

“The New Synthesis and the Woman Question: The Emancipation of Women and the Communist Revolution—Further Leaps and Radical Ruptures”

Part III. of *Unresolved Contradictions, Driving Forces for Revolution* (2009)

[Editor’s Note: The footnote numbering of this selection preserves the original numbering as it appears in Unresolved Contradictions, Driving Forces for Revolution. For that reason the first footnote in this selection begins with footnote 11.]

Here again, I want to emphasize the point with which I began this talk as a whole: Much of this I am still working on and grappling with myself, and much of what follows will be more in the nature of a scaffolding than a fully elaborated discussion. So while what follows will include points of basic orientation and analysis, which I feel are important to be firmly taking hold of and acting on, to a significant degree the purpose and aim here is to offer some food for thought and sense of direction, while at the same time promoting, and provoking, further wrangling with these decisive questions.

The question of the status—the oppression and the struggle for the liberation—of women is objectively coming to the forefront in today’s world and posing itself ever more profoundly and acutely. This fact is being recognized and spoken to by a number of people representing very different class viewpoints, but who remain within the framework of a world of imperialist domination, class division, ruthless exploitation and oppressive social divisions and relations. We see this, for example, in the book which I referred to earlier by Michelle Goldberg (*The Means of Reproduction*) as well as in a major article in the *New York Times Magazine* and a new book by Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn (see “The Women’s Crusade,” in the *New York Times Magazine*, August 23, 2009, an essay adapted from the book by Kristof and WuDunn, *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression Into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*, Alfred A. Knopf, 2009).

Here is a point worth reflecting on, which has been raised by another leading comrade in our party: This focus on the status of women, particularly in the Third World, is being raised by these various bourgeois-democratic forces, both out of a genuine belief that this is an outrage which must be addressed—while approaching this entirely from within the framework of bourgeois and imperialist-dominated relations—and out of a sense that this is one key way to go after, undermine and eventually defeat radical Islam. In other words, an aspect of this is how it is part of a strategic approach on behalf of one historically “outmoded”—imperialist ruling strata—in opposition to another historically “outmoded”—reactionary Islamic fundamentalism.

So in this context, as well as in the larger, world-historic context of the communist revolution, there is a profound and pressing need for those representing the emancipatory goals of the communist revolution, with its final aim of the abolition of all class divisions and all relations of exploitation and oppression, to make further leaps and ruptures in our understanding of and approach to the woman question, in theory and in practice—in the realm of ideological and political line, and mobilizing mass struggle based on that line—in accordance with the pivotal and decisive role this question objectively occupies, not only in terms of ending the millennia of subjugation and degradation of half of humanity, but also the way in which this is integrally and indispensably bound up with the emancipation of humanity as a whole and the advance to a whole new era in human history with the achievement of communism throughout the world.

In this light and from this perspective, I want to offer some thinking on key aspects of how this challenge is presenting itself and on the necessary work and struggle to achieve the leaps and ruptures that are objectively and indeed urgently called for.

The Oppression of Women and the “Two Outmodeds”

To begin with, the oppression of women is a decisive dimension of what Marx referred to as the enslaving subordination of people to the division of labor, which has been a phenomenon ever since class divisions—and, along with them, the oppression of women—emerged in human society, and which must be overcome in order to advance to communism.

Now, as far back as *Red Papers 3*,¹¹ published by the Revolutionary Union (the forerunner of our party) about 40 years ago now, this point—how the oppression of women is a decisive dimension of the enslaving division of labor in society—was made. But *Red Papers 3*, and our thinking at that time overall, was not only undeveloped in general and specifically on the woman question, but it was also significantly influenced by economism (and by related trends which also ultimately amounted to seeking reforms within the existing system and ran counter to a truly revolutionary communism), and this had its effects, as I will discuss through the course of the remaining part of this talk.

In today’s world, with regard to the woman question we see again the relevance of the “two historically outmodeds.” In *A Declaration: For Women’s Liberation and the Emancipation of All Humanity*, published by our party earlier this year (2009), the following is cited:

What we see in contention here with Jihad on the one hand and McWorld/McCrusade on the other hand, are historically outmoded strata among colonized and oppressed humanity up against historically outmoded ruling strata of the imperialist system. These two reactionary poles reinforce each other, even while opposing each other. If you side with either of these “outmodeds,” you end up strengthening both.¹²

That *Declaration* immediately goes on to emphasize the point that:

Between these two “outmodeds” it is the imperialist ruling classes, and that of the U.S. in particular, which have, by far, done the most harm to humanity and pose the greatest threats. In fact, imperialist domination itself in the Middle East, Indonesia, and elsewhere—along with the massive disruption and dislocation that this domination causes, and the corruption, venality and vicious repression characteristic of the local governments that are dependent on and serve imperialism—gives great fuel to the fire of Islamic fundamentalism as a response to all this, although a reactionary one.

This brings into relief the way in which the other “outmoded”—that is, medieval forms of the oppression of women by Islamic fundamentalists and others in parts of the Third World—is being utilized by those who, at least objectively, side with the imperialist “outmoded” and attempt to prettify—and in some aspects even to promote—the “modern” forms of the oppression of women that are more common in the imperialist countries, and to divert attention and struggle around the oppression of women into a framework that reinforces the imperialist system, which is in reality the main and most fundamental force perpetuating oppression, including of the most horrific kinds, in all parts of the world.

This puts into the appropriate perspective the role being played, at least objectively, by people like Goldberg and Kristof and WuDunn, with the analysis they are propagating, and the programs they are promoting, as supposed answers to the oppression of women. Even if we allow that they are genuinely outraged by many manifestations of this oppression, they are still leading everything back into the very framework of the system which is fundamentally the cause of all this.

The following, also from *A Declaration: For Women’s Liberation and the Emancipation of All Humanity*, powerfully refutes the attempt to portray the imperialist “outmoded”—or, more specifically, the “modern” and “liberal” variations of this “outmoded”—as the standard bearer of the liberation of women:

In sum: “Modern” capitalist society—or in reality the global system of capitalist imperialism—has inherited the oppression of women from past societies out of which capitalism has emerged, and while changing some of the forms in which this takes place, it has not eliminated, and cannot eliminate, this oppression; it has incorporated pre-capitalist forms of this oppression, in various parts of the world,

¹¹ *The Red Papers 3, Women Fight for Liberation*, was published in 1970 by the Bay Area Revolutionary Union. It is currently out of print.

¹² Here the *Declaration* is quoting a statement that originally appeared in Bob Avakian’s talk “Why We’re in the Situation We’re In Today... And What to Do About It: A Thoroughly Rotten System and the Need for Revolution.” This talk is available online at revcom.us as part of the “7 Talks.”

particularly the Third World, into its overall, worldwide system of exploitation and oppression, and it perpetuates all this through the fundamental relations, the ongoing process of accumulation and the overall functioning of this capitalist-imperialist system itself. (emphasis in original)

The burkha and the thong—hideous embodiments of the degradation of women

To cite another important passage from this *Declaration*:

While they may appear very different, the burkha enforced by fanatical Islamic fundamentalism, on the one hand, and the “thong,” widely advertised and promoted as “sexy underwear” for women, in “modern” capitalist society, on the other hand, are both hideous symbols and embodiments of the degradation of women. The fundamental thing they have in common is that they are both manifestations of a world marked by horrendous forms of oppression, both “traditional” and “modern”—a world dominated overall by capitalist imperialism—a world that needs to be turned upside down and radically transformed.

Now, in addition to the obvious and egregious manifestations of the oppression of women, not only in the Third World, but also in the U.S. itself—the widespread rape and brutality and degradation that are part of the social relations and the prevailing culture which are promoted in this society and all over the world—it is important to focus on some particular aspects of how the woman question is actually posed in the U.S. today, while situating this in the context of significant changes that have taken place over a few decades.

As we know, women have entered in very large numbers into the work force in the U.S. in this period. In fact, recently it has been pointed out that, if present trends continue, it will very soon be the case that women will actually outnumber men in the work force in the U.S., which is obviously a very significant development. This is a result of changes in the economy (the U.S. economy, in the context of the overall world economy) which have both made possible and necessary this drawing of women into employment in large numbers; and this also plays a part in “stabilizing” U.S. society through the development and furthering of a certain middle class standard of living and “lifestyle” which is only possible to maintain, for significant numbers of people in the U.S. today, through women as well as men working. This involves a very great change from the era of the *Mad Men* on TV, for example (the early 1960s), where the women were in the home and one man working in a middle class position was able to supply this kind of standard of living and lifestyle for the family as a whole. But changes that have taken place have resulted in a situation where it is only possible to maintain this status and this standard of living and lifestyle through the women working as well as the men. This is a very significant development.

And, of course, this did not happen automatically as a result of developments and changes in the economy, but also occurred as a result of concessions wrung and changes brought about through the whole upsurge of the ‘60s and, in particular, the movement for women’s liberation which developed through the 1960s and into the 1970s. These two factors together—changes in the economy and struggle brought forth through the movement of the 1960s, and in particular the women’s liberation movement—have led to significant changes in the status of women in many different dimensions, including in the sphere of work, even while women continue to be discriminated against systematically in work, including in pay and opportunities for advancement and so on—the “glass ceiling” still exists.¹³

But, as we emphasized, even while there is a need, on the part of the ruling class, to promote and foster a significant “middle class” as a force of stability and, in very important ways, of conservatism, there is also a pressing need of this system to maintain traditional relations—particularly as these are concentrated in the patriarchal family and the

¹³ While, to a significant degree, the dramatic rise in female employment in the U.S. in the last several decades has involved women in the professions and families of “middle class status,” broadly defined, there has also been a marked increase in the number of working class and poor women who are employed outside the home—and all this has been accompanied by a major influx of immigrant women working in low-wage jobs, as well as those trapped in illicit enterprises, such as prostitution. *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy*, edited with an introduction by Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild (Holt Paperbacks, 2002), examines the phenomenon of the feminization of migrant labor, “legal” and “illegal,” on a global scale in the last few decades—especially that involving the typical pattern of migration from poor to rich countries—and shines a light on important aspects of how this serves to perpetuate the imperialist system and the “lifestyles” of those in more privileged positions within the imperialist citadels, such as the U.S., a parasitism which, to no small degree, requires the hardships and often brutal exploitation—including outright slavery, particularly in the case of many trapped in the “sex industry”—endured by millions and millions of these women migrant workers.

position and role of women in society overall. And, in this situation, the changes to which I have referred here are clashing sharply against the extremely aggressive attempts of the Christian Fascists and other openly reactionary forces to more firmly assert and enforce tradition's chains, particularly as applied to women—to openly, overtly chain women in a subordinate and oppressed condition, relying heavily on biblical tradition as the ideological basis for this (as is discussed, for example, in *Away With All Gods!*).

What I pointed out, speaking over 20 years ago now to the situation in the U.S., remains profoundly true and of pivotal importance in terms of the fundamental direction of society and, indeed, the world overall. I wrote then: “The whole question of the position and role of women in society is more and more acutely posing itself in today's extreme circumstances.” This was in the context, back in the 1980s, where there was in reality a growing danger of world war—those are the particular extreme circumstances that were being referred to in this statement—but today there are different particular extreme circumstances and real crisis that exists, and this statement, concerning the acute terms in which the position and role of women is posing itself, continues to have profound meaning now. As that statement goes on to emphasize:

It is not conceivable that all this will find any resolution other than in the most radical terms.... The question yet to be determined is: will it be a radical reactionary or a radical revolutionary resolution, will it mean the reinforcing of the chains of enslavement or the shattering of the most decisive links in those chains and the opening up of the possibility of realizing the complete elimination of all forms of such enslavement?

Crucial Experience of the 1960s and '70s

In light of the situation and the stakes, it is very important to critically review the historical experience and views of the revolutionary and communist movements on this question, and to grasp more firmly the need for yet a further radical leap and rupture. There is definitely a need for further investigation, study, analysis and synthesis in regard to all this, but the following speaks to some important aspects of this and can, in part at least, help provide a framework and guidelines for that further investigation, study, analysis and synthesis.

I want to begin by touching briefly on the movement of the 1960s and into the 1970s, and its legacy and aftermath.

Even as there were different trends ideologically and politically among the more radical forces in that period, these radical forces increasingly gained the initiative within the movements and struggles and the overall upheaval of those days. They were going up against, and seeking in various ways to pose radical alternatives to, the dominant forces in the world, in particular U.S. imperialism. But also, at least objectively and to no small degree consciously, they were rebelling against the revisionist parties and forces which were not only stodgy and conservative, in some general and abstract sense, but had themselves become defenders and advocates of the existing oppressive order, seeking at most some kind of adjustments or realignments within that order.

The women's movement coming out of the 1960s, and specifically the contributions as well as some shortcomings both in what it brought forward and how that was responded to by the broader movement, as well as the broader society, is the next point I want to speak to.

Extremely important questions were being raised and grappled with, particularly by the more radical forces within the women's movement that emerged out of the 1960s and into the 1970s, even though this was not on the basis of, and in some significant ways was objectively in opposition to, a consistently scientific approach. But economist influences and related tendencies within the new communist movement that emerged in that period, including the RU and then the RCP, worked against the correct scientific assimilation and synthesis of very important things that were being raised by the women's movement. Valuable insights and important elements of a more advanced understanding were squandered by the communist movement at that time, as a result of economist and other erroneous influences.

So this emphasizes the importance of a more dialectical as well as materialist approach to what came out of that women's movement, even if we can say, as objectively we should, that this movement was largely characterized by a petit bourgeois orientation, not only, or even essentially, in terms of the class position of most of the women who took part in it, but more fundamentally in terms of its outlook and orientation. Nonetheless, on the part of that women's movement, and particularly its more radical sections, extremely important questions were being grappled with, and criticisms were being raised of the communist movement and its approach to the woman question at that time which

had some validity and which should have been embraced in an overall sense and sifted through and synthesized in a way that they were not.

All this needed then, and definitely needs now, to be approached with the understanding that the status of women and the struggle for the emancipation of women will continue to have a tremendously important role, not only in the struggle for revolution but also in the transition toward communism once a new socialist society has been brought into being. Twenty years ago now, in “The End of a Stage—The Beginning of a New Stage” (*Revolution* magazine #60, Fall 1990), I grappled with the question of unresolved contradictions under socialism and how this can be a propelling and driving force to continue the socialist revolution toward the goal of communism and to combat and defeat revisionist influences and forces which would turn the revolution back. As spoken to earlier, unevenness and contradiction hold the basis and potential for change. The unresolved contradictions under socialism and their potential to be a driving and propelling force for continuing the revolution is another expression of this role of unevenness, in terms of its posing the potential for radical transformation. Among the most important of those unresolved contradictions which were spoken to in “End/Beginning” was precisely the aspects of the oppression of women that would persist in socialist society and the importance of the struggle for the complete liberation of women not only in its own right but as a driving force for continuing the revolution overall in socialist society.

The Visceral and the Theoretical

In this context, and in regard to the opportunities that were lost, or squandered, on the part of the communist movement to learn from and to correctly, scientifically assimilate many crucial things that were being raised by the women’s movement at that time, there is a dimension that I want to touch on here, which might be captured in the formulation: the relation between the visceral and the theoretical. In the 1960s and into the ‘70s, there was, as a very vibrant, vital and crucial part—not just a legitimate part but a very vibrant, vital and crucial part—of the women’s movement, the bursting forth of visceral feelings of outrage, of pent-up outrage over decades (and, in a larger sense, centuries and millennia) of the oppression of women. At times, this came forward in ways that were not thoroughly scientific, although it must be stressed that there has been, on the part of many forces within the women’s liberation movement, serious work done and struggle waged in the theoretical sphere, with the aim of making scientific analysis of the oppression of women and the road to their liberation. Even where that fell short, there were important theoretical contributions that were made and important theoretical questions that were focused on and wrangled over, including by way of criticism of some of the stereotypical thinking and economist influences within the communist movement.

But the dynamic synergy between the visceral and theoretical, and the correct understanding and handling of this dialectical relation, is very important in regard to the oppression and the liberation of women, as it is in general in the development of the revolutionary struggle toward a whole new world. Just as in other dimensions of this, it is impossible to conceive of a correct understanding and the waging of the necessary struggle without the element of visceral hatred for the oppression, and without the correct approach to—the correct scientific assimilation and synthesis of—what is brought forward through the visceral expression of outrage at this oppression.

To put it another way, as is true with every important aspect of the revolutionary movement, it will be impossible to proceed on the right basis, with the right foundation, in struggling to uproot the oppression of women with only a theoretical understanding, though that is important and should in no way be underestimated. It is also indispensable to proceed, in a real sense, from a visceral feeling of all that it means to be female in this world. Our party’s *Declaration* on the woman question speaks to this very powerfully, particularly in its opening sections, and it is worth reviewing that and continually returning to it, to reground ourselves in both the sweep of this and also the acuity of it, and the outrage of it.

There are the very egregious things that stand out in terms of the oppression of women in more “medieval” forms, particularly in the Third World, which people like Goldberg and Kristof and WuDunn are able to point to (and let us allow that they do speak to this out of a sense of genuine outrage). There is the whole phenomenon of “honor killings,” where members of her own family will murder a woman, or young girl, if she “dishonors” the patriarchal family by being involved in sex outside of “approved” (and often arranged) marriage, even if this is a result of being raped! There is the whole way in which, in countries where the Islamic religion is dominant, a girl at a certain age suddenly is shrouded in a hejab or in a veil or a chador or a burkha, with everything that this concentrates in terms of

the subordination of women. There are the wife burnings or widow burnings in a country like India. The selling of women on the international sex market in the millions and millions. The outright brutality at the hands of husbands (recalling the old saying in China, which expresses a viewpoint, and relations, that are deeply entrenched in societies throughout the world: “a woman married is like a pony bought, I’ll ride her and whip her as I please”). The ongoing practice of female genital mutilation to which literally millions of girls are subjected every year—cutting out the clitoris, which deprives women of sexual satisfaction, and/or sewing shut the vagina to ensure “chastity” until marriage. The generalized acceptability of marital rape. The killing of girls at birth—which has re-emerged in China, for example, as a result of the reversal of the revolution and the restoration of capitalism, and the patriarchy and male domination which is an integral part of this—as well as the misuse and abuse of the right to abortion to carry out the abortion of specifically female fetuses, because females are deemed to be less valuable than males.

At the same time, while all this is very widespread in countries throughout the Third World, in the so-called “modern” imperialist countries there are no less egregious ways in which woman are demeaned and degraded, and yes brutalized through sexual and other violence on a massive scale.

In the “Revolution” talk (*Revolution: Why It’s Necessary, Why It’s Possible, What It’s All About*), there is a section where it is said: Look at all these beautiful children out here—speaking specifically of the children in the inner cities of the U.S.—and the point is made that these children’s fate is sealed, a life of oppression and degradation is set out for them, even before they are born, and soon the smiles and laughter and the carefree play that you can see among these children when they are very young will be turned into horror upon horror. All this is very true and very important, and again a visceral feeling about this, combined with a scientific theoretical understanding of its basis and of the basis for overthrowing and eliminating it, is indispensable for what we’re all about.

But it’s also very important to focus on the question: What does it mean to be born female in this world? Look at all these beautiful children who are female in the world. And in addition to all the other outrages which I have referred to, in terms of children throughout the slums and shantytowns of the Third World, in addition to all the horrors that will be heaped on them—the actual living in garbage and human waste in the hundreds of millions as their fate, laid out before them, yes, even before they are born—there is, on top of this, for those children who are born female, the horror of everything that this will bring simply because they are female in a world of male domination. And this is true not only in the Third World. In “modern” countries like the U.S. as well, the statistics barely capture it: the millions who will be raped; the millions more who will be routinely demeaned, deceived, degraded, and all too often brutalized by those who are supposed to be their most intimate lovers; the way in which so many women will be shamed, hounded and harassed if they seek to exercise reproductive rights through abortion, or even birth control; the many who will be forced into prostitution and pornography; and all those who—if they do not have that particular fate, and even if they achieve some success in this “new world” where supposedly there are no barriers for women—will be surrounded on every side, and insulted at every moment, by a society and a culture which degrades women, on the streets, in the schools and workplaces, in the home, on a daily basis and in countless ways.

How long does it take before the carefree play of female children—yes, in countries like the U.S.—gets turned into cutting themselves, in response to an unbearable feeling of worthlessness and despair, and often as a result of abuse; or starving themselves in an attempt to conform to the dominant and incessantly propagated notions of female beauty, with which their worth as a human being is equated and to which it is reduced? How long does it take before many girls who show intellectual curiosity and the spark of wanting to know about the world, and of learning about the world, learn instead to stifle that, to “play dumb” and stop speaking up, because it becomes all too clear to them that boys and men feel “threatened” by strong, competent and intelligent women? Or girls who, once having been actively involved in the joy of playing sports, give that up in order to be perceived as more “feminine.” Girls in general who, whatever else may happen in their lives, will be insulted and assaulted by pornography and other degradation of women, soft core and hard core, from mainstream advertising to the most extreme and grotesque and perverse. Who will learn to accommodate themselves in various ways—or will be encouraged, and in many ways coerced, into accommodating themselves—to the oppressive relations that prevail and predominate in society, particularly as regards women; or, on the other hand, will be encouraged and will learn to become hardened and cynical, to treat everyone and everything, including themselves and their own bodies, as commodities, and will be further degraded and debased in the process; will learn to lower their sights and not to dream and think of fully taking part in every sphere of society nor dare to rise up and change society, including in the way that it treats women? All

this too, is laid out for female children, including in countries like the U.S., even before they are born.

We could go on and on and on, detailing the further dimensions of this. Learning every day, and having to be mindful every day, of going through the world constantly seeking to guard against being assaulted, physically and/or sexually, all the way down to the smallest details of how you walk down the street, or enter and leave a building, whether or not and how you get on an elevator—having to carry these burdens every day through your life. Having normal and natural bodily and sexual functions—when girls’ breasts develop or they begin to menstruate and go through other hormonal and physical changes—having all that portrayed in a thousand ways as an object of others’ gratification and/or as something that’s unclean and shameful (that’s not just an old biblical injunction, it still has force and exerts its influence and force in ways that devalue and demean the human beings, the half of humanity, who are oppressed in this way).

As our party’s *Declaration* very rightly insists, in the world today and where humanity now stands, all of this should, and could, be swept from the earth—and the fact that it is perpetuated and enforced by outmoded systems, and above all the dominant system of capitalism-imperialism, makes it all more outrageous.

More “postcards of the hanging”

It is a striking fact—which is starkly evident in the U.S. now—that, in comparison to what is done to women, there is no other group in society that is so systematically reviled and defiled in a way that has become acceptable (or widely accepted in any case) as a significant part of “mainstream” life and culture, as happens in a concentrated way through pornography and the extremely demeaning and degrading images and messages about women it massively and pervasively purveys (with the Internet a major focus and vehicle for this), including pornography’s extensive portrayal of sadistic and violent sexual domination of women. (In this regard see, for example, Pamela Paul’s book, *Pornified, How Pornography is Damaging Our Lives, Our Relationships, and Our Families*, Holt Paperbacks, 2005.)

I began the “Revolution” talk with “They’re Selling Postcards of the Hanging,” reviewing the ugly history of the lynching of Black people in America and the way in which celebration of this became a cultural phenomenon in the U.S., with the selling of picture postcards of these lynchings a major expression of this—often including smiling and leering crowds of white people surrounding the murdered and mutilated body of a Black man. In a recent exchange, a comrade emphasized this profoundly important and compelling point: Today, the way in which pornography depicts women—the displaying of women in a degraded state for the titillation of viewers—including the grotesque brutality and violence against women which is involved in much of this, is the equivalent of those “Postcards of the Hanging.” It is a means through which all women are demeaned and degraded.

All this while pornography is an accepted part of Internet and other mainstream culture and is in fact a highly profitable business, through which billions of dollars are made each year and in which many “pillars” of the capitalist economy are heavily involved. And this “mainstreaming” of pornography is facilitated and furthered by the fact that the degradation of women is a regular feature of TV programs and other forms of “popular culture,” which routinely use the term “bitch” and other demeaning words to refer to women, crassly discuss the physical attributes and commodity value of female body parts, and often extol the sexual conquest and domination of women by men.

As has been noted by Pamela Paul, and a number of other authors who have examined this phenomenon, the great increase in the dissemination and consumption of pornography in recent decades, along with its increasingly extreme forms of humiliating and degrading women, is unquestionably related to the inroads women have made in a number of previously “male only” spheres of society and the challenges that have been posed to male domination overall. This is occurring, however, within the confines of a system in which patriarchy and male domination have not been, and cannot be, eliminated or uprooted—but are, in fact, essential and indispensable components of capitalism, and indeed all systems marked by class division and exploitation and oppressive social relations. In such circumstances, and given the prevailing ideology that corresponds to continuing male domination, despite—and in significant ways because of—real challenges to it, pornography serves as a vehicle of crude and vicious revanchism, a forceful reassertion of relations and traditions in which women are subjugated by and subservient to men. In all this pornography has, in a real sense, a “mirror opposite identity” with fundamentalist religion in today’s world, in its Christian as well as Islamic, and other, forms: they have in common a dark misogyny and determination to slam, and chain, women in a position of enforced subordination.

So when we say, “look at all these beautiful children,” and then we confront the question of what does it mean to be born into this world?—this has profound meaning for the masses of oppressed people and it has a double meaning for the female half of humanity, not only among the most oppressed and exploited sections of society, but among all strata of women. Back in the days when the women’s movement first emerged as a radical force in the late 1960s, focusing on the oppression of women as a crucial social question, some of the men who purported to be radical would come back with “quips” like: “Is Jackie Kennedy oppressed?” That was supposed to somehow be an answer to the fact, the very real fact, that the masses of women of all strata are treated as less than men, and in many ways as less than human. Yes, women of the ruling class take part in the exploitation of the masses of people. But that does not eliminate even their subordinate status within the ruling class, and it certainly does not eliminate the many and horrendous forms of the oppression of women of all strata throughout the world. We could go on and on and still not do justice to this, and still not give anything like full expression to what this means.

Phony science and bankrupt theories rationalizing oppression

To get into this more deeply, let’s step back a little bit. Let’s recall, for example, the official characterization of Black people that prevailed in mainstream and respected institutions well into the 20th century. To cite one really horrendous example, in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, a very prestigious institution, well into the 20th century “the Negro” was characterized as being highly emotional, intellectually inferior, childlike and yet “subject to sudden fits of emotion and passion during which he is capable of performing acts of singular atrocity” (this is drawn from the 1911 *Encyclopedia Britannica*, under the definition of “Negro”). This, again, in the prestigious *Encyclopedia Britannica*—portraying “Negroes” as in essence an inferior subspecies among human beings.

Let’s compare that to the “official” characterization of women during that same general time period. Let’s look, for example, at the medical profession. In *For Her Own Good: Two Centuries of the Experts’ Advice to Women*, Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English catalog some of the prevailing views about women in this profession and cite particularly sharp examples of it: the way in which women were associated with “flights of hysteria”; the supposed “child-like ignorance” that they exhibited toward the larger, male-dominated world; the whole attitude that prevailed toward menstruation, pregnancy and menopause—treating these as illnesses and/or defects; and even the alleged negative effect on the uterus if a woman were to use her brain too much! As Ehrenreich and English point out, with the appropriate caustic irony, “The great uterine manifesto of the 19th century, Dr. Edward H. Clarke’s ‘Sex and Education, or a Fair Chance for the Girls,’ concluded with startling but unassailable logic that higher education would cause women’s uteruses to atrophy.” (Ehrenreich and English, Second Anchor Books Edition, January 2005, p. 140) Things like this were actually written by respected scientific experts late in the 19th century.

Ehrenreich and English call attention to the fact that there was a highly influential trend in natural history in the 19th century which held the view that “the existing human races represent different evolutionary stages”—and this was applied to the sexes (p. 128). Ehrenreich and English point out, for example, that with regard to the supposed hierarchy of human types, Karl Vogt, a leading European professor of natural history in the second half of the 19th century, categorized the Negro male as follows: “[T]he grown up Negro partakes, as regards his intellectual faculties, of the nature of the child, the female and the senile White.” As Ehrenreich and English go on to comment: “Where this left the Negro female one shudders to think, not to mention the ‘senile’ female of either race.” (p. 129)

And there was no prospect for the status of women improving with further societal development, according to Vogt, for as Ehrenreich and English quote him further: “The inequality of the sexes increases with the progress of civilization.” (p. 130)

Attitudes and notions akin to those cited here not only were prevalent in the 19th century but continued well into the 20th—and, in fact, are far from having lost all currency, even in “modern-day” imperialist society. They are at times voiced by powerful and influential figures in countries like the U.S. For example, the following statement, made by E.O. Wilson, only a few decades ago:

“In hunter-gatherer societies, men hunt and women stay at home. This strong bias persists in most agricultural and industrial societies and, on that basis alone, appears to have a genetic origin.... My own guess is that the genetic bias is intense enough to cause a substantial division of labor in even the most free and most egalitarian of future societies.... Even with identical education and equal access to all professions, men are likely to continue to play

a disproportionate role in political life, business and science.” (Cited in Ardea Skybreak, *Of Primeval Steps & Future Leaps: An Essay on the Emergence of Human Beings, the Source of Women’s Oppression and the Road to Emancipation*, Banner Press, 1984. E.O. Wilson is known as a prominent proponent of sociobiology. As can be seen in the statement by Wilson cited here, this approach involves erroneous attempts to attribute the development of human behavioral characteristics and social relations in a linear and mechanical way to biological factors and causes, significantly underestimating the role of social factors in the development of—and changes in—human relations, behavior, traditions and ways of thinking. “Steps and Leaps” contains an important critique and refutation of the viewpoint and methods of Wilson and other sociobiologists.)

And more recently views of this kind were expressed by Lawrence Summers, insisting that women were naturally inferior in things like math and science. This at a time when he was the President of Harvard University—and, we should note, he is now an official in the Obama administration.

In this connection, also—and this is something referred to by Ehrenreich and English—the role of Freud and his theories and the whole psychoanalytic tradition, with the great harm this has done to women, as well as overall, is something which needs to be dug into and criticized much more thoroughly. Some important criticism of this has been raised by various feminists and some others. But, again, there remains a need for a much more thorough and radical exposure, critique and refutation of this, particularly through the application of dialectical materialism/historical materialism and the consistently and systematically scientific outlook and approach this embodies.

I recall myself that back in the 1960s, many of us were influenced, to varying degrees, by Freud’s theories, and there were many attempts by radical theorists—particularly male ones, but not only them—to somehow link and commingle the theories of Freud with the theories of Marx. In reality, these theories are in profound opposition to each other, and the influence of Freud not only has had a negative influence in society overall, but did so within the radical movements of that time. More thoroughly critiquing Freud’s theories and their influence can play an important part in the further development of the truly radical, and scientific, theory of communism, as applied to the oppression and the liberation of women, and overall.

It would have been far better then... and doing even better now

Returning to the point made earlier about *Red Papers 3*—in terms of economist and related influences within the RU and more broadly within what was called the “new communist movement” at that time, and how this interfered with moving toward a correct synthesis with regard to what was being raised by the women’s movement in that period, particularly its more radical sections—I want to refer to a comment that was made about 40 years ago now, at a meeting of what was then called the Revolutionary Youth Movement.

This was at a time when within SDS there were splits into different tendencies: there was the “Weatherpeople” phenomenon, which is well known; there was also Progressive Labor Party and its decidedly economist line (I mean, after all, what does it say when “communists” choose to call themselves the Progressive... Labor... Party—you only have to look at the name to know that such an organization is not going to lead to any kind of a radical new society!); and then there was this trend which identified itself at that time under the heading of the Revolutionary Youth Movement.

At the time of this split in SDS, there was a conference of the Revolutionary Youth Movement trend which some of us took part in as representatives of the RU. At one point in that meeting the question of sexuality, and more broadly the woman question, was being discussed, and one guy made an impassioned speech in which he very pointedly and emotionally said: “If you are a male and you want to be radical, you have to learn what it feels like to be a woman.”

Now, while this statement itself was pointing to something very important, it was made in the context of, and was in fact a part of, a trend that was increasingly giving up on the possibility of effecting truly radical change on a societal, and even global, level. It was part of an emerging trend of “identity politics”—of lowered and narrowed sights—a view that each “identity group” must concentrate on its particular situation and demands, which objectively would remain within the confines of the existing system. This was a retreat from the whole orientation of building a movement to go up against, and overturn and uproot, imperialism and bring a radically different world into being. Even then you could recognize that this was part of taking steps in that direction. And we were right to reject the road of “identity politics” and reformism and, in a basic sense, to insist on continuing on the communist road, even while

that was marred then to a significant degree by economism. But, at the same time, and especially looking back on it now, it is clear that there was something very important being raised which was too easily dismissed.

It was too easy to recognize and seize on the obvious “identity politics,” reformist and petit bourgeois orientation that was coming through in this statement. But it would have been far better to have united with what was correct and important in this statement. It would have been much better if those of us who were serious in considering ourselves communists had taken that kind of approach and on that basis had striven to achieve a further synthesis, through the application of the scientific communist viewpoint and not one marred significantly by economism. And now there is all the more need—and, yes, there is more of a basis—to do precisely that. This is the challenge we face and the important task we have to take up urgently.

Stepping back to look at this with a broader sweep, it is important—without negating or downplaying the very positive character overall, and the very real contributions, of the 1960s movement—to recognize that there were, within this movement, and even on the part of its most advanced forces, real weaknesses with regard to the woman question, including a significant element that involved the assertion of “manhood.” Now, especially as applied to Black people, this is a complicated question, because one of the main and most humiliating forms of the oppression of Black people in the history of this country has been the way in which Black men have been subjected to being treated as subordinate beings, as though they were at one and the same time child-like and extremely dangerous, forced—with the real prospect of death as the price for not doing so—to act in a manner subservient to white people, and in particular white men, as reflected, among other things, in the way that white people, including young white males who themselves had not yet reached adulthood, would consistently address grown Black men with the demeaning term “boy.” But the answer to all this—if the goal is to finally and fully uproot the oppression of Black people, women as well as men, and to abolish all forms of oppression—is not to strive to establish the “rightful place” of Black men in having, equally with white men, a dominant position over women—in asserting traditional relations between men and women which fasten tradition’s chains on women, as a key link in keeping humanity as a whole in an enslaved condition.

In a world marked by exploitative and oppressive divisions—where one of the most profound, and most oppressive, of these divisions involves the subjugation and degradation of the female half of humanity—the assertion of “manhood,” whatever the intent might be in doing so, can objectively only mean, and find expression as, active participation in that subjugation and degradation. And in a world where oppressive and exploitative divisions, including those in which men dominate women, would have been abolished and surpassed, the word—and the very concept—“manhood” would not have, and could not have, any real meaning, and certainly not a positive one.

To put this another way—to draw the necessary line of demarcation sharply—the assertion of “manhood” is ultimately and fundamentally a form and a means of accommodating to and seeking to “find your place” within the oppressive system, with all of the horrific crimes it embodies and enforces. In this connection, the role of Booker T. Washington is instructive. In the latter part of the 19th and the first part of the 20th century, after the reversal of Reconstruction, Washington became a prominent figure—and was promoted by the powers-that-be, including the openly segregationist and white supremacist powers-that-be in the South—in advocating that Black people not struggle against segregation and their overall oppression but instead strive to “better themselves” within the confines of their segregated and oppressed condition. An interesting insight in this regard is found in Jackson Lears’ recently published book, *Rebirth of a Nation—The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* (HarperCollins, 2009). In *Rebirth of a Nation* (whose title rather clearly invokes, critically and ironically, the overtly racist, and highly influential, early-20th-century epic film *Birth of a Nation*) one of the main themes Lears explores is how the assertion of “manliness” and “manly virtue” has, in the history of this country, been closely linked with militarism in the service of U.S. empire, with Theodore Roosevelt the most salient personification of this. Lears’ focus is on the period marked by the advent of capitalist imperialism—at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century—but clearly, and very correctly, he has in mind, and frequently suggests, parallels with phenomena today, a century later. And, as part of this discussion, Lears makes the following observation about Booker T. Washington—citing his role in preaching subservience to the established oppressive order, and contrasting him, significantly, with the much more militant and non-accommodationist Ida Wells, who boldly stood up against and organized against segregation and lynching:

As resistance to the emerging Jim Crow regime seemed increasingly futile, the frankly accommodationist views of Booker T. Washington appeared to hold out more promise than the angry resistance of Ida Wells.

Washington epitomized the marriage of manliness and black uplift. (Lears, p. 131).

While here Lears seems to be conceding too much to the notion that resistance, like that of Wells', was futile, there are important insights in his observations about Washington, in contrast with Wells, particularly in the linking of "manliness" and "uplift" with accommodation to the oppressive system.

Once again, the 1960s had a radically different and much more positive character and impact—with regard to the struggle of Black people in particular, and overall—than what was represented by Washington's "accommodationism" (or, to use a less elegant but no less accurate phrase, Washington's "Uncle Tom-ing") in the period after the defeat of Reconstruction. In fact, the struggle of Black people in the 1960s, in its main and overwhelming aspect, was in direct opposition to, and a powerful refutation of, the kind of stand taken and promoted by Booker T. Washington. But the link remains, and is all too real, between the assertion of "manhood" and the orientation of accepting, and even seeking to "get in on," at least some of the oppressive relations that are the lifeblood of this system. To repeat a statement of mine, which is cited in *A Declaration: For Women's Liberation and the Emancipation of All Humanity*:

In many ways, and particularly for men, the woman question and whether you seek to completely abolish or to preserve the existing property relations and corresponding ideology that enslave women (or maybe "just a little bit" of them) is a touchstone question among the oppressed themselves. It is a dividing line between "wanting in" and really "wanting out": between fighting to end all oppression and exploitation—and the very division of society into classes—and seeking in the final analysis to get your part in this. (emphasis in original)

And, as that *Declaration* also makes clear, quoting the special issue of *Revolution, The Oppression of Black People, the Crimes of This System, and the Revolution We Need*, the role models that are needed, by Black children and by people in general, are not "male role models" but

revolutionary role models, women no less than men. They need to see men and women who model the mutual respect and equality that reflects the world we are fighting for: a whole new liberated world where girls grow up strong and without fear of being raped, degraded or abused, where no child is ever deemed "illegitimate," and where men—like everyone else—find their worth in contributing to the betterment of all humanity through the revolutionary transformation of society rather than by getting in on even a little of the oppression of this nightmare world. (boldface and emphasis in original)

Again, as we look back on the movement of the 1960s overall, the point now is not to be determinist and teleological, as if it would have been impossible then to achieve the basic elements of the correct synthesis—with regard to the liberation of women, in its fullest dimensions, and the crucial relation between that and the emancipation of humanity as a whole—even though that would have been difficult to achieve given the overall weaknesses of the communist movement at that time; nor is the point that "it's all good," everything that has happened has led to the situation where such a synthesis is only now—possible. Not only would it have been far better if a more correct approach had been taken back then, but the fact is that there is a great need now for that synthesis—and there is the basis, through focused and concentrated work and struggle, to make the leap and ruptures required to actually achieve that synthesis in theory and line, as a much firmer foundation for carrying forward struggle around this fundamental sphere of human social relations, as one of the most decisive elements of actually unleashing a new stage of communist revolution in the world at the crossroads we are now facing, and in order to really be a vanguard of the future.

Challenging Traditional Gender Roles and Sexuality

One of the most important things that emerged in the upheaval of the 1960s (and into the early 1970s), particularly through the more radical currents within the women's movement, was the challenging of traditional gender roles in many different ways. And this, again, owing significantly to economist influences, was not thoroughly taken up and pursued by the emerging communist forces, including the RU at that time. Even while we did learn some things from this movement and did take up aspects of this, it was not taken up in the kind of central and thorough way it should have been. (This was interconnected with influences of the communist movement internationally and historically, which I will also discuss further through the remaining part of this talk.)

At the same time, and along with this challenging of traditional gender roles, there were many questions of sexuality and sexual liberation that were being brought up by the women's movement: a lot of experimentation, some of which led to dead ends, some resulting in bad ends, as is spoken to in our party's *Declaration*. Nonetheless, very important questions were being raised and answers were being sought in this sphere too. The whole question of emancipating women's sexuality—and that sexuality not being reduced to a “duty” to fulfill men sexually—was a very important dimension of what was being brought forward. But this didn't fit neatly into the views and the tendencies of the communist movement internationally and historically—it was something that, to significantly understate it, was at odds with a lot of the prevailing tradition within the communist movement, which significantly influenced the RU at that time.

And, along with this, in this whole context of throwing into the air and challenging traditional notions and oppressive conventions and mores with regard to sexuality, homosexuality also became a major social question and focus of struggle. And this, as we know, was way outside the pale of what the communist movement historically and internationally was prepared to engage in any kind of way other than to just reject it outright—and this included the RU, and then, for much too long a period, the RCP.

Now, it is true that, while there were, as our *Declaration* points out, many positive aspects to the sexual exploration and the challenging of tradition with regard to sexuality, and in particular the sexuality of women, which emerged through the upsurge of that time, there were ways, as that *Declaration* also emphasizes, in which the traditional roles and the traditional domination by men over women reasserted themselves and took advantage of, and turned into their opposite, these attempts to liberate women's sexuality. Notwithstanding these negative aspects, the questions that were being thrown up and the answers that were being sought were extremely important, as we can recognize more clearly now, particularly as we now view things not through a reified and economist understanding of what the proletarian revolution is all about, but understanding it in its fullest expression as (in the words of the *Communist Manifesto*) the most radical rupture with all traditional ideas, as well as with all traditional property relations. If, at the time of that powerful upsurge, in the 1960s and into the 1970s, we had really understood that fully, and proceeded from that understanding, we would have welcomed and embraced, and scientifically synthesized, what was being brought forward and thrown into the air and wrangled over in the realm of sexuality.

The Communist Movement, Socialist Society and Women's Emancipation— A Critical Overview

This brings me to some important points concerning the history and historical influence of the communist movement on this question—not just the question of sexuality but of gender relations and the woman question more broadly speaking. Here again, I want to emphasize that more definitely needs to be learned about this. But the following are some observations which may, in turn, serve as a part of the framework for further investigation, analysis and synthesis.

Now, not only to be “fair” in some abstract sense, but to be objective and scientific and to recognize what has in fact been the principal aspect of things, some very important fundamental analysis was made by the communist movement with regard to the oppression and the struggle for the liberation of women. Historically new breakthroughs were made, with Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* seminal in this regard. But, at the same time, intermixed with this, within the communist movement, there was from the beginning and there increasingly developed strong currents of economism, nationalism, patriarchy and traditional views and values with regard to women. This took very sharp expression in the Soviet Union over the period in which it was actually a socialist country.

To briefly touch on some important aspects of this, which, again, require further investigation, analysis and synthesis: In the Soviet Union during the period of socialism (from the time of the October 1917 revolution up through the mid-1950s, when capitalism was restored) transformations of a truly major and in some ways quite profound nature were carried out which did qualitatively change the position of women in a positive way and significantly strike at deep-seated inequalities between men and women. We should not ignore or underestimate this.

As part of this, there was some challenging of traditional gender roles in the popular culture as well as in official policy, especially in the 1920s. But there were significant limitations and shortcomings in this, and especially

after the 1920s there was not only a lack of continuing to challenge and transform traditional gender relations and roles, but there was, in some aspects, a retreat from this. This is part of a larger phenomenon that we've noted, which was manifested in a number of different dimensions. For example, in the sphere of art and culture there was a lot of experimentation, a lot of throwing things up into the air, particularly in the early years of the Soviet Republic. But then at a certain point, after Stalin's leadership was firmly consolidated, things changed. However, it is necessary to look through a broader lens and not attribute this simply to a single individual. The larger context was set by the view—which did have a basis in reality—that, in the 1930s, and especially as that decade went on, there was a growing danger of imperialist attack on the Soviet Union, and that in any case it was necessary to rapidly industrialize and transform the economy, including in the countryside, or else, as Stalin put it, “we will perish.” As this approach was applied, everything tended to get reduced to and funneled into the drive for rapid development of the economy. And to a significant degree, different forms of experimentation in different spheres—whether it was art and culture or the sphere of sexuality and gender relations—tended to be hemmed in and “compressed” within this framework, wherein it was held that the transformation of the economy, viewed essentially as a matter of technology and technological development and transformation, would lay the basis for, if not itself bring about, the elimination of the social relations that remained from the old society.

And then, particularly in the periods more or less directly leading into and during, and then after, World War 2, there were a number of statements from official sources in the Soviet Union that emphasized not only that it was “natural” for women to have a “maternal instinct” and to want to have and rear children, but also that it was their patriotic duty to do so—their duty to the Motherland, as it was formulated.

Now, we should not in this context ignore the objective factors of first the impending and then the actual massive attack on the Soviet Union, with the tremendous loss of life that occurred as a result of the Soviet Union's involvement in World War 2. In various studies I've seen, the estimate of 20 million (which we all sort of grew up with as the standard estimate of the number of Soviet lives lost during World War 2) has actually been challenged from the standpoint of saying that the number was probably even higher; some estimates of 25, 30 or even 40 million are offered, and not by people who are totally out of touch with reality. To emphasize the enormity of this, 20 million, the low estimate, would represent at least 10% of the Soviet population at that time, while 40 million would amount to about 20%—1 out of every 5 Soviet citizens! So it's understandable, on one level, why, in the aftermath of that war, there would be an emphasis on the need to increase the population, and that along with this tendencies to view this as the essential role and contribution of women would be strengthened. This is understandable, but it is not legitimate, justified or acceptable for communists to be putting this forward as their answer to this very real and acute contradiction—the tremendous loss of population as a result of the war.¹⁴

Obviously, in the history of the socialist and communist movements up through the experience of the Soviet Union during the period of Stalin's leadership, while again many truly profound changes and great achievements were brought about in relation to the status of women, as well as in other spheres, there remained a salient need for a further radical rupture with regard to the conception of women's role in society and its transformation, including a thorough break with the “motherhood cult” and with traditional gender roles.

As some observers of the Soviet experience (and not only the most overtly anti-communist) have pointed out, with some justification, while there was an advocacy of equality for women—and, it is important to emphasize, very important steps were taken in that direction, in the Soviet Union when it was socialist—there was no fundamental

14 It should be stressed here that this view, of women's contribution to the country through childbearing, was not unique to Stalin and the Soviet leadership in the time of Stalin. Take, for example, the following statement by German socialist August Bebel in the early part of the 20th century: “A woman who gives birth to children renders, at least, the same service to the commonwealth as the man who defends his country and his hearth with his life against a foe in search of conquest.” (From *Woman Under Socialism*) It is important to stress that this statement by Bebel is made in the context of emphasizing the dangers women face in childbirth, as part of a polemic on behalf of equality for women and in opposition to attempts to limit their role in public life and in contributing to society overall. And this statement by Bebel is not in the same category as the following, made during the same period, by the aggressive champion of American imperialism, Theodore Roosevelt: “But ... the woman who, whether from cowardice, from selfishness, from having a false and vacuous ideal shirks her duty as a wife and mother, earns the right to our contempt just as does the man who, from any motive, fears to do his duty in battle when the country calls him.” (Cited in *For Her Own Good*, p. 209.) Nonetheless, Bebel, like Stalin and other prominent socialist and communist leaders who advocated for and led struggle on behalf of equality for women, was not free of the influence of paternalistic and even patriarchal views toward women.

nor consistent effort to educate and mobilize masses to challenge and transform traditional gender roles in any kind of thorough way as part of fully uprooting tradition's chains. And, as one expression of this, increasingly after the early years of the Soviet Republic, the idea of the abolition of the family receded and then all but disappeared and was to a significant degree replaced by glorification of the family as it existed in the Soviet Union—and it was proclaimed that this was a different kind of family, and therefore women's role as mother had a different meaning. This went along with increasingly extolling motherhood in particular, even while this coexisted with significant steps that were being taken to overcome inequality and ways in which women's role had been limited—particularly as this applied to their role in work and the economy—including by removing barriers to women in traditionally male occupations.

In other words, as some have formulated it, there was a conception and even policies moving in the direction of equality for women, but there was no fundamental and consistent challenge to, or effort to transform, traditional gender roles, at least not after the beginning experimentation in the 1920s.¹⁵

All this does illustrate the basic point I have been emphasizing: In the Soviet Union, when it was socialist, there were, both in conception and in practice, not only important breakthroughs in terms of overcoming inequality for women in many different spheres, but also, especially in the early years, some challenging of traditional gender roles; but this latter aspect in particular was also in conflict with, and was increasingly giving way to, the assertion of traditional patriarchal views and conventions, along with economist and nationalist tendencies within the Soviet Union and the international communist movement overall, in which the Soviet Union exerted a great influence.

Now, in China, there were definitely significant advances beyond the Soviet experience, including with regard to the role of women in many different spheres of society. One of the ways this was powerfully expressed was in the sphere of culture, particularly through the course of the Cultural Revolution—with the model opera works and ballets, and so on. And this included a definite element of challenging traditional gender roles in many different spheres.

But still there were significant influences of economism, nationalism, patriarchy and traditional views and values, with regard to gender roles, and especially with regard to sexuality. Let us put it this way: What I referred to earlier, regarding the questions that were being raised and the answers that were being sought in terms of sexuality and, in particular women's sexuality, through the women's liberation movement, and especially its more radical sections, during the 1960s and into the 1970s—that would not have met with great welcome, nor was it embraced at the time, by the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. This is something we have to squarely recognize. And, for the most part, this was not welcomed and embraced by new communist forces looking to the Chinese Communist Party at that time, including specifically the RU and then the RCP. I will say that in visiting China in the early 1970s, along with the many tremendously positive things that I took note of and was inspired by, you did get this feeling of a certain heavy atmosphere and some sense of repression with regard to sexuality. And, looking at this in larger perspective, it does seem to have been part of an historical trend in the communist movement with which the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese revolution did not really rupture. This was not something that was unique to, or a specific weakness of, the Chinese revolution in contrast with the communist movement overall.

While, again, there is certainly more to be learned about this, it can be said that, with regard to the sphere of sexuality, in some significant ways for the communist movement overall, and specifically for our party and the RU before it, the question of homosexuality has been emblematic of the weakness of the communist movement and socialist states historically—from the time of Engels, with his unfortunate remarks denigrating homosexuality, up through the Chinese revolution. This, in a significant way, has concentrated a weakness of the communist movement on the

¹⁵ *Footnote by author:* In this connection, as part of research on this question, I came across a reference to a book which I haven't yet read—and therefore I can't evaluate the book overall—but the passage referred to did seem to be making an important point. This book is *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender and Propaganda During World War II*, by Maureen Honey (Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1984). It appears to be comparing the experience in the U.S. (as attested to by the reference to Rosie the Riveter) and in the Soviet Union in the context of the second world war, and it identifies some significant similarities, it seems, between the two: the situation where (although estimates are that in the Soviet Union nearly a million women did take part in guerrilla warfare and other forms of military activity in fighting the Nazis, which is different than the U.S.) with large numbers of men in the military, women increasingly, in the Soviet Union—and in a new way, in some senses, in the U.S.—were fulfilling roles in the economy which men had traditionally occupied and from which women had generally been barred. But there was a way in which—even in the Soviet Union, and not just in the U.S.—this role of women in production, along with their role as mothers, was presented not only (and in the U.S. particularly, not so much) as a matter of rights and equality but also as a matter of duty, and more specifically patriotic duty to the country. This is something which is worth pursuing further.

question of sexuality more generally, including specifically how this relates to the status, and the struggle for the complete liberation, of women.

The Need and the Basis for a Further Leap and Radical Rupture

So, while again there is definitely more to be learned through further investigation, study, analysis and synthesis, all this does, I believe, establish that there is a need for a further radical rupture, to lay a firmer foundation for really achieving the “4 Alls”^{***} in their fullest dimension. This has not been given full expression or been fully recognized in the history of the communist movement, including in the history of our party, until very recently when we have begun to seriously address questions from a different and much more radical standpoint.

The change in the position of our party on the question of homosexuality¹⁶ is, in very significant measure, a result of what has developed into the New Synthesis, and specifically the method and approach embodied in that New Synthesis. It represents a breaking with trends and tendencies within the communist movement which, to no small degree, have been suffocating of the kind of radical theory and radical movement that communism actually should be and must be. But, in a real sense, this constitutes a beginning, which we need to build on and go much further with—on the basis of a scientific approach and the scientific synthesis of what I referred to earlier as the visceral and the theoretical.

At the same time, the struggle against the oppression of women, aiming at nothing less than the complete and final abolition of this oppression in every form, is also a crucial part of making revolution in the first place, without which there can be no revolution, certainly not one aiming for communism. Building a movement for revolution as powerfully as possible toward the first great leap of the seizure of power and the creation of a new, revolutionary state, empowering people to actually build a new society free of exploitation and oppression—when the conditions for that have been brought into being through the unfolding of the contradictions of the system itself and the conscious, consistent and determined ideological, political and organizational work of the growing ranks of the revolutionary communists—this is what we have to be taking up and proceeding from. Viewed in this light, there is a present and pressing need for further grappling in the realm of theory, analysis and synthesis to deepen our understanding concerning the oppression and the liberation of women—building on and advancing from the work that has been done, in order to learn still more about the origins of the oppression of women, but also about the specific forms this oppression is assuming in today’s world as well as the actual material underpinnings and dynamics underlying this—all focused toward a deepened grasp of the necessary conditions for the complete emancipation of women and the role of the struggle around this contradiction as a pivotal and decisive front of the overall struggle for a communist world and the emancipation of humanity as a whole from all oppressive divisions.

In this context I want to say something briefly about the important role of our comrades in the Communist Party of Iran (Marxist-Leninist-Maoist) around the woman question. These comrades have made a very important contribution in their insistence that the communist movement overall must focus much more attention on this question, as one of decisive importance for the radical transformation of society and the world as a whole; in their recognition of the even greater role that the struggle against the oppression of women—and, as our slogan says, unleashing the fury of women as a mighty force for revolution—can and must play in the next, new stage of communist revolution; and in calling for a scientific materialist, as opposed to a sociological or a cultural, approach to this question, while emphasizing the need to learn from, and to synthesize from a scientific communist standpoint, the work of others and in particular feminist scholars on this question. All these are important contributions of our Iranian comrades.

^{***} [Editor’s Note: Earlier in this work Bob Avakian explains what is meant by the “4 Alls”: “This is the goal around which people must be brought forward: the advance to communism, the achievement of what we refer to as the ‘4 Alls’ as they were popularized in China at the time of Mao: the abolition of all class distinctions, the abolition of all the production (or economic) relations on which these class distinctions rest, the abolition of all social relations corresponding to those production relations, and the revolutionizing of all the ideas that correspond to those social relations.”]

¹⁶ For a discussion of the RCP’s position on homosexuality, and the development of that position, involving a major, qualitative change in its views on this question, see “On the Position on Homosexuality in the New Draft Programme,” RCP Publications, 2001. See also Bob Avakian and Bill Martin, *Marxism and the Call of the Future: Conversations on Ethics, History, and Politics* (Open Court, 2005), especially chapter 21, “Sexuality and Homosexuality.”

In carrying out further work on this crucial question, it will be important to consistently ground this work in the scientific outlook and method of dialectical and historical materialism. There is a need to guard against tendencies toward mechanical materialism and, specifically, toward attempting to situate the essential basis for women's oppression in, or even to reduce it to, the fact that throughout human history it has been women who have borne children and that women have had to take the main responsibility for the nurturing of children in their early years. Along with this, it is necessary to guard against ahistorical tendencies that fail to give the necessary attention to the specific forms which the oppression of women takes in the context of different modes of production and the property relations, as well as the ideas, customs, etc., that correspond to a particular mode of production.

In order to more fully chart the path of the emancipation of women, as a pivotal part of the emancipation of humanity as a whole, while recognizing the role of women's biology—specifically in giving birth to children and in their early care, particularly in conditions where prolonged nursing remains a necessity—it is also important to recognize that it is not this biology itself which is the fundamental source of women's oppression. Rather, it is the way in which this biology has figured into—or, better said, has been encompassed and subordinated within—definite production relations (and the corresponding social relations). These relations are historically evolved and have, in different societies and different epochs since the emergence of class society, differed with regard to the specific forms and the specific ways in which they embody class division, exploitation and oppression, even as they have in common that they all are, in one form or another, an embodiment and a fountainhead of exploitative and oppressive relations.

This understanding and approach is critical in order to be able to fully develop the conception, the strategic orientation, and the policies and actions flowing from this, which can lead, in fact, to the emancipation of women and of humanity overall in the most fundamental and thorough sense.

In this regard, it is also important not to underestimate the importance of the *Declaration* by our party: *For Women's Liberation and the Emancipation of All Humanity*. This *Declaration* begins with, and throughout brings forward, searing exposure of the oppression of women in many different forms, in all parts of the world, including the so-called “advanced” capitalist countries. It also contains important analysis of how and why the capitalist-imperialist system does not, and cannot, eliminate the oppression of women, including as this is embodied in traditional gender roles, but on the contrary this system perpetuates and enforces such oppressive relations, in both “modern” and “medieval” forms, in both the capitalist-imperialist countries themselves, most definitely including the U.S., and in the Third World countries it dominates and exploits; and it drives home that only through revolution and the advance to communism throughout the world, and the decisive role of the struggle for the liberation of women in that revolution, can the oppression of women be ended together with all forms of exploitative and oppressive social relations.

Still, this *Declaration* is precisely that—a declaration, a very crucial statement of basic principles and orientation, situated in both the current conditions in the world and in the strategic framework of communist revolution. It is not intended to itself make, but to help inspire, the further deeper analysis and synthesis with regard to this question which is necessary in order to have a still more powerful foundation for carrying forward the struggle for the liberation of women—from all tradition's chains, from all the horrific forms of their oppression, not only throughout history, but in the present world—as a crucial part of achieving the emancipation of humanity as a whole.

And here I want to (so to speak) step back to “Steps and Leaps” (Ardea Skybreak, *Of Primeval Steps & Future Leaps: An Essay on the Emergence of Human Beings, the Source of Women's Oppression, and the Road to Emancipation*, Banner Press, 1984). This is an important—and, I believe, still too much overlooked—work. The following concise statement in “Steps and Leaps” provides some rather jolting historical perspective with regard to the development of a scientific understanding of the origins of the oppression of women: “It is sobering to recall that the material origins of the subordinate social status of half the human species throughout recorded history was not posed as a question, nor certainly deemed worthy of serious investigation, until the middle of the nineteenth century.” And Skybreak goes on to point out that Marx and Engels:

cut through the societal prejudice of their time to insist that the subordinate position of women had nothing to do with either some innate deficiencies of female nature or any divine decrees (or “natural features”) sanctifying this order of things. They maintained, instead, that the oppression of women was a product and consequence of the social organization of human beings, basically determined in any given society by the

particular level of development of the productive forces and the corresponding set of production relations.
(The above quotes are from Skybreak, p. 107)

In no way should the profound importance of this initial breakthrough by Marxism, and its continuing significance, be underestimated. At the same time, however, this is, from an historical standpoint, an initial breakthrough—a beginning foundation which must be built on and qualitatively advanced. This, of course, is something which applies to all scientific breakthroughs, and all the more so when they have to do with the crucial, and highly contentious, question of human relations, the character and prospects of human society and the struggle bound up with all this.¹⁷

“Steps and Leaps” points to, and makes very important contributions to the analysis of, pivotal developments in relation to this very important contradiction: the initial and essentially unavoidable division of labor between men and women in early human society, owing to biological differences relating to childbirth and the rearing of children in their early years—emphasizing that this division of labor would not have constituted an oppressive relation, at least not in any fully developed and institutionalized sense, but that, on the other hand, it contained seeds of oppressive relations, between men and women in particular, which would then (to continue the metaphor) ripen into oppressive relations with changes in the productive activity of various human societies, the relative weight which different kinds of basic productive activity acquired, and along with that the emergence of the differential accumulation of material surpluses, and corresponding changes in the property and other social relations.

And “Steps and Leaps” points to this truly world historic conclusion: “the biological necessities associated with bearing children are themselves not immutable or necessarily permanent factors, and eventually the further elaboration of human social organization will be such that biological attributes will no longer contribute to channeling or restricting the activities of half the human species.” (p. 137)

Along with this, one of the things that stands out very powerfully in “Steps and Leaps” is the way in which it examines all the different attempts—from sociobiology to general theories about human nature, and on and on—to evade, or in any case to come up with an alternative to, a scientific understanding of the fact that stares us in the face: The oppression of women, and all oppressive and exploitative relations, are rooted in actual material conditions that have resulted from the historical development of human society. Toward the end of “Steps and Leaps,” this great irony is highlighted: At the very time when the need and possibility of abolishing and moving beyond all this is objectively posing itself more and more forcefully, there is more and more an attempt to turn away from that and to find any other kind of explanation for the state of human social relations and the very real horrors bound up with this—explanations which, whatever the intent, can only lead to the perpetuation of all this.

In acting on this objective basis, in terms of our conscious understanding and ability to take conscious initiative, we have a great deal to build on, but we also have many challenges to meet in going forward and achieving new advances. There is a need for further study and wrangling on the basis of consistently applying a scientific outlook and method, and specifically the scientific outlook and method of dialectical and historical materialism, as it has been developed up to this point, and doing so in a way that will contribute to its further and even qualitative development.

It is important to understand that here, too, it is not a matter of linear development. This is one thing that should be learned from the historical experience I have reviewed here, in stressing the need for further synthesis, including the missed opportunity for synthesis going back decades, as captured in the story about the meeting of the Revolutionary Youth Movement and the very heartfelt statement there—that if you are a man, and you truly want to be radical, you

¹⁷ Here it is worthwhile taking note of the statement by Engels, cited in “Steps and Leaps” concerning, as Engels put it, “one of the most absurd notions taken over from eighteenth century enlightenment ... that in the beginning of society woman was the slave of man.” (Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, cited in Skybreak, p. 111)

This is a very pungent observation by Engels, and it underlines once again the basic orientation that we have stressed: the Enlightenment, yes and no. There are definitely things from the Enlightenment that must be upheld and defended, and this has special importance today when the Enlightenment, and specifically its more positive aspects, are under attack by Neanderthal fundamentalist Christian Fascists, who are a major force in the U.S. and are in fact no less obscurant than the most backward Islamic fundamentalists.

But, at the same time, there needs to be a recasting of what is correct and what is valuable in the Enlightenment, and a radical rupture with what in the Enlightenment is not positive, as part of a radical rupture with all traditional ideas as well as all traditional property relations. (In this regard, see “Marxism and the Enlightenment,” in Bob Avakian, *Observations on Art and Culture, Science and Philosophy*, Insight Press, 2005.)

have to learn what it feels like to be a woman—and the overall point about how much of what was being challenged and wrangled with by the women’s movement, particularly its more radical currents that came forward through the 1960s and into the 1970s, involved crucial questions which should have been, but were not then, fully welcomed, deeply engaged and correctly assimilated and synthesized through a consistent application of the communist outlook and method. This is what we have to do now. And, in doing so, we have to learn from our mistakes: We can’t go back and correct that error of 40 years ago, but we can and must learn from it.

In 1970 Susan Brownmiller wrote that, “We want to be neither oppressor nor oppressed. The women’s revolution is the final revolution of them all.” (Susan Brownmiller, “Sisterhood Is Powerful: A Member of the Women’s Liberation Movement Explains What It’s All About,” *New York Times Magazine*, March 15, 1970. Cited in Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs, Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (Free Press, 2005)—a critique of women who promote the degradation of women through pornography and other aspects of “raunch culture.”) Now, in reading Brownmiller’s *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution* (Dell Publishing, 1999) it is clear that her politics have gone in the direction of reform rather than revolution. Even at the time when she was part of a more radical upsurge and made the above-cited statement, it seems clear that there were significant limitations in how Brownmiller conceived of “revolution,” and that she was influenced by contradictory trends, including not only revolutionary but also revisionist ones. But whatever the full picture is with that, it does not negate the important contributions she and others like her made, particularly in the period of the late 1960s and early ‘70s, nor does it remove from us the responsibility of correctly understanding and synthesizing something very important that’s spoken to with the statement that “The women’s revolution is the final revolution of them all.”

There are two things that are important to emphasize once more in relation to this. First, that the emancipation of women can only be achieved as part of a real and profound revolution—the communist revolution—the most radical revolution in all of human history, aiming for the emancipation of all humanity, the historic leap beyond all forms of oppression and exploitation, through the transformation of all the material and ideological conditions which give rise to and reinforce exploitation and oppression. And, at the same time, a fundamental and decisive component of that revolution, without which that revolution will never achieve its goals, is the struggle for the complete liberation of women.

This takes us back to the very important point from “The End of a Stage—The Beginning of a New Stage” about unresolved contradictions under socialism. What is said there is another way of expressing the understanding that the struggle for the complete emancipation of women will be a crucial part of “the final revolution.” In other words, it will be a crucial component in propelling and driving forward not only the revolutionary struggle to overthrow the rule of capitalism-imperialism but to continue the revolution, within the new, socialist society itself, in order to advance on the road toward the final aim of communism. The point is that, among the unresolved contradictions which will remain in socialist society, and which can be a driving force propelling that revolution forward, the continuing ways in which the emancipation of women will need to be fought for and fought through will be one of the most decisive aspects and expressions of that.

It should be clear that what will be involved in this whole process is not a matter of linear development—not a simple straight line continuation of the theory of the communist movement and the experience of socialist society—but will of necessity be a more complex and much richer process, drawing and learning from a much greater variety of experience and of analysis and theorizing, carried out from different perspectives, representing ultimately different class viewpoints—all of which must be encompassed and embraced by, and at the same time synthesized through, the application of the communist outlook and method.

In conclusion on this crucial question, all that has been touched on here underlines the need for further ruptures and leaps—in theory, and in practice guided by that theory—with regard to the liberation of women, as a decisive part of the communist revolution and the achievement of the “4 Alls” in the fullest sense. It underscores the need for the method and approach of the New Synthesis to be more fully and systematically applied to this question and for crucial and urgently needed advances to be made on this basis.