

false consciousness

by
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That people are unaware of the oppression of women is a serious problem, but one that will be resolved as our movement grows and makes its presence felt. The problem of false consciousness, however, is harder to solve, and ultimately more dangerous, since our consciousness will determine our goals and our strategy.

Of all the wrong theories about who oppresses women, the most confusing and insidious is the theory that women oppress themselves. This false consciousness takes two forms.

First, women are put down for submitting to unequal, unrespectful treatment without fighting back. Second, they are accused of courting their own oppression. That is, they are accused of behaving in such a weak, passive dependent way with men that men cannot possibly treat them as equals.

The first attitude is most common among women who feel that they have tried to be strong and independent, who look around them and notice that other women appear perfectly satisfied being weak and dependent. These other women seem to have made a conscious and ignoble bargain with life, sacrificing their dignity in return for protection and keep. Let us examine this bargain, and try to understand what the elements of choice really are.

Any woman, in any social class, who tries to insist on equality in relationships with men must be prepared to face the consequences of being a single woman in our society. She must face the difficulties of travelling alone, of being an obligation to her married friends, of knowing she can depend on no one for help and companionship when she wants them. These problems are real, not psychological, not in her mind. It is not a question of women being taught to believe that being single is undesirable. It is truly difficult for most unattached women to operate comfortably and effectively in a male chauvinist culture.

For many women, marriage means even more than the opportunity to avoid being single. It is also the only way out of a boring and alienating job - a job which moreover, is likely to require that she concede her dignity to men anyway. If for example, she is a secretary or waitress, and fails to placate the men who are her superiors or customers, chances are she will find herself job-hunting again.

Her only chance for respect -- partial and phony though it is -- is to have a family. Society has closed other roads to all but a few. Discrimination against women in jobs is a fact. Women's work is low-paid work. And for a woman with apparent opportunities for better-paying, less boring work, sexual discrimination in the professions and in graduate schools becomes important.

For most women, the consequences of losing -- even of attempting -- an individual struggle with a man are severe: poverty, isolation, even death, depending on the man's temperament and the woman's own class situation. Sure, every time we don't struggle we make it harder for a woman who does. But only when we have a movement, only when women can offer each other real support, can we begin to make such demands on each other. To blame women for not struggling is to forget what the risks of struggle are for us all.

The second form of this false consciousness--the theory that women are oppressed because they go around asking for it--is most dangerous to our movement. It implies that a man oppresses a woman simply as a reaction to the woman's own expectations, and that he will stop as soon as she shows him she has some self-respect. The theory denies a basic reality--that men benefit in real ways--socially, economically, sexually and psychologically--from male supremacy.

FALSE CONSCIOUSNESS

Our oppression is not in our heads. We will not become un-oppressed by "acting unoppressed." Try it--if you have the economic independence to survive the consequences. The result will not be respect and support. Men will either not like you--you are a bitch, a castrator, a nag, a hag, a witch; or they will accuse you of not liking them--you don't care about me; you don't love me; you are selfish and hostile.

True, women suffer (because they are oppressed) from feelings of inferiority and self-hatred. True, too, that believing themselves to be inadequate and to deserve their place in a different and lower class from men; women have often thought themselves unjustified in demanding their freedom. In other words, the fact that women sometimes blame themselves for their situation may prevent them from becoming strong fighters on their own behalf. Surely one important task of our movement

is to make it come clear to ourselves and to all women that our low social, economic and sexual status results not from any natural inferiority but from actual, recognizable, analyzable oppression, however subtle in form. But we cannot stop there; the elimination of self-blame, the birth of self-respect, is not the elimination of oppression. Feeling convinced of the justice of our demands is not, alas, the same as having those demands met.

The job of our movement, then, is not to blame ourselves or any other women for passivity, weakness, dependence, or any other qualities that women seem to display. Nor is it simply to strengthen ourselves for personal confrontations. Our job is to provide the vision of liberation and the hope, through our collective strength, of finally overthrowing male supremacy--everywhere.

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