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Transcript of

## **Žarana Papić: The social relationship of the sexes – a neglected contradiction<sup>1</sup>**

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The problem of the relations of the sexes their social formation and establishment in the form of an ostensibly eternal seemingly “biological” hierarchy, in addition to the limited consciousness which is resist to the “contradiction” aroused by the reification of social differences” /Horkheimer/, is a fundamental and inescapable question in any serious effort to get to the roots of the woman’s ‘social handicap’, the complicated aspects of the subordination and fulfillment of her individual and social being. The analysis of the long-standing social mechanism of the ‘production’ of the sexes, which is a rule have yielded the inequality and domination of one sex/male/ over the other/female/ has been fundamentally (sic) neglected in social thought. For a long time the ‘structure’ of social thought has been founded on the blind acceptance of manifest forms as the essence of human sexual characteristics and on the assumption that socially conditioned human nature is biological nature itself, and accordingly that it is impossible to transform the social relations of the sexes, for this would impinge on the rigid, unalterable biological sphere. In many other problems the biological argument has given way and yielded to primarily social interpretations, as for example in the “nature vs. nurture” dispute in regard to the formation of the individual. But in the field of the relations of the sexes, the biological mode of thought has retained full vitality. This is reinforced by a vigorous individual as well as pervasive theoretical consciousness which maintains that in the social origin of the sexes and their relations is there unquestio-

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<sup>1</sup> Page divisions are kept according to original archival document.

nably exist limiting factors, inseparable biological facts which determine the contour, domain and "natural" capacity of each individual sex. This historically constituted consciousness overlooks the social character of the biological and bases the concept of the equality of the sexes on unexamined and unquestioned grounds: motherhood, the "biological" bond between the child and the mother and her seemingly primordial striving to care for children until maturity. The consciousness and its practical application accept the fundamentally reified relationship of the sexes and neglects the fact of the historical process of the determination of the characteristics of the sexes. It fails even to conceive of the fact that the functions of the female being and "biology" are similarly an historical, human made product. The ostensible and seemingly unquestionable foundation of biologism in perceiving the "authentic" characteristics of the sexes rests on the conviction that the social forms that "mediate biology and which are so universal, pervasive and powerful as sex roles and parenting may come to seem natural and therefore unavoidable" /Cerullo et.a./. To neglect the social nature of the formation of sexual predilections and their role and to leave them unexamined for allegedly powerful arguments/ in the sphere of biological determination is to neglect and to fail to question the fundamental characteristics of all historical social forms in which the world of fatherhood and the male develops as the world of culture, which motherhood and the world of women is identified with the world of nature, i.e. the unalterable. The biological function of motherhood always seemed a universal timeless fact and long escaped the inspection of socio-historical analysis, remaining in the sphere of self-evident inalterability and natural

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insurpassibility (sic). By virtue of the socio-historical formation of the sexes, the indispensability of woman's reproductive role also imposed upon her whole set of allegedly natural and authentic female duties. The necessity for extended care in the early years of life, a unique biological feature of the human being – seemingly unavoidably belonged to the woman and became her basic function, her "natural duty and social task". But it is lost from view that the extended dependence of the young does not bear out the biological inevitability of the female role in the care of children but rather points to the necessity for the care of children, which in and of itself does not dictate anything "about the social arrangement by which this is managed"/ Cerullo et al./ and thus does not testify to the biological inexorability of all the components of the traditional female sphere, merely indicating the specific "biology of the child" /R. Hamilton". The fact that the biology of the child has ostensibly become the fundamental element of the biology of the woman is the result of the social process of the structuring of sex roles. Whenever woman and her function of childbirth and child-rearing remain in the sphere of natural determination, the family easily assumes the characteristics of a "natural" institution in which by virtue of long composed biological "scenario" – two worlds: the world of men and the world of women are established and place in opposition for all time. Individual, practical and social consciousness pays no regard to the fact that "there is nothing inevitable about the form or role of the family, any more than there is about the character or role of woman" /J. Mitchell/. Similarly, the social mythologizing of motherhood is no evidence of the inevitability of woman's duty, but in fact, prints to the roots of her social powerlessness and non-participation.

The identification of woman with nature, the insistence upon unalterability of the forms of primary socialization, and the hypostatization of the existing form of the family leads to the narrowed concept of the possible transformation of the social relationship of the sexes. All formulations that deny the historical character of the biological and which at least implicitly assume that, aside from childbirth, there also exist irreplaceable, long-lived, exclusively female duties, activities and aptitudes, impose upon women /even if economically independent/ a deep-seated and rigid status and domain for her individual and social development, as well as the character of its attainment. This is the status and domain of motherhood/ as a substitute for all other forms of creativity/ of marriage, the family and “home sweet home”, of an imposed and restricted sex identity, of deprived and undiscovered sexuality, the domain of conservative and narrow “feminine” characteristics etc. The inability to perceive the depth and consequences of the social process of sex-role formation or the necessity to conceive in comprehensive terms as a radical transformation is the reason for the socially insufficiently recognized and “disparaged” scholarly status of the “woman question” and its notable absence / or excessive abstraction / in Marxist thought. Understanding the need for economic independence of women and their massive entry into the public sphere is not in and of itself final, even fundamental solution of the structure of the family and the “natural” division of labor and roles within it, if the patriarchal rules which the process of socialist transformation has not fundamentally impinged upon, the social segregation of women in particular spheres of production and public affairs, the socialization

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of temperament, and the psycho-structure of the sexes remain untouched problems which we sometimes abashedly acknowledge but continue to consign to an ostensibly independent privacy where the patriarchal order continues to live in the minds and hearts of people.

The distinctive position of women and their role in the continuation of the social order clearly indicate that it is no longer possible / or even “logical” / to separate the family and relations between the sexes from the entire process of social production and reproduction.

The analyses of the social phenomenon as a whole cannot escape the problem of the relations between the sexes, the character of the family and the direction of women’s “destiny” and the fact that a grasp of the pure biological sphere of human reproduction is one of the essential conditions for perceiving the social and historical character of human nature. Only then is it possible for the neglected, but not negligible dimension of social human nature/ relations between the sexes / to emerge from its ossified ostensible naturalness and reveal all its social roots and elements of distorted consciousness. It seems to me that there is accordingly reason to give serious consideration to the objections to Marxism in recent feminist literature to the effect of the family, seeing “the worker’s consciousness as developing only at the point of production” / S. Rubothan/. The tendency to consider and study the two social spheres – production/ work and the economy/ and human reproduction/ childbirth and socialization/ - in isolation or in a schematic relationship, is also to be found in Marxist thought.

The contemporary women’s movement and its sur-

ging theoretical development, which desires to reexamine the foundation of women's subordination and their imposed biological and familial identity have created new opportunities for the analyses of social contradictions. They have disclosed heretofore unnoticed and "unimportant" forms of the domination and exploitation of women – as in language, wherein one may perceive the conceptual and grammatical domination of the male over the conceptual world/ the concept of the "man" seems "naturally" to refer to the characteristics of the male rather than the female, etc/. There has been analysis of patriarchal values, stereotypes, prejudices and child development by virtue of which the sexes assume their essentially unequal and falsely complementary identities and affinities, the lie has been given to the romantic mythology that exalts womanhood, while at the same time reasserting woman's unfreedom and restriction in a limited, disarmed aura, etc. In the day-t-day existence of our still vigorous patriarchal mentality, this ensemble of touchy problems is converted into "bogey of feminism", and is then interpreted by means of the familiar sexist arguments with reference to the typical female tendency toward exaggeration and hysteria, thus facilely obscuring the problem and leaving women still in their ascribed status.

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