt down the centres of that metropolis and challenged all constituted authority, it made a way for the rest of the working class everywhere to move in its own specific interests. We women moved. This is neither an accident nor the first time events have moved in this sequence.

It is not an accident because when constituted power was confronted, a new possibility opened for all women. For example, the daughters of men to whom was delegated some of this power saw through the noble mask of education, medicine and the law for which their mothers had sacrificed their lives. Oh yes, marriage to a man with a good salary would be rewarded by a fine house to be imprisoned in, and even a Black servant; they would have privilege for as long as they were attached to that salary which was not their own. But power would remain in the hands of the white male power structure. They had to renounce the privilege even to strike out for power. Many did. On the tide of working class power which the Black movement had expressed in the streets, and all women expressed in the day-to-day rebellion in the home, the women's movement came into being.

It is not the first time either that a women's movement received its impetus from the exercise of power by Black people. The Black slave who formed the Abolitionist Movement and organized the Underground Railroad for the escape

to the North also gave white women-and again the more privileged of them-a chance, an occasion to transcend the limitations in which the female personality was imprisoned. Women, trained always to do for others, left their homes not to free themselves-that would have been outrageous-but to free "the slave." They were encouraged by Black women, ex-slaves like Sojourner Truth, who suffered because, being women, they had been the breeders of labour power on the plantation. But once those white women had taken their first decisive step out of the feminine mould, they confronted more sharply their own situation. They had to defend their right, as women, to speak in public against slavery. They were refused, for example, seating at the Abolitionist conference of 1840 in London because they were women. By 1848 at Seneca Falls, New York, they called their own conference, for women's rights. There was a male speaker. He was a leading Abolitionist. He had been a slave. His name was Frederick Douglass.

And when young white women headed South on the Freedom Ride buses in the early 60s of this century and discovered that their male (white and Black) comrades had a special place for them in the hierarchy of struggle, as capital had in the hierarchy of labour power, history repeated itself-almost. This time it was not for the vote but for a very different goal that they formed a movement. It was a movement for liberation.

The parallels that are drawn between the Black and women's movements can always turn into an 11-plus: who is more exploited? Our purpose here is not parallels. We are seeking to describe that complex interweaving of forces which is the working class; we are seeking to break down the power relations among us on which is based the hierarchical rule of international capital. For no man can represent us as women any more than whites can speak about and themselves end the Black experience. Nor do we seek to convince men of our feminism. Ultimately they will be "convinced" by our power. We offer them what we offer the most privileged women: power over their enemies. The price is an end to their privilege over us.

The strategy of feminist class struggle is, as we have said, based on the wageless woman in the home. Whether she also works for wages outside the home, her labour of producing and reproducing the working class weighs her down, weakens her capacity to struggle-she doesn't even have time. Her position in the wage structure is low especially but not only if she is Black. And even if she is relatively well placed in the hierarchy of labour powers (rare enough!), she remains defined as a sexual object of men. Why? Because as long as most women are housewives part of whose function in reproducing labour power is to be the

sexual object of men, no woman can escape that identity. We demand wages for the work we do in the home. And that demand for a wage from the State is, first, a demand to be autonomous of men on whom we are now dependent. Secondly, we demand money without working out of the home, and open for the first time the possibility of refusing forced labour in the factories and in the home itself.

It is here in this strategy that the lines between the revolutionary Black and the revolutionary feminist movements begin to blur. This perspective is founded on the least powerful-the wageless. Reinforcing capital's international division of labour is a standing army of unemployed who can be shunted from industry to industry, from country to country. The Third World is the most massive repository of this industrial reserve army. (The second most massive is the kitchen in the metropolis.) Port of Spain, Calcutta, Algiers, the Mexican towns south of the US border are the labour power for shitwork in Paris, London, Frankfurt and the farms of California and Florida. What is their role in the revolution? How can the wageless struggle without the lever of the wage and the factory? We do not pose the answers-we can't. But we pose the questions in a way which assumes that the unemployed have not to go to work in order to subvert capitalist society.

Housewives *working* without a pay packet in the home may also have a job outside of their homes. The subordination of the wage of the man in the home and the subordinating nature of that labour weaken the woman wherever else she is working, and regardless of race. Here is the basis for Black and white women to act together, "supported" or "unsupported," not because the antagonism of race is overcome, but because we both need the autonomy that the wage and *the struggle for the wage* can bring. Black women will know in what organizations (with Black men, with white women, with neither) to make that struggle. *No one else can know.*

We don't agree with Avis that "the Black American struggle failed to fulfill its potential as a revolutionary vanguard . . .", if by "vanguard" is meant the basic propellant of class struggle in a particular historical situation. It has used the "specificity of its experience"-as a nation and as a class both at once-to redefine class and the class struggle itself. Perhaps the theoreticians have not, but then they must never be confused with the movement. Only as a vanguard could that struggle have begun to clarify the central problem of our age, the organizational unity of the working class internationally as we now perceive and define it.

It is widely presumed that the Vanguard Party on the Leninist model embodies that organizational unity. Since the Leninist model assumes a vanguard expressing the total class interest, it bears no relation to the reality we have been describing, where no one section of the class can express the experience and interest of, and pursue the struggle for, any other section. The formal organizational expression of a general class strategy does not yet anywhere exist.

Let me quote finally from a letter written against one of the organizations of the Italian extra-parliamentary Left who, when we had a feminist symposium in Rome last year and excluded men, called us fascists and attacked us physically.

> . . . The traditional attack on the immigrant worker, especially but not exclusively if he or she is Black (or Southern Italian), is that her presence threatens the gains of the native working class. Exactly the same is said about women in relation to men. The anti-racist (i.e., anti-nationalist and anti-sexist) point of view-the point of view, that is, of struggle-is to discover the organizational weakness which permits the most powerful sections of the class to be divided from the less powerful, thereby allowing capital to play on this division, defeating us. The question is, in fact, one of the basic questions which the class faces today. Where Lenin divided the class between the advanced and the backward, a subjective division, we see the division along the lines of capitalist organization, the more powerful and the less powerful. It is the experience of the less powerful that when workers in a stronger position (that is, men with a wage in relation to women without one, or whites with a higher wage than Blacks) gain a "victory," it may not be a victory for the weaker and even may represent a defeat for both. For in the disparity of power within the class is precisely the strength of capital.[4]

How the working class will ultimately unite organizationally, we don't know. We do know that up to now many of us have been told to forget our own needs in some wider interest which was never wide enough to include us. And so we have learnt by bitter experience that *nothing unified and revolutionary will be formed until each section of the exploited will have made its own autonomous power felt*.

Power to the sisters and therefore to the class!

4 From a letter by Lotta Feminista and the International Feminist Collective, reprinted in *L'Offensiva, Musolini, Turin*, 1972 (pp. 18-19). I wrote the paragraph quoted here.

NOTHING UNIFIED & REVOLUTIONARY WILL BE FORMED UNTIL EACH SECTION OF THE EXPLOITED WILL HAVE MADE ITS OWN AUTONOMOUS POWER FELT.

Brooklyn's Selma James is the founder of the International Wages for Housework Campaign and coordinator of the Global Women's Strike. This text, first published in 1973, quickly became a classic of anti-racist women's movement. It addresses the economic basis of the power relations within the working class internationally.

PÉTROLEUSE PRESS
petroleusepress.tumblr.com