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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Feminist Review*, No. 4 (1980), pp. 79-105

Published by: [Palgrave Macmillan Journals](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1394771>

Accessed: 26/11/2011 21:34

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A Materialist Feminism is possible

Christine Delphy

translated by Diana Leonard

The first issue of *Feminist Review* (January 1979) contained a review of my work ('Christine Delphy: Towards a Materialist Feminism?') by two English sociologists, Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh. I delayed writing a reply to it because I felt it was a full-scale attack not only on my ideas, but also (see the title of the article) on me as an individual. I was finally prompted to produce the first draft of my answer by various friends who were organizing a Radical Feminist Day School at the White Lion Free School in London in April. This paper, called 'From Superstructure to Superstructure; or How to Run Round in Circles While Staying in the Same Place', I have now developed after discussion into this present article.

I have sought to suggest the various ways in which Barrett and McIntosh misrepresent what I have written and to suggest what I think *should* be the concerns of feminist criticism. More importantly, I have tried to make clear how they fundamentally misconceive Marxism, and in the process to expose the widespread theoretical schizophrenia of the left on the subject of women's oppression. The contradictory analyses they produce are due to a desperate desire *to continue to exempt men from responsibility* for the oppression of women.

Let me deal first with some of the many distortions of my work in Barrett and McIntosh's paper. I believe the duty to be honest in criticism is particularly imperative when you are using, as they are, not only articles which have been translated and are thus available to an English speaking public, but also untranslated texts. In the latter case there is a greater obligation to be scrupulous in the account one gives, and it is surprising that Barrett and McIntosh do not seem to have realized this. If, as I shall argue, many of their distortions are attributable to the fact that their theoretical-political position prevents them understanding my work, others are inexplicable and, unfortunately, seem to indicate a certain degree of ill-will.

For instance, they make only one reference to an untranslated paper called 'Nos amis et nous: les fondements caches de quelques discours pseudo-feministes' (Delphy, 1977). The section they refer to concerns the question of how hatred of women can parade as love for the workers. It deals with the real motives, as opposed to the reasons usually put forward, for making so-called 'bourgeois' women seem a threat to the women's movement. (These motives are shared by

men and women, but they have different causes and effects since hatred of women is self-hatred in the case of women.) One particular sentence mentions the wives of prominent men and reads as follows:

An obvious example of the mythical character of the 'bourgeois threat' is given by the fact that the *only concrete* reference consists in a horrified evocation of Mme Pompidou . . . who doesn't constitute a category in her own right and who has anyway never shown the slightest interest in joining the movement, let alone in subverting its revolutionary goals . . . It is therefore clear . . . that she, like Jackie Kennedy in the USA at the same time . . . were used as *symbols* (Delphy 1977:36-37).

Of this they say: '(Delphy) roundly defends her solidarity with the wives of prominent men.' Frankly, I do not see *how* these sentences can be interpreted in this way. And, more to the point, I would have thought that, if they mention the article at all, they should at least have mentioned its main theme, a theme which is not only *not* that of 'defending my solidarity with the wives of prominent men', but which actually goes a long way beyond the isolated discussion of the use of 'bourgeois women' as symbols and is in fact very relevant to the debate with me which they are undertaking.

I am also astonished that they reproach me for not having mentioned in 'The Main Enemy', which appeared in 1970, an article by Jean Gardiner which appeared four years later (a fact they recognise while still continuing the reproach). It would have been more normal to have asked Gardiner and the other participants in the debate on domestic labour why *they* did not mention 'The Main Enemy', which had appeared in English by the time when they were writing (1974).¹

In saying that:

although prepared to debate strategy with the socialist feminist Danièle Léger, she is not prepared to discuss in detail the intellectual foundations of her political position with those Marxist feminists who have offered alternative analyses,

they insinuate that I refuse to discuss my position and, further, that I fear a debate for which I am not theoretically well-enough equipped. Moreover, they introduce here a distinction between 'Marxist feminist' and socialist feminist'—although later on they use the two terms as equivalents—and suggest a hierarchy between the two. They seem to say that some speakers are more valuable than others: some can talk about the 'intellectual foundations' while others are restricted to 'strategy'.

On the one hand, I do not recognize this type of dichotomy as a matter of principle. It is profoundly repugnant to me. On the other hand, these reproaches are factually false. I have debated several times, and publicly, with Jean Gardiner between 1974 and 1979. I invited her to an Anglo-French seminar on the domestic mode of production co-organized by Diana Leonard and myself in 1975; and as recently as March 1979 she spoke at a seminar which I gave at Bradford.² As to the 'alternative Marxist analyses' whose existence Barrett and McIntosh affirm without one actual citation, doubtless, like me, they do not know where to find them; unless of course they mean the debate on domestic

labour? If so, a critique of that was already contained in 'The Main Enemy' and I also discussed it again in my debate with Danielle Léger (Delphy 1976c).

More serious is the suggestion that I keep low company: that I do not talk with my equals. To insinuate this, Barrett and McIntosh demote Léger, temporarily and to suit the case, to the level of simple 'socialist feminist' (in opposition to full 'Marxist feminist') and our discussion is qualified as 'strategic' as opposed to 'intellectual'. This qualification is inaccurate since the debate with Léger is concerned with the overall conceptions which inform our respective political choices, and is not principally about strategy. What our debate makes clear is precisely that a strategic position always derives from an analysis, whether this is explicit or implicit; and that however conversely an analysis is always tied to a 'strategic' position.

Still more disquieting than this incorrect distinction between analysis and strategy, however, is the corresponding hierarchy which Barrett and McIntosh try to establish between people: between the activists (the practitioners) and the theoreticians. The latter apparently need only talk among themselves. Above all, it seems that the latter cannot be the same people as the former; and the former cannot be the latter.

This division between theory and practice, so contrary to the principles of the women's movement, is also, and chiefly, the means to the establishment of a hierarchy between militants: one group making theory, in a vacuum, the others listening and putting it into practice. This division feeds—alas—the anti-intellectualism of many feminist activists, who refuse all theory without realizing that, for better or worse, their practice always incorporates a theory, whether explicit or not. Their mistrust is understandable when those who theorize assure the others that theory has nothing to do with practice.

The greater responsibility here must lie with the intellectuals, for their practice of making theory into the private hunting ground of the élite explains and justifies the anti-intellectualism of the others. The non-intellectuals, since they want to make the revolution, are right to defend themselves from a 'theory' which is presented to them as a means of domination. But they are wrong to abdicate when faced with the pretensions of this self-designated élite. Those who day after day create campaigns and slogans do not call these 'theory'—and would be confirmed in this by Barrett and McIntosh who want to keep 'theory' as their specific and superior practice. Nonetheless, there is more theory in one single spontaneous slogan from the movement (and we could take whichever one is to hand; let's say 'a woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle') than in many so-called theoretical articles. The way in which *Feminist Review* opposes 'theory' and 'instant politics' in its first editorial, and distrusts the latter, is not only false, for such a thing as 'instant politics' simply does not exist, but it is also élitist and reactionary in general and in particular, since it is in total opposition to the founding principles of the new feminism which says that any woman has as much to say about the situation of women as any other. This principle, one of the many aspects of the profound and profoundly revolutionary slogan 'the personal is political', whose theoretical implications we have not yet completely explored, is not demagoguery: it is the recognition and affirmation that revolt comes from oppression, from all oppression, and from nothing but oppression.

This is why we—for here I represent not just myself but the feminist group to which I belong and which publishes the journal *Questions féministes*—say that (*Questions féministes*, No 1, 1977):

theoretical too often denotes inaccessible articles, the endowment of a social elite. Theoretical is tantamount to incomprehensibility . . . We seek to break this equation. Our aim is to restore the true meaning to theory and, at the same time, to make it everyone's concern, to let everyone not only consume it but also produce it. For *whatever* their language, *all accounts* are theoretical which try to *explain the causes and the functioning*, the *why* and the *how*, of the oppression of women . . . all accounts which try to draw political conclusions and which propose a strategy or a tactic to the feminist movement .

We see ourselves as 'privileging a political definition of theory' because a definition which distinguishes the two, and above all a definition which opposes the two, is reactionary.

The distinction between the political and the theoretical is only one of the aspects of a broader position of Barrett and McIntosh: a position from whence they voice their critique, and which I personally feel is itself eminently to be criticized. In fact I think that there is a link between the various criticisms they have made of me scattered throughout their article:

—between the one I have just been talking about, when they say that only three of my articles are 'theoretical' ('The Main Enemy' (1970 and 1977), 'Continuities and Discontinuities in Marriage and Divorce' (1976a), and 'Les femmes dans les études de stratification sociale' (1974 and 1979)), while the rest are either 'empirical' ('Consumption and the Family' (1974 and 1979)) or 'polemical' (all the others);

—their contention that my polemics are directed against 'enemies found within the women's movement itself';

—and finally their untiring questioning of my right to use a Marxist vocabulary or conceptual framework:

She uses a modified form of Marxist vocabulary, consistently blurring its potential precision (for example she argues that women are a class, but also that they are a caste and a status group).

. . . 'The Main Enemy' hinges on the Marxist terms 'exploitation' and 'mode of production' she does not define these terms . . . uses them where convenient and substitutes sociological terminology where that is more convenient.

. . . adopts the vocabulary of a mechanistic and discredited position in Marxist thought. . .

. . . nor does she refer to Marx's own work on modes of production, on the transition to capitalism, or on the conditions under which separate modes of production may co-exist in a social formation.

Delphy has . . . written that . . . technical concepts cannot be abstracted from their 'reactionary context', yet she attempts precisely this in her use of Marxism.

she couches her analysis in terms of modes and relations of production, use values and exchange values and so on, and her political hostility to Marxism is such that she suggests that the position taken by socialist-

feminists in the women's movement reflects a theory which has been 'elaborated by left-wing men as a "revolutionary" rationalization of their interests as men'.

Delphy sees no need to address this debate. . . [about ideology]

Delphy extricates herself from a difficult conceptual corner by inserting a sociological term (status) into her argument, thereby evading the theoretical consequences of the Marxist vocabulary that she has borrowed.

I could obviously reply to these criticisms point by point on the level of facts and say, for example, that my article on family consumption which they call empirical is precisely not such (but readers can soon verify that for themselves); I could express my astonishment that they have not been able to see the theoretical progression in the articles which they warrant 'primarily polemical', and give vent to my indignation that they should dare to say that I can only repeat what I've already written without saying anything new; I could ask them where they get the idea that the notion of status, for example, is contradictory to that of class (they certainly did not get it from Marx who recognised that the slave class was defined *statutorily*); and I could wax ironic about their view of Marxism as private property – which one 'borrows' (from whom?) – or as risky – whose utilization has such disagreeable 'consequences' that one tries to 'escape' them.

But rather than sticking to the letter of their article or to what concerns me personally, I prefer to apply myself to the spirit which inspires these criticisms and which concerns the whole feminist movement.

Marxism Misunderstood: Abused and Used

Barrett and McIntosh's article rests on a common set of attitudes:

- a religious attitude to the writings of Marx,
- an assertion that Marxism constitutes a whole which one must take or leave,
- a confusion between the materialist method, used for the first time by Marx, and the analysis of capitalism which he made using it; or rather the reduction of the first to the second,
- a confusion, voluntarily perpetuated, between these two things and the interpretation which 'Marxist' sects make of contemporary society,
- and a presentation of this triple confusion as the whole (to be taken or left) of 'Marxism', which is in its turn not only presented as a science, but as THE SCIENCE, having all the characteristics of this pure essence: in particular, neutrality and universality.

The religious attitude builds Marx into an object of study in himself. 'Marxologists', as their name indicates, are interested in Marx *qua* Marx. They lose sight of why Marx is important; or rather they invert the order of priorities. They judge Marx not in terms of politics, but rather they judge politics in terms of Marx. This talmudic attitude may at first sight seem contradictory to the liberal interpretations taken by the different Marxist sects (in itself no bad thing) and the fact that their analyses, all supposedly 'Marxist', diverge radically among themselves. But in reality the reverence for the letter of Marx, the constitution

of this into the ultimate, quasi-divine reference, the dogma of infallibility, serves to construct the *authority* with which later 'Marxists', whoever they may be, adorn themselves. Recourse to *argument from authority*, which is notable in Barrett and McIntosh (I am right because I'm a Marxist) is by no means peculiar to them, but that doesn't make it any more excusable.

Marxism is erected as the value of values and is seen as not only above the struggles, but outside them. The ultimate perversion, and one moreover which is widespread, is that these people then come to judge real oppression, and even the very existence of oppression, according to whether or not it corresponds to 'Marxism', and not Marxism according to whether or not it is pertinent or not to real oppressions. This perversion is not, of course, a simple diversion of the intellect, devoid of political meaning. For to stress in a revolt, like a women's revolution, only that which is consistent with their interpretation of Marxism, allows them eventually to decide that a revolt is invalid or unimportant ('what matters is to be a Marxist not to make a revolution').

In so far as these two linked attitudes incarnate 'Marxism' today, it is more than understandable that most of the oppressed, including most feminists, refuse to call themselves 'Marxists'. Like them, and unlike Barrett and McIntosh, I stress those things in Marxism which are consistent with women's revolt. I won't shed one tear for Marxism if it has to be abandoned because it is seen to be useless in analysing oppression. This is an essential difference, because it seems to me that the very meaning of Marxism rests in its political utility. People who do not have a specific political interest—who are not part of an oppressed group—have diverted this meaning by making Marxism into an object in itself. Or rather, in so doing they have revealed that they are not politically engaged. But what does this mean? Is it even possible? Nothing is outside the field of politics: one is simply on one side or the other. If they are not on the side of the oppressed, they are on the other side; and their intellectual approach shows it.

Indeed, subordinating political validity to theoretical 'truth' is a typically reactionary procedure (and, additionally, one contrary to the spirit of Marxism). Theoretical truth—whatever theoretical truth it may be—simply does not exist. For where does a theory draw its truth from? In what can it be more or less true than another theory, if not in that it serves a class; that it is true or false from a *political* point of view, from a given position in the class struggle (in the wide sense)? To what 'absolute truth' can one refer to decree a theory 'correct' without making reference to the class struggle? I do not know; or rather, I know all too well. This absolute truth is what bourgeois science pretends to possess; and it is this pretention that materialism precisely deflated, which Marx precisely denounced in saying that all intellectual production is the product of a real situation and practice. Science, capital S, does not exist, and what does must be called 'bourgeois science'.

It is therefore strange to see some 'Marxists' (like Louis Althusser) rehabilitating the notion of Science and laying claim to an absolute truth, but this time for Marxism. This status is simply not compatible with the very theory—Marxism—for which it is claimed, at least in so far as Marxism does not break with the approach which engendered it—materialism. But it is more than contradictory, it is disquieting, because the pretention to universality, to the absolute, is precisely the mark of intellectual products coming from dominant positions. Only

dominants claim to be above the mêlée, and they must claim so to be since all their knowledge, their Science, tries to claim that this mêlée does not exist; or—in a secondary fashion—to deny the class struggle. From this it would seem that any claim to universality, in knowledge of no matter what, hides a dominant perspective (of the dominant group in whatever inter-group antagonism has to be established, and varies from case to case).

But Barrett and McIntosh present as a criticism the fact that:

it is clear throughout her work that Delphy's theoretical position is closely related to her political stance, and indeed she has argued that 'each is indispensable to the other'.

They imply not only that *their* theoretical position is *not* related to their political position, but further that this would be a good thing: that theory can be independent of the social and/or political position that one occupies, and even that it *should* be. In the article which they cite, 'Pour un féminisme matérialiste' (1976b), I say that theory should not be independent of politics, but that anyway it cannot be, even should it want to be. In so doing I am only reaffirming what has been said elsewhere by many other authors, starting with Marx, and which is the basis of the materialist approach:

All knowledge is the product of a historical situation, whether it knows it or not (Delphy, 1976b).

The idea of a neutral science—of a theory which is not related to a social/political position—is not in itself a neutral idea; it does not come from an *absence* of socio-political position, since such an absence is inconceivable. The idea that knowledge does not have a foundation in the social position of its producers is, on the contrary, the product of a very precise social position: the position of dominance. But

Whether it (knowledge) knows it (that it is historically rooted) or not makes a great difference: for if it does not know it, if it pretends to be neutral, it negates the very history it purports to explain. It is ideology and not knowledge (Delphy, 1976b).

So, when Barrett and McIntosh see the rooting of a theory in a political position as a weakness, they reveal at the same time that they adopt a notion of knowledge and hence of Marxism which is not only profoundly anti-Marxist, but above all profoundly reactionary and hence anti-feminist. Two of the most serious practical political implications of this situation, which are visible in their article, are:

—on the one hand it justifies their not revealing the political position from which they speak,

—and on the other, it implies that people *other than the oppressed*—theorists, scientists—may talk about the oppression. This stance is directly linked to the reactionary content of the political position they are hiding.

We have seen that the reification-deification of Marx serves to construct the *authority* from which the imposition of 'Marxist' theses is then *argued*. This is simply a way of evading the discussion: of dispensing, or thinking one is dispensing, with the need to prove the internal coherence of an argument by calling on a principle of authority and it is, justifiably, horrifying to feminists—and others;

—and it distances them from Marxism.

But there are many ‘Marxist’ theses. They all have, however, one point in common; all the different parties and schools which call themselves ‘Marxists’ agree to perpetuate, under cover of the authority which their talmudic studies have conferred on Marx the man, an unpardonable confusion between the principles of materialism and the analysis which Marx made of the capitalist mode of production (and which in turn they interpret liberally and diversely). Although inexcusable, this reduction of the former to the latter is today so widespread that most ‘Marxists’—and plenty of others—think that capitalism ‘invented’ exploitation, and that capitalism *is* exploitation, and that exploitation is capitalism. Here, again, it is not just a matter of simple ‘error’ or ‘ignorance’ striking by chance. This ‘error’ has a political meaning which feminists have clearly recognized: it makes the antagonism between the proletarians and the capitalists—which is one of the possible forms of exploitation—into the principal conflict wherever it exists, into the model for all oppression, and finally into the very definition of exploitation. This is evident when ‘Marxists’ say:

—either that feminism cannot use Marxism (Diana Adlam (1978), in a review of *The Main Enemy* in *Red Rag*) ‘no concept of relations of production developed on the ‘model’ of Marxism . . . includes the necessity of sexual division’;

—or that the exploitation of women does not exist since Marxism is indifferent to sexual division (Mark Cousins (1979) in *m/f*). Both here confuse Marxism—the method—with the Marxist analysis of capitalism—one of the possible applications of this method.

The concepts used for the Marxist analysis of capitalist exploitation (or *Capital*, to simplify) cannot actually account for the exploitation of women for the same reason that they cannot account for the exploitation of serfs, or slaves, or indentured servants, or prisoners in labour camps, or African share-croppers. The simple reason is that the concepts used to account for exploitation *by wages*—and it is this which is the subject of *Capital*—cannot account for the exploitation of the unwaged. But the concepts used in the analysis of capitalism are not the whole of Marxist thought. On the contrary, they are themselves derived from more general concepts. How, otherwise, would Marx have been able to analyse non-capitalist modes of production and exploitation, such as slavery and feudalism? The concepts of *class* and *exploitation* do not come from the study of capitalism; on the contrary, they pre-exist it, permit it, and are at the origin of the notion of capitalism in its Marxist sense, ie. as a *particular* system of exploitation. These more general concepts—class and exploitation—not only in no way require that sexual divisions be ignored, but on the contrary are eminently useful in *explaining* them. And I mean here ‘explain’ in the strong sense: not just in describing it, not in describing only what happens after the division exists, but in accounting for its *genesis*.

These concepts are the key-concepts of materialism to which I see two foundations. For me, the first foundation of materialism is that it is

a theory of history . . . where this is written in terms of the domination of social groups by one another (Delphy 1976b).

Domination has as its ultimate motive exploitation. This postulate explains and

is explained by the second foundation: the postulate that the way in which life is materially produced and reproduced is the base of the organization of all societies, hence is fundamental both at the individual and the collective level.

Marxism is, by all the evidence, materialist. To this extent it can be used by feminism. In so far as materialism concerns oppression, and inversely if we accept that to start from oppression defines among other things a materialist approach,

a feminist science . . . wants to reach an explanation of the oppression; to do this it must start with it (and) . . . it will tend inevitably towards a materialist theory of history (Delphy, 1976b).

To me this means that materialism is not one possible tool, among others, for oppressed groups; it is *the* tool precisely in so far as it is the only theory of history for which oppression is the fundamental reality, the point of departure.

This has been hidden across the years by people who have appropriated Marxism and, in so doing, have not only reduced materialism to the analysis of the capitalist mode of production alone, but in addition have evacuated the very materialism of this analysis because they have made it one academic analysis among others and in competition with the others on its 'intellectual merits' alone. They have thus dropped the deep meaning which propels Marxist analysis and which distinguishes it as an approach far more than its content—the explanation of and struggle against *oppression*. It is therefore clear that the non-recognition of sexual division in the analysis of *Capital* in no way prevents the application of materialist concepts to the oppression of women. However, this non recognition poses a problem—not for women, but for the analysis of the capitalist mode of production. It is in fact not so much a matter of non-recognition as of non-problematization. The analysis Marx made of wage exploitation is not, as Mark Cousins pretends, indifferent to the division of the sexes, or at any rate it is not so in the sense that Cousins (and others) understand. They think that in the analysis of capital the positions described—or the classes constituted by the analysis (capitalists and workers) can be indifferently occupied by men or women. The fact that they are above all occupied by men is seen as an external factor, and one which removes nothing from the validity of the analysis. This implies that the latter would be the same if the classes were constituted in equal parts of women and men. But this is false: the analysis of the capitalist mode of production is indifferent to the sexual division in the sense that the fact that the positions *could not* be occupied indifferently by men or women is not even perceived as a problem. Their theory is indifferent to the problem, certainly, but in the opposite sense: it takes the sexual division as given, it recognizes it and integrates it, it is based on it.

Hence a materialist approach cannot be content with adding the materialist analysis of the oppression of women to the analysis of the oppression of workers made by Marx, and later Marxists. The two cannot be simply added together, since the first necessarily modifies the second. Feminism necessarily modifies 'Marxism' in several ways:

—first, because it is impossible for it to accept the reduction of Marxism solely to the analysis of capital,

—second, since the struggle between workers and capitalists is not the only struggle, this antagonism can no longer be taken as the unique dynamic of

society,

—and third, because it also modifies the analysis of capital *from within*. The recognition of the existence of patriarchy—or, for those who are shocked by this term, of sexual division (which no one can deny and which for me is one and the same thing)—makes it apparent that ‘the working class’ described by Marxists and characterised by them as ‘theoretically asexual’ is well and truly sexed, and not only in an empirical and contingent fashion. It is concerned entirely with only the male part of the working class. All the concepts used by Marx, and then by the others, take as a structural and theoretical definition of the worker’s condition the lot of the male worker. Women workers are invisible: they are absent from the analysis of the labour market on the one hand, and their domestic work and its exploitation is taken as given on the other. Thus not only the reduction of Marxism to the analysis of capital, but the very content of this analysis, makes it impossible to apply *this* Marxism to the oppression of women. But, still further, taking account of the oppression of women—which is what it means to be feminist—makes, or should make, it impossible to accept this analysis even as it concerns capital.

Two objectives: the extension of the principles of Marxism (ie. of materialism) to the analysis of the oppression of women, and a review of the analysis of capital from what has been acquired in feminist analysis, are what should define a Marxist feminist or feminist Marxist approach, if the words have a meaning. But it is the very possibility of such an approach which Barrett and McIntosh try to deny, or rather to forbid, by affirming that their conception of Marxism is the only one, and in claiming, in addition, that I would be contradicting myself if I were to ‘attempt in my use of Marxism’ what I say is impossible: ‘to abstract technical concepts from their “reactionary context”’. Noting in passing that they here qualify Marxism as a ‘reactionary context’, I maintain that this is true of all the overall theories of society or humanity we possess. General accounts of the world, whether they are anthropological, sociological or psycho-analytic, take the oppression of women as given, are unable to explain it, and above all are unable to help in overthrowing it. This applies equally to Marxism as Barrett and McIntosh understand it (ie. to the conventional analysis of *Capital*); and that it would be ‘illusory to claim to arrive at different results with the same conceptual tools’ is abundantly proven by the failure of the ‘domestic labour debate’. This is indeed why I do not use this analysis and why I deem that they should not use it either. BUT this is not true of materialism as a method, and this is why a feminist materialist approach is not only possible, but also necessary, whatever they may say.

Polemical and Feminist Criticism

This set of attitudes to Marxism is the basis of the problem in Barrett and McIntosh’s approach, which is why I have dealt with it first, leaving aside temporarily their polemic . . . on polemic. For polemic is certainly one of the things at issue in this polemical article. They criticize me for doing something which they themselves are busy doing. I could, of course, have fallen for it in making a reply, and perhaps I should content myself with mentioning this irony and let them have the benefit of the doubt: I could accept that they did it intentionally, to be funny. But I want to profit by the occasion to tackle the problem in depth and to look at the question of polemic—which is not to say that I am defending them, for there is polemic and polemic.

Barrett and McIntosh reproach me:

– for writing polemical and not theoretical articles,

– for being ‘locked in . . . political combat with enemies found within the women’s movement itself’, that is of setting myself against other feminists,

– of hating Marxism, the proof being my opposition to socialist feminists.

They use polemic in a pejorative sense; at first intellectually pejorative, later politically pejorative. The intellectual line signifies nothing, as I have said above as regards my articles. But, in a more general manner, it is absurd to oppose polemic to theory for one very simple reason: no new idea appears in a void. In the place where it wants to establish itself there is always already another idea on the same question, an *accepted* idea, which it is therefore necessary initially to demolish. Theoreticians have always been polemicists; one of the greatest, Karl Marx, was also one of the most tenacious polemicists of his epoch. It is present in all his work, even those pieces which are not explicitly polemical, even those whose title is not *Critique of*. . . He could not have constructed a materialist theory of Capital except in opposition to, and after initially demolishing, liberal economists’ theories about the self-same capitalism.

Thus on the ground of the facts of intellectual history, this opposition—between polemic and theory—has no meaning at all; but on political grounds it has one, and it is dangerous. Indeed Barrett and McIntosh explicitly equate ‘polemic’ and ‘politics’ in their article. So what exactly are they aiming at with their accusation? At convicting me of non-sisterliness, since they say that I find my enemies within the movement. I would dispute this at the level of facts and of principles. On the factual level, I will say, since they force me to make the distinction, that my ‘main enemies’ are outside the feminist movement: that I am concerned with ‘feminist’ men—like those denounced in ‘Nos amis et nous’—or women like Annie Leclerc³ who *refuse* to be called feminists. The two articles (out of ten) where I have criticised individuals by name have as their target authors who are clearly, without a shadow of doubt, and by their own admission, *outside* the movement. However, although it has not been my practice to polemicize within the movement, unlike Barrett and McIntosh, I do not for all that think that it is illegitimate, and for an obvious reason: the movement is not an island, feminists are not born by spontaneous generation, they do not live on another planet, they are not outside this society. The ways of thinking outside the movement are also in the movement. If not it would all be so easy! If not, why should one of the first slogans of the movement have been ‘get rid of the phallus/man in your head’? To rid ourselves of the dominant way of thinking is a priority, and a collective task, which requires the freedom to criticize. To deny ourselves this is to prevent ourselves from advancing. It is more than a sterile attitude: it is dangerous, because, as Juliet Mitchell says (citing from memory), ‘The danger from the outside consists not so much in its opposition as in its influence’. And as Monique Plaza says in her preface to ‘Pouvoir “phallomorphique” et psychologie de “la Femme”’, which is a critique of the way of thinking exemplified by Luce Irigaray, to forbid criticism under the pretext that it concerns ‘the discourses of feminist women’ is to individualize and moralize a problem when (Plaza, 1977:90):

what interests us in a feminist critique of a discourse is the location of its *social determinants* . . . What holds us back . . . is the envelopment of the author in rules and schemes external to her (Plaza, 1977:90).

This is even more true when we criticize other feminists.

In these various quotations I think that the objectives, but also the *conditions*, of a feminist critique are well enough defined. Feminist critique is, first, and this may seem tautologous, feminist; which is to say it attacks not an individual, of course, but a way of thinking; above all it attacks what is *not* feminist in a way of thinking, and in doing this it is necessarily in solidarity even with the woman attacked. A feminist critique is always aimed, even within the movement, at the exterior. Further, a critique, even one made from within the movement, if it does not aim at the outside but on the contrary comes *from* the outside (ie. from external arguments, theories, or interests) is not feminist.

To dare to reproach me, in a polemic which readers may judge feminist or not, they must have overcome their fear of ridicule; and to overcome fear of ridicule, like any other fear, you need a pressing motive. Let us therefore look closer at their arguments on what is 'within the movement' and on 'Marxism'.

On the one hand my disagreement with certain socialist feminist positions is given as necessary and sufficient proof of my 'hostility to Marxism'. Thus socialist feminists and Marxist feminists are held to incarnate Marxism in the least of their words. On the other hand, socialist and Marxist feminist positions are represented as coming from 'within the movement': socialist/Marxist feminists thus represent feminism. Now there is a choice:

– either these positions are effectively Marxist, and, since we know Marxism was not invented by feminists, these positions are not *particularly* feminist. As Marxist they are not either more or less feminist, nor more or less anti-feminist either, than any other position coming from outside. An attack on them is not in any case an attack within the movement;

– or these positions are purely feminist and they owe nothing to Marxism, in which case I cannot see why an attack on them indicates an hostility to Marxism.

In either case, there is no reason not to criticize Marxist positions, nor some feminist positions; quite the contrary, as mentioned above. And if Barrett and McIntosh violently attack the freedom to criticize Marxist positions and feminist positions, it is precisely in order to arrive at a double censure which results in a double validation and a privileged position for certain theoreticians – the Marxist feminists.

If on the one hand we accept the principle of the authority of 'Marxism' which they defend, and the corollary that it must not be attacked; and if we accept the myth that feminist solidarity prohibits criticism 'within the movement' on the other, then Marxism validates certain 'feminist' positions, but above all, inversely, *feminism validates Marxism*. According to Barrett and McIntosh, Marxist feminist positions are unattackable because they are 'Marxist': to attack them is to be 'hostile to Marxism'. But even if one breaks this taboo and scorns being taxed with 'hostility to Marxism', it then becomes impossible to be hostile to Marxism because, in the devilish logic of Barrett and McIntosh, the movement comes forward and covers 'Marxism' with its maternal wing. When Marxism is defended by Marxist feminists it becomes 'feminist', and to attack it is quite frankly to take on one's sisters.

What a marvellous example of a double bind! Here is a move which, if it succeeds, puts those who call themselves Marxist feminists in a position of

absolute control over the whole movement, since they will become immune to all criticism. Happily, such an attempt is condemned from the start by the transparency of the syllogism which it uses. But beyond the naivety of the intellectual procedures at work the Machiavellian intention remains—to control the whole movement. And to control it in the name of what?

The ‘Marxist feminist’ position which they claim to defend does not exist; or rather it is unjust to join the epithet of Marxist feminist to it. I have described above what a position which could call itself Marxist feminist should be. It would consist in doing two things which they precisely do not do:

—applying materialism to the oppression of women, and

—looking again at the analysis of Marx’s *Capital* from an analysis of patriarchy.

In what then does their position consist? Just the simple juxtaposition of two political interests: the anti-capitalist interest and the anti-patriarchal interest. We could then ask which women in the movement are not both anti-patriarchal and anti-capitalist, and therefore why some of us need a particular name? This is such an important question that I cannot deal with it within the framework of this article. But the simple juxtaposition of these two interests is not enough to justify the use of term ‘Marxist feminist’, for such a term denotes a fusion of the two, leading to one unified vision applying to all problems. They do not have such a vision, and they cannot have it, because of their refusal to effect this fusion and particularly to do the two above-mentioned things which are the prior condition for it. Their conception of each of the terms of this juxtaposition, and their conception of Marxism in particular, condemns them to not being able to come to such a unification. In fact, in their position, when feminism encounters Marxism it is as a *boundary*. For them Marxism is equal to the conventional analysis of capital, but in this analysis the capitalist conflict is the fundamental dynamic of society. Women, as we have seen, are doubly excluded from this dynamic; first, because the conventional analysis cannot account for their oppression, and, further, because this analysis *incorporates* the oppression of women as given.

Thus their position—which Barrett and McIntosh assert is the ‘Marxist feminist’ one—has as its logical implication the necessary and inevitable subordination of the oppression and struggle of women to the anti-capitalist struggle. Is this really what they want? At this stage—ie. basing myself solely on what they say and not taking account of the history of the movement—I can only put forward a conjecture.

This conjecture derives from the gulf which exists between the anger my work arouses in them and the reasons they give for it; from the disproportion between their objective of totally discrediting my approach and the arguments which they invoke against it. The evidence suggests to me that something *other* than what they say provokes their anger; something they do not say, and it is this I have searched for.

The Two-Pronged Attack on Materialist Feminism

The fact that they do not dare to indicate their true position, that they never write down in so many words the theory which they oppose to mine—which is

nonetheless the reference theory from which they criticize me—already gives *one* indication of its nature. It indicates that the political premises and the implications of this theory risk being disagreeable to the Women's Liberation Movement. This suspicion is confirmed by the fact that they use not *one* but two lines of argument to reject my materialist analysis of the economic oppression of women, for remember, it is to this and this alone that I apply myself. I wrote explicitly; and in my very first article, not only that I did not pretend to explain *all* the aspects of the oppression of women, and even more precisely that all the aspects attached to sexuality are as important and as *material* as economic oppression, but that they were outside the field of my analysis. Thus the allusions of Barrett and McIntosh to the fact that my theory does not explain *everything* leaves me cold, since it was never my ambition to explain *everything*.

What is curious about the use by Barrett and McIntosh of two separate lines of argument against my analysis is that these arguments are not complementary, but rather logically incompatible with one another. However, they must have something in common, if only that they are used to the same end, and it is a good bet that it is what they have in common, and not their specific contents, that will indicate their real meaning. One is based on the analysis of domestic work, and thus accepts as legitimate the study of the economic oppression of women. The other, on the contrary, is based on the rejection of all study of economic oppression, such an approach being called 'economistic'. The logic of the passage from one to the other, if we can manage to disclose it, must constitute the *real* message—however hidden—of their article.

(1) Domestic work: the economic oppression of women

That part of the Barrett and McIntosh critique which attempts to deal with the economics of women's oppression reveals a total incomprehension of the type of approach I myself and others are aiming at. After having accepted that the topic of my work is all domestic work, they seem in the space of one paragraph to decide that I see only farmers' wives as being exploited, and conclude that since farmers' wives are only 10% of women in France and are even fewer in England, my analysis is not very relevant to France and not at all to England. Now my 'theoretical edifice' does not 'rest' upon the proportion of such women in the general female population. I use the example of the work of farmers' wives, which although producing goods for the market is still unpaid, to prove the falsity of the theory (still favoured by some Marxist feminists, such as Sue Himmelweit (1978)) which says that it is because domestic labour produces only 'use values' and not 'exchange values' that housework is not paid. I seek to stress that wives do productive work for their husbands within the labour relationship of marriage. The tasks they do vary with their husbands' needs and desires. The actual number of farmers' wives is therefore immaterial to the argument. Even if there was only one of them, and she lived 10,000 miles from the English shore, as long as women in England still did the washing up, and I have been led to believe that they do by biased informants, my analysis will have no problem in crossing the Channel.

Barrett and McIntosh also reproach me for looking 'at only one half of the family production, that of the housewife', and for not looking at 'the man's relation to his subsistence', which would enable me to see that the 'man's principal productive activity is in the social sphere of wage labour' (Barrett and McIntosh 1979). Thus it appears from their article that I have not seen what I never stop shouting from the roof-tops—ie. that men and women have

different relations of production. But obviously Barrett and McIntosh aim *not to see* these differences, since their goal is to try and annul them by speaking of the 'domestic economy' as a whole, indissolubly constituted of the wife's work and the man's wage. This is the same as the way in which liberal economists treat the market economy as constituted indissolubly of the alliance of capital and labour. The fact that this mutual dependence is not exactly reciprocal and that this allows one of the indissociable elements to dissociate its interests enough from those of the other element to exploit it, is not something they want to see.

What does this reconciliation of the couple, this negation of sexual antagonisms within the 'domestic economy', this refusal to look at its internal functioning, mean? It means they adhere, as they mention in an aside, to the theory proposed by the English participants in the domestic labour debate, according to which domestic work serves only to lower the overall level of wages. This means that the economic exploitation of women not only benefits capitalism, but benefits only capitalism. In no way can it benefit any man, since far from benefitting husbands, the domestic work performed by wives is used to exploit their husbands further by lowering their wages.

Another of their arguments is to say:

- that my analysis 'offers no distinction between the situation of wives and that of women in general',
- that it 'offers no account of the category of mothers',
- that my use of the term 'patriarchy' is 'ambiguous' because 'at times it refers to the system by which husbands appropriate their wives' labour, at other times . . . to the domination of the father over his family',
- and finally, that my analysis does not say anything about women who 'like Christine Delphy herself, ourselves and many other feminists, are not signatories of the marital labour contract' (Barrett and McIntosh 1979).

All these criticisms stem either from failure to understand or, I fear, bad faith. The power of the husband and the power of the father are not opposed; they are both the power of the head of the household, and that power accounts for the appropriation of the labour of the children as well as of the wife and unmarried female or male relatives and other dependents of the head of the household.

The absurdity of which they accuse me – 'are we to see children and the old and disabled as exploiters?' – exists only in their heads and because they have so little grasp of the concept of appropriation that they are unable to make the distinction between the person for whom a service is performed and the person by whom the labour incorporated in the service is appropriated. Clearly, services applied *to* children are not appropriated *by* them, but by the person who would have to perform (half of) the work if his wife did not provide the totality, i.e. the husband. Even though I have not dealt explicitly with the unpaid work performed by unmarried women for their aged parents, for example, the concept of appropriation does give the means to find, or at least indicates the direction in which to look for, the real beneficiaries. How this concept can account for situations outside of marriage I have shown in my analysis of divorce by demonstrating that the labour of ex-wives continues to be appropriated by their ex-husbands after the marriage proper has been dissolved.

I have not said that women can 'escape oppression by the simple device' of avoiding marriage because the opposite is the case. Why, if I thought that, would I say that the exploitation of domestic work is the basis of *all women's* economic exploitation? If Barrett and McIntosh cannot see how marriage oppresses them even though they are not married, they have a problem! To mention only one of the ways in which marriage affects the situation of all women, it is obvious that the situation of women—therefore of Barrett and McIntosh, and myself—on the labour market, the super-exploitation of *all* women in wage work, is determined by the domestic situation of *most* women (see V. Beechey 1977) and, more precisely, constitutes an economic pressure towards marriage (Delphy 1976a). I will not even mention the other penalties attached to spinsterhood, except to say that, to my mind, the punishment of spinsterhood must have something to do with marriage.

They oppose 'mothers' to 'wives' and 'childcare' to 'marriage'. This opposition is interesting; it certainly is not mine. And their choice in favour of 'mothers' and 'childcare' is equally interesting. For 'wives' refers, even in the dominant ideology, to a *relation*, whereas 'mothers' connotes a *natural fact*. Marriage is an *institution* whereas childcare is a *task* which can be performed in any relations of production and which therefore does not say anything about its own conditions of execution if they are not specified. The choice of these terms indicates the choice of an ahistorical, technical, asocial approach which is wholly confirmed by the sentence (Barrett and McIntosh 1979):

'an analysis of childcare and women's position with regard to the reproduction of *the species* would lead to an analysis of the role of women in reproducing labour power and the forces and relations of capitalist production generally.' (My emphasis.)

Here we have their theory and all its compounded fallacies in a nutshell.

As regards the confusion between (a) biological reproduction, (b) reproduction of labour power and (c) social reproduction in general (a confusion which incidentally is *not* 'feminist' but has been put forward by the male French anthropologist Claude Méillassoux, see the excellent critique of Felicity Edholm, Olivia Harris and Kate Young (1977)). But the very basis of that confusion is the naturalistic approach. We are confronted here with biologism of an amazing crudeness; but it is not so amazing if one realizes that it is the hidden premise of the whole domestic labour debate—a basis which is revealed in a rather candid, and to that extent endearing way by Janet Bujra, writing as late as 1978 (Bujra 1978):

'It is women rather than men who are anchored in domestic labour *simply* (sic) because of their innate link with biological reproduction'. (My emphasis.)

One could not be more frank about it. We are dealing with the oldest 'theory' of the social division of labour. It is 'Marxist' if by 'Marxist' one understands whatever is adopted by 'Marxists'. If by Marxist one understands materialist, then it is not Marxist. How Barrett and McIntosh can reconcile this naturalistic approach with an analysis in terms of exploitation is a mystery. In their perspective women are exploited because the natural handicap of childbirth, plus the handicap of childcare which is 'naturally' derived from the first, puts them in a vulnerable position.

It is understandable under these conditions that they misread my work and that they do not see that the answers to their questions are contained in it. The term 'mothers' is unproblematic to them. We do not know whether they mean by it 'reproducers' or 'rearers' of children. They do not make the distinction because to them the term connotes both at one and the same time, and it does so because to them one is derived from the other: women bring up children *because* they have given birth to them. They think that I rally to their position by conceding that 'analytically the responsibility for childcare may precede marriage', whereas I say exactly the opposite. I do not say that women who have children are 'mothers' and therefore liable to be exploited. I say rather that because their work is appropriated women must raise children for nothing. I do not say that 'motherhood' explains the appropriation of women's labour, but on the contrary that the appropriation of their labour, effected among other things through unpaid childcare, constitutes women as mothers. Thus motherhood, far from being a natural fact giving birth to exploitation, is a social construct created by exploitation.

The explanation given by Barrett and McIntosh of women's economic exploitation is that a sexual division of labour based on physiology is exploited by capitalism. This argument uses two contradictory conceptual frameworks, one naturalistic and the other social. The reason for this extraordinary marriage can be found only in the political implications: if capitalism, that is society, takes over from nature, it is so as to exempt men, to exonerate them from having any interest whatsoever in the economic exploitation of women. As this preoccupation is the only reason to be found for such an eclectic approach, it is easy to understand the anger evoked in Barrett and McIntosh by the study of relations of production inside the home, as such a study can only show that the interests of men and women are not only dissimilar but divergent.

(ii) The ideological nature of women's oppression

Their second line of argument is not concerned with the realm of economic analysis, but tries to undermine the very legitimacy of such a concern. This rejection takes place under the guise of the rehabilitation of the study of ideology; a rehabilitation which is hardly necessary as nobody, least of all me, has ever cast any doubt on its importance. This is however how they construe my work (Barrett and McIntosh 1979):

'By refusing to allow *any place whatsoever* to ideology, Delphy . . .',
 'In the category of idealism Delphy includes *any analysis which considers ideology* to be relevant to the oppression of women',
 'Delphy's analysis, in emphasising the economic aspects of women's oppression, *fails to consider the ideological* and political construction of women as a category';
 'Delphy's analysis . . . consistently *rejects the ideological* from consideration',
 'Delphy's analysis . . . by *its rejection of the ideological* dimensions of our oppression . . .' (My emphases.)

Taken at their face value these accusations are astounding. I have, of course, never said, written, or even implied that I consider the study of ideology unimportant or the role of ideology minor, let alone that I think ideology does not exist at all. Moreover, I have not been content with *mentioning* its existence, I

have actually studied it. But it is probably the *way* I study it rather than any total neglect of it which is distasteful to my critics, though what it is in my approach which displeases them so much is not clear. They characterize my understanding of ideology as 'mechanistic and discredited', but this does not excuse them from proving it actually is such, since in fact I have sought to do precisely what they require: to produce an analysis 'which relates the ideological to the economic'.

Barrett and McIntosh themselves, however, throughout most of their article, seem actually to oppose the economic and the ideological, since to them merely to study one of these two levels of society constitutes in itself proof of a denial of the other level(s), as they reveal in their sentence: 'Delphy's analysis, in emphasizing the economic aspects of women's oppression, fails to consider the ideological and political construction of women as a category'. They seem to imply that the ideological can exist without the economic, or the economic without the ideological, and moreover that where one exists the other cannot be, as in their phrase: 'a material *rather than* an ideological basis' (my emphasis). Further, simply to talk about the economy is construed by them as denying any existence whatsoever to ideology. The conclusion of this is that recognizing the existence of ideology is incompatible with recognizing the existence of other levels of reality, and in particular of the economic. To pose ideology as important is one thing—nobody would take issue with that. But it is quite another thing to assert that recognizing the importance of other levels is tantamount to negating the importance of ideology, because *that* is tantamount to putting a total ban on the study of anything *but* ideology.

This ban contradicts their request that 'the ideological be related to the economic', and most people's very definition of ideology. Barrett and McIntosh offer no definition of this word, other than referring to Althusser's: 'a material, lived relation, which has its own determining powers'. I have no quarrel with that definition, also called the materiality of ideology. But in fact it is clear that they identify ideology in great part with subjectivity—with what is called psychology—and with reason, moreover, because it is by its internalization by individuals that ideology is most effective. It can also be said that it is only at this level that we can reveal ideology in its pure form, ie. in the specific form of *ideas*. But it is equally clear that their understanding of psychology/ideology differs totally from mine. But does this authorize them to deny mine?

The passage which shows both the identification which they make between ideology and psychology and their distortion of my position is as follows (Barrett and McIntosh 1979:104): 'Delphy is correct in rejecting this idealism, but not in attributing it to any analysis which attaches weight to ideological processes.' That I do so is thought to be 'proved' by my 'ever-increasing and factional hostility to the *Psychoanalyse et Politique* group in the French Women's Movement'. Thus they identify the ideological with the psychological, which is not false provided ideology is not *restricted* to the latter; but in addition they totally identify psychology with *one* of its interpretations: psychoanalysis. I criticized this latter attitude in 'Pour un féminisme matérialiste' (Delphy 1976b). More specifically, I said there that the blocks which all the many attempts to reconcile Marxism and psychoanalysis had encountered came from the fact that their premises are incompatible, yet these attempts accept (Delphy 1976b):

‘the extravagant claim of psychoanalysis to be, not a system of interpretation of subjectivity, but subjectivity itself. I will not accept that objecting to the theory of psychoanalysis is synonymous with disinterest in its object, with indifference to—and even negation of—the existence of subjectivity, even though not only the adherents of psychoanalysis but also the vast majority of people make this claim’.

All the evidence suggests that Barrett and McIntosh are among the people who elide subjectivity and psychoanalysis, but unlike the rest they have read, or at least they say they have read, my article, and they know that not only do I not accept this equation, but I think it scandalous. Why then do they attribute it to me? Why do they equate my criticism of psychoanalysis with a lack of interest in subjectivity when, if I criticise psychoanalysis, it is precisely because with its idealist and naturalist presuppositions it stands in the way of a *truly materialist psychology*? Why do they not discuss *this*?

As to the importance of ideology, I have said of it, against the prevailing ideology for which ‘what goes on in the head is not objective, but rather is defined in opposition to what is objective’; for which ‘when something happens inside the head, nothing has happened’; that (Delphy 1976b):

this comes down to saying that ‘sexism’, the ideological expression of institutional oppression, the emergent part of patriarchy, constitutes all the oppression. This is to deny the existence of the institutional structure which causes sexism. It is above all to deny that the psychological structure, which is the relay of the institutional structure in the production of ‘prejudices’ and of the said ‘sexism’ . . . is also just as *concrete* and *objective* and *exterior to the action of the individual* as the institutional structure.

It is therefore curious that they set me against the materiality of ideology—as if I trifled with it—since it is one of the main themes of ‘Nos amis et nous’ (Delphy 1977a). But perhaps it is because for me the materiality of ideology does not mean its *solitude*. I do not separate it from other material factors, as they do when they plead, for example, for an account of the construction of ‘gender identity’ as if such an analysis could give the key to sexual divisions and the oppression of women. For me, or I should say for us, for in our group there is a (reconstructed) psychoanalyst, the study of the way in which gender identity is acquired cannot take the place of the study of the social construction of sexual divisions, albeit it is essential for understanding how these sexual divisions function. The acquisition of gender identity cannot, obviously, explain the very existence of gender, because this must actually exist before being acquired.

Barrett and McIntosh seem to prefer to distort my work—to the point of altering it—than to engage in discussion on this field. They deny that I defend, and that I defended before they did, the materiality of ideology, because they find it very uncomfortable to see that for me this does not invalidate, but on the contrary is complementary to an analysis in institutional and economic terms. For them, declaring these processes material gives a determinant, unique place; it idealist confusion between the *process* of socialization and the social *structure*. For them, declaring these processes material gives them a determinant, unique place; it gives them the status of a, or even the, material base, and so removes the other material bases.

To say that ideology acts on reality is one thing; but the fact that ideology is material (ie. can be a cause of certain effects) does not imply that it can be an *ultimate* cause, for this in turn implies that ideology is *its own cause*. To accept this is to fall back into a theory of culture as totally arbitrary, which is but one expression of idealism. Idealism is the theory—in fact little theorized because it is precisely the dominant ideology—according to which the social structure is produced by ideas, which are themselves produced by nothing. We find both these elements in Barrett and McIntosh; the notion that ideology is the determining factor, and the notion that it is a thing apart, of itself. At this point we can no longer talk of ideology but only of ideas. ‘Ideology’, although made up of ‘ideas’, is not the same concept as ‘ideas’. The concept of ‘ideology’ says precisely that ideas are the product of the social structure. The notion of the existence of a material base and of its determining role is inherent in the concept of ideology.

It is easy to demonstrate—and it still appears (amazingly) necessary to do so—that an idealist approach is not tenable. If we have both a material exploitation and a devaluing ideology pertaining to the exploited, the relation between the two can go only in one direction. Whereas the existence of sexist, or racist, or classist ideology cannot be explained without exploitation, the existence of exploitation *requires* the constitution of an exploited population, which in turn requires the creation of a sexist or racist or classist ideology. Thus when we find both a material exploitation and a devaluing ideology pertaining to the same group co-existing, the logical primacy of the first is the inevitable conclusion.

Barrett and McIntosh would not take this conclusion to task as regards capitalism, or indeed society as a whole. The real underlying logic of their plea for ideology is not that they do not believe in the primacy and determinancy of the material; but, on the contrary, that they believe in it so much that they want to reserve this privileged seat *for capitalism*. This goal explains their otherwise mysterious juxtaposition of an economic argument about domestic labour and then their total rejection of an economic approach later on.

The Motivation for the Attack on Materialist Feminism: The Best Means of Defence of Men

It is really interesting to observe the path the left (for it is the left in general and not only ‘Marxist feminists’ that we are dealing with) has followed on the question of women’s oppression. For a long time they refused any legitimacy to the women’s struggle in the name of the supreme and absolute pre-eminence of the economic over the superstructural, it being taken for granted that the oppression of women belonged in the latter sphere and in no way to the first, which was privately owned by the ‘working class’. It seems that they have radically changed their battleground. Because women have invaded the economic, not in the traditional Leninist fashion by becoming employed more in the waged sector or by stressing their super-exploitation as ‘workers’, but, on the contrary, by refusing any longer to accept that certain kinds of labour and certain production—by a strange coincidence theirs—are neither labour nor productive. They have redefined the economic in such a way as to include their exploitation. They say in the same breath that they work and that their work is exploited. The ‘discovery’ of housework cannot be dissociated from the denunciation of its being unpaid. It could not be discovered first as work and then as

unpaid work, but had to be seen all at once as work and unpaid work, ie. as exploitation.

The women's movement has forced the political as well as the intellectual world to recognize that housework is work, and exploited work at that. Leftists can no longer pretend to restrict women's oppression to the superstructural, to 'backward thinking'. As soon as the threat became inescapable they resolved to invade the discussion of domestic labour in a last attempt to preserve it from feminism. Not being allowed to say any longer that domestic labour was 'superstructural' or 'non-existent', they tried to 'prove' that it benefitted capitalism. The attempt aborted. Having bored everyone to tears whilst convincing no one, the left withdrew, and the more honest adherents (like Jean Gardiner at a seminar held in the University of Bradford, 1979—on tape) have now admitted that their thesis did not make sense and that is why they had to abandon it altogether. Barrett and McIntosh nevertheless make a half-hearted attempt at pushing this line (as well as the contradictory 'no economy' line) probably from the viewpoint that 'why not try, we've got nothing to lose. If the "ideology-as-material" line doesn't work, maybe the "domestic-labour-as-saving-for-capital" will still go down with some'.

It is from this perspective that we can understand the blossoming of accusations of 'economism'. For where do they come from? From the left groups and parties. Economism is a very precise concept which refers to a very precise position in the analysis of *capitalism*. Originally this accusation was levelled at the rigidity of Leninist orthodoxy, against its conception of the pre-eminence of the economic pushed to the limit of ignoring all other factors. Today, however, the left retains only the derogatory connotations of this accusation and transports it into the feminist domain. But in the process they have managed to change the meaning of the word and they now use it to denote any mention of the economy itself. However, these two words are in no way identical or interchangeable: economism is to economy what biologism is to biology, psychologism to psychology, etc. It is a *reduction*. To reject reductionism, be it biologism, psychologism or whatever, in no way implies or requires the negation of biology, psychology or economics. However, the left is now shouting 'Economism!' each time it sees the word economic. Whence comes this change, if it is a change?

In fact it is just a new way of pursuing old aims, for they use the accusation of economism only as concerns feminism. We are currently witnessing a determined attempt to ban the study or even the mention of the economic conditions of women, coming not only from *Feminist Review*, but also from *Red Rag* (Diana Adlam) and *m/f* (where the male feminist Mark Cousins goes so far as to pretend that the word economy simply cannot be used in conjunction with the word women). By calling any and every analysis that takes into account the economic aspect 'economistic', not only do they try to invalidate this approach, but they try to negate the very existence of an economic aspect to the oppression of women. In the guise of rehabilitating other factors which hardly need rehabilitating, they get rid of the economic. For the economic is not simply a thing which can be explained indifferently by an economic or by a non-economic approach and still stay the same thing.

A simple example can show this. To approach the role of women from an econo-

mic angle is to see housework as work, and, conversely, to see housework as work is to take an economic angle. When approached from another angle, for example that of role-playing, housework is no longer work, nor was it before the women's movement; it is a hobby, a vocation, a proof of love, a character trait, in brief anything and everything except work.

The problem is that we cannot at the same time reject the economic *approach* and keep the economic *fact*, for there are no such things as facts in themselves. We know it well since the same actual event—a woman doing the washing up—is not the same fact for that woman and for her husband, nor for a feminist woman and for a non-feminist woman. And it is because 'facts' do not exist but only mental constructs, that ideology itself does not exist *as ideology*. Barrett and McIntosh never define ideology, with the result that the concept about which they talk so much always remains abstract. This is understandable but unfortunate since they talk of it as if it were something which exists, which is *there* for us to take and discuss and fight.

But this is false: ideology does not exist before the fight. What exist are ideas. Ideology obviously does not present itself as ideology: it appears as an exact reflection, as the *only possible* reflection of the world; as the world, in short, like *all* representations. Ideology is only all those representations which we denounce as false; it is *not there before our denunciation*. And the denunciation must itself be based on *another* representation, on another interpretation of the world. To construct this we must actually study reality. This is why it is doubly absurd to oppose the study of things and the study of ideology. Not only do the two go hand in hand, but it is the study of reality which in a sense *makes up* the ideology we are then going to work on: to transform so as to make accepted interpretations of facts appear as ideology. It is easy to say now that the opinion that women who are at home all day 'do nothing' is 'ideological', but who knew it ten years ago? Without those who showed that housework was work, where would those who now talk of the 'ideology of domestic work' be?

The left does not dream for one minute of invalidating the economic perspective as regards the classic social classes. It would cost them dearly so to do, since it is this perspective precisely which constructs classes as classes. Classes are classes only for the revolutionary: only for those who think that some people exploit others. To the capitalist, in whose eyes exploitation does not exist, classes in the Marxist sense do not exist either.

What bothers the left is when *women apply to their own situation* a materialist analysis; when they reject the ideology which says that they are naturally inferior or the victims of a culture which happens, unhappily but mysteriously (ie. without any material benefits for anyone), to be sexist. But women are now saying 'there is no mystery: we are oppressed because we are exploited. What we go through makes life easier for others'. And the left is afraid that women will call a spade a spade, the economic economic, and their own sufferings exploitation.

The strategy is therefore still the same: women and their oppression are sent back to the superstructural and attributed to patriarchal 'ideology', whilst proletarians are the sole occupants of the economic realm. The left now says that the economy is no longer—'Bah, rubbish'—the determining instance, and yet at

the same time they fiercely oppose the entry of women into it (their theoretical entry, that is, for concretely women have never left the economy). The economy remains the mainspring of the class struggle, and the class struggle remains for the left *the* struggle. Dismissing women to the superstructural therefore means the same old thing as ever: that the women's struggle is secondary.

But there is a contradiction in this approach, for if the left maintains that women are oppressed in the last resort by capital, why is the idea that women are exploited so threatening to them? If women as housewives are exploited by capital, just like other workers (and some Marxists do maintain this), all the better. Women as housewives have just as much at stake as proletarians in the overthrow of capital. Three cheers, there is another revolutionary mass to mobilize. Why then is the left in fact so scared of women exploring their economic exploitation? Why do they do everything in their power to make it appear that women's oppression is restricted to the superstructural, to 'ideological factors'? What is the logic underlying the way in which Barrett and McIntosh slide from one line of argument to another? Why tolerate this contradiction between the analysis of domestic labour as a benefit for employers and the denial of the importance of this very economic exploitation?

It is because in both cases the oppression of women is linked to capitalism. The contradiction between the arguments invoked does not matter because they have the same end; and this end explains the permanent oscillation of the left between different theses on domestic exploitation. It is always trying to deny the exploitation because recognizing it requires overcoming the hurdle of explaining how it is due only to capital and in no way benefits its immediate beneficiaries (who are only 'apparent' beneficiaries). We have seen that the attempt to jump this obstacle—the domestic labour debate—has largely fallen down, the victim of 'appearances'. This hold-up explains why there is now a return to the *ideological* thesis, this time revamped with a theory of the total autonomy of ideology which is scarcely Marxist—but, no matter, the other wasn't either.

To treat ideology as totally autonomous in the face of a material exploitation one must

- either purely and simply deny this material level,
- or adopt an idealist approach;

and this is what has happened. If the oppression of women is caused by capitalism, it is by the subterfuge of the 'sexist' ideology which capital produces (why?) and economic exploitation is thus once again explained by ideology. Now this is a difficult position for 'Marxists' to hold, which is why they always try—as Barrett and McIntosh do—to minimize the economic exploitation so as not to make the inevitable idealism of their position too visible. However, it is equally difficult (read impossible) nowadays to deny the existence of the economic exploitation of women: domestic work is here to stay. So the left finds itself in the uncomfortable position of presenting in relation to women (and only in relation to women obviously, since it is contrary to the very principles which constitute it) an idealist analysis. This divides its political approach to the point of schizophrenia; 'generally' materialist (ie. as regards capitalist exploitation) it finds itself on the intellectual terrain of the right as regards patriarchal exploitation. How is this possible and how is it to be explained?

In my opinion very simply; if the left refuses a materialist analysis it is because this risks leading to the conclusion that it is men who benefit from patriarchal exploitation, and not capital. What better confirmation of this could there be than their resistance—so theoretically inexplicable—to materialist analysis, their insistence on abandoning what is held to be their specific theory, when it comes to women? Does this not show that they *know* what would be the outcome of a materialist analysis? I suggest it is for this reason that they have set up a barrage in front of this question for the last ten years (Silveira, 1975):

The first question a feminist must ask of Marxism, and we should refuse to discuss any other issue until we get an adequate answer is, what are women's relations to the means of production?

This purpose—the exemption of men from all responsibility for the oppression of women—is the real message, however hidden, of the article by Barrett and McIntosh. The only reason for the anger which pushes them to consecrate an entire article to the demolition of my work is that the latter affirms that men are the class which oppresses and exploits women. While the refusal to accept this thesis is comprehensible on the part of men, hence of the left (which, in so far as it resembles other political formations and all the institutions of our societies, is dominated—it is too feeble a word—by men), this refusal requires some explanation when it comes from women.

For a long time the socialist feminist current has represented within the Women's Liberation Movement an expression of a tendency to protect our enemies. This is, however, a tendency which is not restricted to socialist feminism, and which is also not true of the whole of this current. In France women in the Communist Party, for example, now affirm ('Elles Voient Rouges', May 1979):

the existence of patriarchy as power of men over women . . . (as) power structured ideologically and economically . . . (which) determines an oppression (having as its) end the maintenance of the appropriation of women by men. It is supported by an economic *exploitation* based on the *unpaid domestic work* of women/wives.

And in Britain, the USA and everywhere else there are many socialist feminists who have refused for a long time to accept the crazy idea that: 'patriarchy is the ideological expression of the exploitation of male workers'. Fortunately, more and more feminists are becoming convinced of the obvious; that patriarchal ideology is connected to patriarchal exploitation, and that there are (at least) two systems of oppression, each with its own material base.

Why should it be otherwise? Why has it been otherwise? The line put forward by Barrett and McIntosh as 'Marxist feminist' is neither Marxist nor feminist; and if it handicaps the anti-patriarchal struggle, it does not serve the anti-capitalist fight for all that. The refusal to incriminate men is not however peculiar to the socialist feminist tendency. This refusal can take other forms within the movement (and outside it takes the obvious form of *rejecting* the whole movement). It has simply found, in the socialist feminist tendency, an expression which is more elaborate and hence more satisfying in so far as it does not rest on simple negation; or rather that it masks this negation by presenting a replacement enemy: capitalism.

But this refusal is also expressed in currents such as that of neo-femininity, for to base the domination of men on their physiology has as its political implication—since this physiology is unchangeable by definition—a refusal to, or rather a sense of the impossibility, the uselessness of, politically confronting men as a class. We could stop here. A refusal to confront the oppressor group, a search for ways out before we come eyeball to eyeball, when the outcome is uncertain and when enormous collective and personal costs and sacrifice are involved here and now, is understandable enough not to need an ulterior explanation.

However, it would be a pity to stop our search for the reasons for not incriminating men here. I have already analysed in 'Nos amis et nous' (Delphy 1977) how the explanation of the oppression of women by an ideology necessary to capitalism implies a double mediation of the oppression of women by that of men, and thus reveals a feeling of unworthiness on the part of women. We feel that we ourselves are unworthy of being directly oppressed, of being oppressed in some way *for ourselves*. We feel that it is—it *must* be—men who are oppressed through us. But there is even more to the theories which make the oppression of women the secondary consequence of antagonisms *between men* than this.

There is also the incapacity to conceive of social antagonisms as existing other than between men. This is the corollary of, but not the same as, the incapacity to conceive of women as a group as protagonists in a fight—hence as equals in a sense to their adversaries. Finally, there is the incapacity to conceive of women as social beings, and in the last resort as human beings. The refusal to consider women as a class and to consider men as the antagonistic class relates back finally to its 'unthinkability'. If we dig a bit at these unthinkables we will notice that they themselves relate back to the set of confused representations which turn around the belief that there must necessarily be close and permanent relations between most females and most males at all times. This makes a structural conflict 'dysfunctional', hence unthinkable. But it might be said that this is a question of reality, not of a 'belief'. But this 'reality', or this 'belief'—the belief that such is reality—is not only ideological, but is the very heart of the ideology (ie. of the representation of the world which supports the patriarchal system).⁴ There obviously also, there *above all*, the ideology does not appear as ideology but as *the* reasonable presentation of reality, as reality itself.

The study of the cosmology which informs both patriarchal ideology and the refusal to consider the antagonism of the sexes as a social product—the representation of the world which includes much more than the representation of the present-day relations between the sexes—will be exciting. It is the dominant ideology, of course, but precisely for that reason it has still *to be discovered*. Because it has never been contested, because it has always been, and remains, just the way we see things, of the order of *obvious*, it has always been exempted, as are all obvious things, from declaring itself, from making itself explicit, from justifying itself.

But this is for another article; and since the struggle against ideology which oppresses us all is and *must* be a struggle undertaken in solidarity, rather than impute replies to Barrett and McIntosh, I would prefer to open the debate by asking them, now that we have done a tour of the Marxist pretexts, to put forward the view of the world (in particular of the relation between the existence

of the sexes, the genders, society and the species) which informs their refusal to consider men as a class as oppressors.

Notes

- 1 'L'Ennemi Principal' by Christine Delphy, which first appeared in *Partisans* No 54-55 1970 was translated into English and sold in mimeo at the National Women's Liberation Movement Conference in Edinburgh in June, 1974. After having been refused by *New Left Review* on the grounds that they 'had already dealt with the domestic labour debate', it was published in pamphlet form by the Women's Research and Resources Centre in 1977 (translator's note).
- 2 Incidentally, Maxine Molyneux also presented to the Anglo-French seminar in 1975 an early version of the paper to which Barrett and McIntosh refer. It is now published in *New Left Review*, although it was not at the time they published their article, and does not refute my work in the way they imply.
- 3 Annie Leclerc is the author of *Parole de Femme*, 1974, criticized in Delphy 1975.
- 4 I think that this will be the next great debate in the movement and that it will be found that the last ideological bulwarks which impede us, and which thus constitute the stronghold of patriarchal ideology, are also the bases of heterosexual ideology. This debate will therefore be of the very greatest importance because it will signify both the breaking of the last ideological barrier *and* the way out of the tunnel on the question of the relationship between lesbianism and feminism.

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