

WOMEN
and the POLITICS
of CLASS

“combines analytic rigor with moral passion”

— LINDA GORDON



Johanna Brenner



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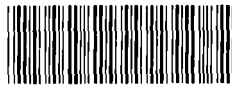


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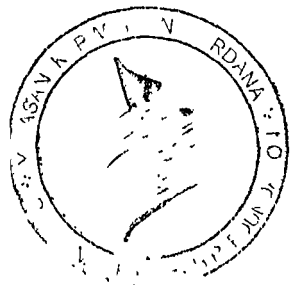
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PUSTAKA PERDANA



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Monthly Review Press
New York



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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

ISBN 1-58367-010-6 (paper)

ISBN 1 58367-009-2 (cloth)

Monthly Review Press
122 West 27th Street
New York, NY 10001

Designed and typeset by Illuminati, Grosmont
Manufactured in Canada

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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Acknowledgements

With profound gratitude I here acknowledge my friends. I am very fortunate to have engaged in an extended intellectual dialogue—sometimes not so simple or easy—with people who I love and respect. I owe special thanks to my co-authors Barbara Laslett and Nancy Holmstrom, astute thinkers and dear friends. The articles we've written together are full collaborations, expressing our shared political commitments and drawing equally on our different areas of knowledge. Thanks also to Barbara for being there in hard times and for her outstanding editorial skills. Thanks to Jan Haaken, true friend and comrade, for teaching me about psychoanalytic feminism and giving me tools for understanding emotional life, tools that have been crucial for me personally as well as intellectually. I thank Samira Haj for all the love and support we share and for challenging my thinking and drawing me into new intellectual terrains. My gratitude also to Bill Resnick, loved companion and intellectual sparring partner. How I understand the world is continually shaped by our conversations and by his often unique and compelling insights about contemporary politics. Thanks to Pat Kirkham for her enduring friendship and Gary Smith for his wise counsel. Perry Anderson and Erik Olin Wright have been generous colleagues; their encouragement over the years has been very important to me. I am grateful to Christopher Phelps, who commissioned the book when he was editor at MR Press, for his enthusiasm about the project and for helping me to shape the collection. I want to thank my editors Lucy Morton and Robin Gable for their help also. Always in my mind are my son Aaron Brenner and my brothers Adam, Louis, and Peter Seitchik. Their love and appreciation for me and mine for them is deep and abiding. Our relationship sustains me in everything I do, including writing this book.

Chapter 1, “Rethinking Women’s Oppression” (with Maria Ramas), was first published in *New Left Review* 144 (March–April 1984). Chapter 2, “Gender and the State” (with Barbara Laslett), was first published as “Gender, Social Reproduction, and Women’s Self-Organization: Considering the U.S. Welfare State” in *Gender & Society* 5, no. 3 (September 1991). Chapter 3, “Gender and Class in U.S. Labor History,” was first published in *Monthly Review* 50, no. 6 (November 1998). Chapter 4, “The Feminization of Poverty, Comparable Worth, and Feminist Political Discourse,” was first published as “Feminist Political Discourses: Radical Versus Liberal Approaches to the Feminization of Poverty and Comparable Worth” in *Gender and Society* 1, no. 4 (December 1987). Chapter 5, “The Politics of Welfare Reform,” was first published as “Towards a Feminist Perspective on Welfare Reform” in *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 2, no. 1 (Fall 1989). Chapter 6, “Welfare Reform: Reframing the Debate,” was first published in *Against the Current* 54 (January–February 1995). Chapter 7, “Socialist-feminism versus Communitarian Conservatism” (with Nancy Holmstrom), was first published as “Autonomy, Community, and Women’s Rights” in Mike Davis and Michael Sprinter, eds., *The Year Left* (Verso, 1985). Chapter 8, “Democracy, Community and Care,” was first published as “Utopian Families” in *Socialist Register 2000* (Merlin Press). Chapter 9, “Meeting the Challenge of the Political Right,” was first published as “Feminism’s Revolutionary Promise: Finding Hope in Hard Times” in *Socialist Register 1989* (Merlin Press). Chapter 10, “The Best of Times, the Worst of Times: U.S. Feminism Today,” was first published in *New Left Review* 200 (July–August 1993). The author and publishers gratefully acknowledge permission to reprint this material here.

Introduction

The articles in this book were written out of my experience as a political activist, a socialist, and a feminist thinker and teacher. They are theoretical and practical, exploring Marxist-feminist questions but always with an eye toward doing politics. In this century feminism has made extraordinary gains, pushing back the boundaries of male domination within industrial capitalist societies. Now, though, the movement for women's liberation faces a political impasse. I try to account for feminism's gains and limits and suggest that old modes of organizing need to be transformed to meet new challenges.

I write about bringing anti-capitalist ideas and perspectives into feminism but also about bringing feminism into socialist politics. I explore the intersection of capitalist class relations with race/ethnicity and gender. I explore how economic life and politics interconnect with family life and sexuality. I argue that creating collective, democratic, and unalienated forms of family and community life are as central to socialism as revolutionizing work and politics. I insist on the value of imagining and discussing these alternatives even though they seem unattainable.

I belong to a socialist organization, Solidarity, that meets on Sunday. I joke sometimes that it's my church. But my politics do not rest on faith in an inevitable triumph, the final conflict, or History. However, I do believe in hanging in there, keeping socialist ideas and ideals alive, doing politics that are as pro-working class, liberatory, and democratic as possible, and in being part of that long tradition of struggle for an egalitarian and democratic world.

Themes that have been at the core of my intellectual and political commitments tie the articles in this book together. I start, as Marx did,

with the capitalist mode of production and its distinctive social arrangements. I reject functionalist arguments—arguments that try to explain all the different institutions of capitalist societies by how they function to support the interests of the capitalist class. But I do think that what Marx called the social relations of production—class relations—constrain and shape politics, social life, culture, personal life, and much else.

I begin to trace these linkages in Part I, *Toward a Historical Sociology of Gender*. For me, historical materialist explanation begins with how societies organize the collective labor basic to human survival and with the power relations that are embedded in those institutional arrangements. Marxists have focused their attention almost entirely on the production of things. Marxist feminists have broadened this notion of necessary labor to include the care and nurturing of people—we use the term “social reproduction.” Feminists early on identified the particular way social reproduction is organized in capitalist societies—through the nuclear family household—and the gender division of labor in social reproduction—women’s assignment to the work of caring for people—as central to the oppression of women in capitalism. But where did the gender division of labor come from? Was it just “carried over” from the patriarchal households of the societies where capitalism originated? Was it determined by women’s biology? Was it the product of capitalist interests in guaranteeing new laborers? Was it the product of working-class men’s interests in securing their wives’ sexual services and caring labor? Was it because capitalists and male workers shared in the domestic ideology that women’s place was in the home and that women’s wages ought to be lower than men’s wages?

These are the questions Maria Ramas and I address in our article on rethinking women’s oppression (Chapter 1). We argue that to understand women’s oppression in capitalism, it is necessary to explain not only what men wanted but also what *women* wanted, how women defined their interests in relation to men’s and what resources women had for contesting with men politically. We argue that in the nineteenth century, human biology *and* the structures of capitalist accumulation—the capitalist employers’ drive for profit—powerfully constrained the choices open to working-class women. In the constraints of human biology we included not only women’s role in biological reproduction (pregnancy, breast-feeding) but also children’s long period of dependence on adults and their need for consistent attention to develop physical, emotional, and intellectual capacities. We argue that pregnancy and breast-feeding