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Woman and Her Mind: the story of daily life



by Meredith Tax

I. THE ASSAULTS OF DAILY LIFE

Open your hand.
Empty? Empty. Here is a hand

To fill it and willing
To bring teacups and roll away headaches
And do whatever you tell it.
Will you marry it?
It is guaranteed

To thumb shut your eyes at the end
And dissolve of sorrow.
We make new stock from the salt.

“Applicant” (Sylvia Plath)

In our society, where competitive individualism and the cash nexus are the dominant values, men are raised to see the world as a series of ‘challenges.’ They learn to view everyone as a competitor for money, prestige, and women, and to be constantly on guard. Moreover, each challenge is seen as a sexual ‘threat’ to their ‘masculinity,’ which they learn to meet with the most aggressive response appropriate.

They are taught that to be masculine is to be physically and verbally aggressive, super-active sexually, authoritarian in manner, and capable of abstract thought. Being observant of the ordinary details of daily life is *not* considered part of being masculine. Men are taught to chart the stars in their courses, but not to notice when someone in the room has been crying. Or, if forced to notice, they regard it as a threat and act aggressively or condescendingly or helplessly. In our society sensitivity to other people’s needs is considered feminine. So is vulnerability to other people. The ideal American male is a competitive machine, competent, achieving, hard-driving, and soulless, with a *sexual* life, but no *personal* life. Fortunately, most men can’t live up to this ideal but the strain of trying is considerable.

Men are relatively unaware of their social environment because they don’t have to be. It’s not their job. They don’t have to notice the comparative cost and beauty of various costumes. They don’t have to be tuned into the nuances of social behavior to please those whom it is essential to please. They don’t have to listen to footsteps behind them in the street at night (though they have to more than they used to). As they walk along the street, the passing scene will present no chance romantic encounter which may change their whole lives. Men are taught to be active, to go and seek what they need, not to look pretty and wait for it to come into their vicinity. Men don’t observe each cloud over human relations as if their whole future depended on it.

There’s a reason for that: it doesn’t!

Women are hyper-aware of their surroundings. We have to be. Walk down a city street without being tuned in and you're in real danger; our society is one in which men rape, mug, and murder women whom they don't even know every day. You'd better keep track of what car is slowing down, and of whom is walking up behind you.

Our radar must be constantly turned on. How else can we be sure of taking advantage of our opportunities? We have been given a passive role: we can't go out and promote what we want, but must think fast and grab it as it flies past. We must be prepared to return the right kind of smile to passing Prince Charmings. And since our role also includes being a mediator between the men in our lives and their acquaintances, we must also be perpetually on guard to smooth out a fight, to be conciliatory or forgiving or cute, and to keep unpleasant things from happening.

There's a lot to be said for the self-consciousness and consciousness of others that women are trained to develop; being conscious of other people's behavior is good. Even the emotional service-station aspect of many women's behavior is preferable to the unconsciousness bred into men. But the price we pay is high. Since our awareness of others is considered our duty, the price we pay when things go wrong is guilt and self-hatred. And things always go wrong. We respond with apologies; we continue to apologize long after the event is forgotten—and even if it had no causal relation to anything we did to begin with. If the rain spoils someone's picnic, we apologize. We apologize for taking up space in a room, for living. How willingly we would suffer to prevent someone else a moment's discomfort! This is one of the hardest habits to break. And it's a vicious circle—our attempts to protect men from consciousness of the pain they are causing allows them, in turn, to keep causing the pain and to remain less human than they could be. If we could only break out of this circle, stop apologizing and effacing ourselves, and live less torturously! But of course there are reasons why this doesn't happen easily. Men and women are brought up to be like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, with pieces carved out of their selves so they can fit into one another in the neurotic dependence most of us call love. If we make ourselves whole, where are we going to find a jigsaw puzzle to fit into?

But those pieces that have been taken out of our heads! This self-consciousness! It is so painful, so physical. We are taught to feel that our only asset is our physical presence—that's all that other people notice about us. The most minute blemish on a total person—a pimple, excess weight, a funny nose, larger than average breasts—can ruin a day, or years, with the agonies of constant awareness of it. The whole world is looking only at that pimple. A detached observer would consider these agonies adolescent and excessive.

But what does adolescence mean? It is in adolescence that we first learn how immensely we are impinged on by the world, and how easily it can destroy us. Our incredibly painful self-consciousness may be exaggerated, but is based on a true perception of how we are constantly judged, how our very being is assaulted. As we grow older we learn to block out these perceptions in order to survive. We survive by blocking out, every single day, the knowledge of how we have been crippled by our socialization, and how men, employers, and advertisers exploit that deformation. What damage has been



done to us as girls! What a sowing of self-doubt and self-hate that is never completely harvested, always springing up again! We have been denied the opportunity to *choose*—a self, a man, a career, a life style. As a result we become unable to make choices even of the most trivial kind. Our inability to choose is part of American folklore: the woman in cartoons who sits dithering in a shoe-store for hours unable to decide between two pairs of pumps. When you have been told all your life that the right pair of shoes or the right color toilet paper can determine your whole destiny, it is difficult to make such decisions casually.

To realize this is just to live with the everyday knowledge that one has lost an arm. When we block out the realization of how we've been crippled by society, we can only conclude that we are miserable because there's something wrong with us, and it's our fault. We think we are unloved because we have a pimple, but in fact we are miserable because we've been crushed and twisted from birth to fit into the roles laid out for us.

*First, are you our sort of person.
Do you wear
A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,
A brace or hook,
Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch,
Stitches to show something's missing? No, no? Then
How can we give you a thing?
Stop crying.*

"Applicant" (Sylvia Plath)

We have to face the fact that pieces have been cut out of us to make us fit into this society. We have to try to imagine what we could have been if we hadn't been taught from birth that we are stupid, unable to analyze anything, "intuitive," passive, physically weak, hysterical, overemotional, dependent by nature, incapable of defending ourselves against any attack, fit only to be the housekeeper, sex object, and emotional service center for some man, or men and children.

We didn't get this way by our genes or by accident. We have been *molded* into this deformed posture, *pushed* into these service jobs, *made* to apologize for existing, *taught* to be unable to do anything requiring any strength at all, like opening doors or bottles. We have been told to be stupid, to be silly. We have had our mental and emotional feet bound for thousands of years. And the fact that some of the pieces that have been cut out of us are the ones we can never replace or reconstruct—an ego, self-confidence, an ability to make choices—is the most difficult of all to deal with.

Almost all women who have accomplished anything outside the charmed circle of the bourgeois family, have been forced to struggle against the damage that has been done to them. For some of us, this process has taken the form of a "nervous breakdown"; for others, a long period of sheer personal horror; to others, a more drawn-out process of repeatedly sinking under despair, and rising again. For all of us, caught in the kind of double binds we have been caught in, some sort of confrontation with the self is crucial. Only by realizing what we might have been can we imagine how different women in a free society could be. But the knowledge that we can't achieve this ourselves, that no matter how we struggle we are still in some part of ourselves "damaged goods" (to use the appropriate capitalist terminology), that we can see what is wrong with ourselves and still be unable to put it permanently right—this is very painful and discouraging. But it's necessary: for it is this realization which makes it evident that there are no individual solutions to women's oppression, no way we can really float free of our society and its conditioning, that creates our revolutionary consciousness. It is an asset to come to political understanding of how our society works as a system dependent on the personal suffering and deprivations of each of us. That's what makes us realize, in our everyday and personal life, that *social* change is absolutely necessary (in building a revolutionary movement). It is an asset to come to political understanding through personal pain; it makes possible a gut understanding of how

society works as a system dependent on the personal suffering and deprivations of each of us. That's what makes us realize, in our everyday and personal lives, that *social* change is absolutely necessary, that we must build a revolutionary movement out of personal need. Because, as Lucy Stone put it almost a century ago:

In education, in marriage, in everything, disappointment is the lot of women. It shall be the business of my life to deepen this disappointment in every woman's heart until she bows down to it no longer.

The things that mess us up are so built into the structure of society that only the most radical of social changes—far more radical in its attack on the basic institutions of this society that traps us, and far more drastic in the changes it effects on human consciousness, than previous revolutions—has a chance of doing the job, of freeing us and freeing those who will be born out of our lives.

II. FEMALE SCHIZOPHRENIA



A young woman is walking down a city street. She is excruciatingly aware of her appearance and of the reaction to it (imagined or real) of every person she meets. She walks through a group of construction workers who are eating lunch in a line along the pavement. Her stomach tightens with terror and revulsion; her face becomes contorted into a grimace of self-control and fake unawareness; her walk and carriage become stiff and dehumanized. No matter what they say to her, it will be unbearable. She knows that they will not physically assault her or hurt her. They will only do so metaphorically. What they will do is *impinge* on her. They will demand that her thoughts be focussed on them. They will use her body with their eyes. They will evaluate her market price. They will comment on her defects, or compare them to those of other passers-by. They will make her a participant in their fantasies without asking if she is willing. They will make her feel ridiculous, or grotesquely sexual, or hideously ugly. Above all, they will make her feel like a *thing*.

You can say what you like about class and race. Those differences are real. But in this everyday scenario, any man on earth, no matter what his color or class is, has the power to make the woman who is exposed to him hate herself and her body. Any man has this power as *man*, the dominant sex, to dehumanize woman, even to herself.

No woman can have an autonomous self unaffected by such encounters. Either she remains sensitive and vulnerable to this pain; or she shuts it out, by saying, 'It's only my *body* they are talking about. It doesn't affect *me*. They know nothing about *me*.' Whatever the process, the solution is a split between mind and body, between one self and another. One may hate the body and consider the mind the real "self." One may glorify the body, as a means of satisfying one's desires by becoming an instrument to satisfy the desires of others; in this case the body becomes a thing, and the mind a puppeteer to manipulate it.

Both of these solutions (and most of us get sucked into one or the other) can be called *schizophrenic*. R.D. Laing defines schizophrenia as a social process, in *The Politics of Experience*:

No schizophrenic has been studied whose disturbed pattern of communication has not been shown to be a reflection of, and reaction to, the disturbed and disturbing pattern characterizing his or her family of origin. . . . When one person comes to be regarded as

schizophrenic, it seems that without exception the experiences and behavior that gets labelled schizophrenic is a special strategy that a person invents in order to live in an unlivable situation.

In *The Divided Self*, Laing describes the experience of schizophrenia, the contradictory kind of self-consciousness that extends to one's very existence, that is, one is literally not sure he exists:

1. *Being aware of himself and knowing that other people are aware of him are a means of assuring himself that he exists, and also that they exist. . . . The need to gain a conviction of his own aliveness and the realness of things is, therefore, the basic issue in his existence. His way of seeking to gain such conviction is by feeling himself to be an object in the real world; but, since his world is unreal, he must be an object in the world of someone else, for objects to other people seem to be real. . . .*

2. *In a world full of danger, to be a potentially seeable object is to be constantly exposed to danger. Self-consciousness, then, may be the apprehensive awareness of oneself as potentially exposed to danger by the simple fact of being visible to others. The obvious defense against such a danger is to make oneself invisible in one way or another.*

(Penguin edition, pp. 108-109.)

Let us translate this into the terms of everyday life; let us enter the mind of a woman who is confined to her house, who goes out only to shop, to visit other women, or to chauffeur her kids, and whose only work, or function, is to take care of a man and some children. For her the contradiction will present itself this way:

'When I am by myself, I am nothing. I only know that I exist because I am needed by someone who is real, my husband, and by my children. My husband goes out into the real world. Other people recognize him as real, and take him into account. He affects other people and events. He does things and changes things, which are different afterwards. I stay in my imaginary world in this house, doing jobs that I largely invent, and that no one cares about but myself. I do not change things. The work I do changes nothing; what I cook disappears, what I clean one day must be cleaned again the next. I seem to be involved in some sort of mysterious process rather than actions that have results.

'The only time that I think I might be real in myself is when I hear myself screaming or having hysterics. But it is at these times that I am in the most danger—of being told that I am wrong, or that I'm really not like what I'm acting like, or that he hates me. If he stops loving me, I'm sunk; I won't have any purpose in life, or be sure I exist any more. I must efface myself in order to avoid this, and not make any demands on him, or do anything that might offend him. I feel dead now, but if he stops loving me I am really dead, because I am nothing by myself. I have to be noticed to know I exist.

'But, if I efface myself, how can I be noticed?'

It is a basic contradiction.

Laing explores it further. His language is extreme, since he is describing extreme states; but they are only heightened versions of what most of us go through at some point in our lives, or every day.

As a death ray, consciousness has two main properties: its power to petrify (to turn to stone; to turn oneself or the other into things); and its power to penetrate. Thus, if it is in these terms that the gaze of others is experienced, there is a constant dread and resentment at being turned into someone else's thing, of being penetrated by him, and a sense of being in someone else's power and control. Freedom then consists in being inaccessible. (p. 113.)

To turn people to stone is the ultimate way of objectifying them. To be able to penetrate them is to be able to see through them; the slang is an accurate description of that feeling: 'I can see right through you,' means 'You don't fool me; I see what you're really like.'

We often experience these states as projections from our own minds onto someone else's. It is that someone who turns us into stone, makes us objects, oxen, thick-tongued and slow of motion. We are petrified with fear of someone else's power. Or, someone else can see through us, can see what we are really like under our fragile veneer of normality. The person who sees through us has power over us.

In the walking-down-the-street scenario, our heroine experiences verbal assaults in four different

(1) She can turn the construction workers to stone. “Look at them—what a mechanical response—they are like puppets. I don’t have to listen to them. I can block them right out. I can petrify them with a look. How dare they speak to me!”

(2) She can see right through them: “How ridiculous they are, to think they can attract me by behaving so obnoxiously. They are pathetic and gross. Probably no one loves them. They can’t fool me. I know what they are really like, even if they’re trying to act big.” She may exchange a nod or look with them, nod graciously, or ignore them.

Inversely, she can experience these states as projections onto the group of men:

(1) “Look at them staring at me! I am petrified! What will they do? I can’t move fast enough to get away! My hands and feet are so cold, I feel as if I’m moving through ice water. I will turn into a block of ice if I don’t get away.”

(2) “I feel as if I’m naked—so ashamed. They are laughing at me. They are pretending to think I’m pretty just so they can make fun of me. They know what I’m really like, that this dress and makeup are just a fake to hide my ineptness, terror, ugliness. I feel like I am being broken into little bits.” She will walk miserably by, like a dead thing.

These states of mind are heightened, metaphoric reflections of the real conditions of a woman’s life in our society. For a woman is either an object (turned to stone), belonging to some man and getting her money, status, friends, and very identity from her association with him—or else she is nowhere, disappeared, teetering on the edge of a void with no work to do and no felt identity at all.

From the earliest age a girl is deprived of a sense of herself (ego); her identity is made to depend on other people’s evaluations of her. She is continually told what she looks like, and how important it is to have people like her. In this way, she is taught to think of herself as an *object* rather than a *subject*. She is also deprived of a sense of her own competence, of her ability to do and understand things. She is told she must be pretty and sweet; she mustn’t make messes or play rough; she must perform services for Mommy and Daddy, and be useful. She is taught to be charming, yet passive. She is taught to fail at most activities, so as not to be threatening or “unfeminine.” She is taught to be of “service” to others, not to herself, so that when she grows up she can be a wife and mother like Mommy.

How different this is from the way boys are socialized—they know they will be loved even if they make messes, stay out late without phoning, get dirty, and act like brats.

Women are stupefied, made *stupid*, by the roles they are pushed into. Books on educational psychology always cite the junior high and high school years as the time when the boys “catch up” with the girls, and begin to surpass them scholastically and on IQ tests. It’s no accident that these years are the ones of increased social pressure upon girls to take up their post-pubescent feminine roles and learn to live with them. It’s not that the boys are growing smarter; the girls are becoming stupefied! Their IQ’s—which, it is now recognized, are largely determined by social pressure and by the subject’s expectations and sense of his own worth—continue to decline.

But this training in stupidity starts long before puberty. It starts before the small girl has enough ego to resist it. A teacher’s training course at B.U. started with a snappy lecture on how children learn to read. The lecturer was a progressive educator who believed in teaching people according to the educational method most appropriate to *them*. “Little boys learn by taking things apart; they like to know how things work. The way to teach them to read is to show them an object, like a toy truck, and teach them the names of its different parts. They learn best through tactile and mechanical tools, so that’s how to teach them language. Little girls learn best by rote. They learn faster than boys for this reason. All you have to do is show them flashcards.” A woman taking the course was enraged. “That’s why we’re unable to *think*.” The teacher admitted that the question might ultimately be one of socialization rather than nature, but “after all, you have to teach them the way they learn best, no

matter what the cause is. And it makes your job easier—they're easier to teach." Less demanding. And so the cycle is perpetuated.

This remorseless stifling of a girl's intelligence and ego, this socialization into a life of service, this continued undermining of any possibility of independent achievement outside of the prescribed realm, all constitute a condition one could describe as *female schizophrenia*. Most women suffer from some form of it at some point in their lives. And most of them think of it as a "personal problem" rather than a social disease. That's part of the way they're trapped. For this condition is too widespread and too structurally based to be merely "personal" in origin. Our society could be described as one which drives women crazy.

Many women are so systematically deprived of an ego that they must constantly refer to a mirror, to their physical presence, to reassure themselves that they are actually there, still in one piece. Women's lives are a series of small dramas in which they play shifting defensive roles. The necessity to do so is real, for they are under economic necessity, and often physical constraint as well, to faithfully play the parts of sister, daughter, wife, mother and lover. Many women recognize these as a collection of roles, but the face behind the shifting masks is a mystery even to themselves. The only constant in their lives is misery and a never-ending unsureness of themselves. A woman must, in order to make it as a woman, reflect the desires and preconceptions of every man who has power over her. Otherwise she is out of a job, out of her parents' house, out of a marriage, with no available slot left to fill. Women have to *play* at being themselves—that is, their *nice* selves, the selves made to order on standard patterns. "Just be yourself, dear," we are told as we go off to the prom. And we wonder, "What does that mean? What am I expected to do?"

The greatest women writers, in all ages, have recorded the effects of such expectations upon their minds. Charlotte Bronte, a nineteenth-century feminist, as well as a great novelist of feminine roles, wrote in *Shirley*:

Their sisters have no earthly employment but household work and sewing, no earthly pleasure but an unprofitable visiting, and no hope, in all their life to come, of anything better. This stagnant state of things makes them decline in health. They are never well, and their minds and views shrink to wondrous narrowness. The great wish, the sole aim of every one of them is to be married, but the majority will never marry; they will die as they now live. They scheme, they plot, they dress to ensnare husbands. The gentlemen turn them into ridicule; they don't want them; they hold them very cheap. They say—I have heard them say it with sneering laughs many a time—the matrimonial market is overstocked. Fathers say likewise, and are angry with their daughters when they observe their manoeuvres—they order them to stay at home. What do they expect them to do at home? If you ask, they would answer, sew and cook. They expect them to do this, and this only, contentedly, regularly, uncomplainingly, all their lives long, as if they had no germ of faculties for anything else—a doctrine as reasonable to hold as it would be that the fathers have no faculties but for eating what their daughters cook or for wearing what they sew. Could men live so themselves? Would they not be very weary? And when there came no relief to their weariness, but only reproaches at its slightest manifestation, would not their weariness ferment in time to frenzy?

A contemporary novelist, Anais Nin, writes of such things at length in her diaries. The following excerpts are from her *Diary, 1931-1934* (Harcourt, Brace and World & the Swallow Press, 1966).

They all want to sanctify me, to turn me into an effigy, a myth. They want to idealize me and pray to me, use me for consolation, comfort. Curse my image, the image of me which faces me every day with the same over-fineness, over-delicacy, the pride, the vulnerability which makes people want to preserve me, treat me with care. Curse my eyes which are sad, and deep, and my hands which are delicate, and my walk which is a glide, my voice which is a whisper, all that can be used for a poem, and too fragile to be raped, violated, used. I am near death from solitude, near dissolution.

I have always been tormented by the image of multiplicity of selves. Some days I call it a richness, and other days I see it as a disease, a proliferation as dangerous as cancer. My first concept of people about me was that all of them were coordinated into a whole, whereas I was made up of a multitude of selves, of fragments.

There were always, in me, two women at least, one woman desperate and bewildered, who felt she was drowning, and another who only wanted to bring beauty, grace, and aliveness to people, and who would leap into a scene, as upon a stage, conceal her true emotions because they were weaknesses, helplessness, despair, and present to the world only a smile, an eagerness, curiosity, enthusiasm, interest.

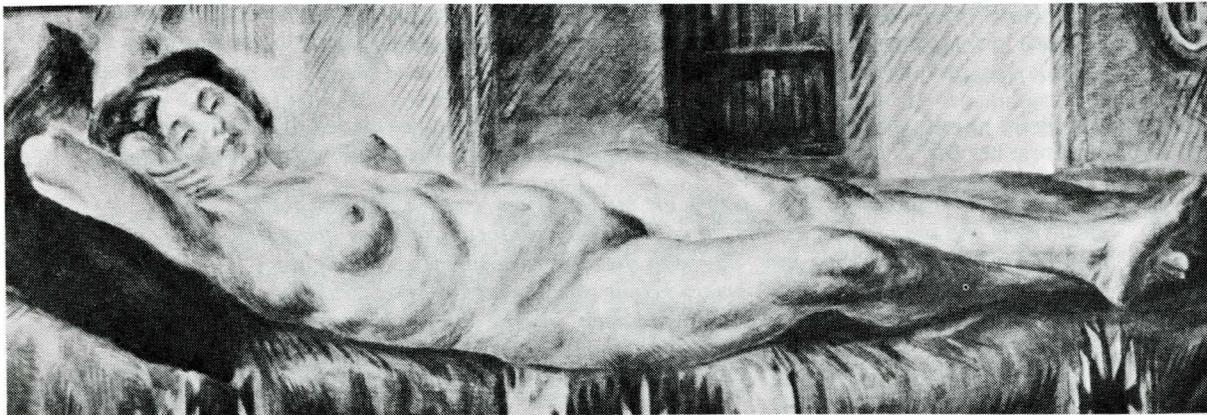
From the day she learns to understand signals, all a woman hears is a series of contradictory instructions and conflicting descriptions of the way she is to look and behave. She must be sexy and a virgin at once. She must be appreciative, yet challenging. She must be strong, yet weak. Vulnerable, yet able to protect herself. Smart enough to get a man, but not smart enough to threaten him, or, rather, smart enough to conceal her intelligence and act manipulatively. Desired by all, but interested only in one. Sophisticated, yet naive at heart. And so on down the line.

She is in the position of the little boy Laing talks about in *The Self and Others*, whom a policeman saw run around the block ten times. The cop asked him what he was doing. The boy said, "I'm running away from home, but my father won't let me cross the street."

These contradictory instructions are, of course, most acute in the realm of sexual behavior. For the first part of their lives, until they leave home (if they do), most girls are still inculcated with an obsolete Puritanism that no longer accurately reflects the social norms. When a girl becomes "independent," she is encouraged to live by the "new morality." This new "freedom," however, is an ideology as manipulative, mystified, and destructive as the old, for now women are defined as sex objects *even to themselves*. One of the definitive statements of this ideology can be found in *Cosmopolitan*, June, 1969. It is an article by a female gynecologist, Barbara Bross, entitled, "How to Love Like A Real Woman." Dr. Bross states:

Sexual abstinence in a normally constituted person is always pathogenic. [Translation: that means "getting sick."] We have been given sex organs to use them. If we don't use them, they decay and cause irreparable damage to body and mind. This is blunt, firm, indisputable, and true. . . .

Woman is man's intermediary between himself and nature. He considers her as part of nature, though he will never say so, but that is what he feels. Her periods echo the rhythm of nature. Her ability to give birth makes her part of nature. She is the mother. She is the earth. She senses where he can only think or act. Woman is, man does. That is the strength and weakness of both sexes.



III. AN ANGRY MANIFESTO ON CONSUMERISM

The loss of ego, the selflessness, the schizophrenia described above is usually called by other names. It is called “femininity” and “sexiness” and being a “homemaker,” mostly. Under such names, it is merchandised daily in women’s magazines, on the Woman’s Pages of the unfree press, on TV screens, in glossy movies—everywhere the mass media spread their oily track. In late capitalist society, craziness produces consumption—isn’t our perpetually expanding economy based, after all, on millions of women buying tons of crap that they don’t need and must be made to want? Nothing sells like the illusion of identity. Those admen don’t know what they’re doing. They think they’re selling us products by playing on our need to be attractive or our fear of losing our looks. God knows that would be alienating enough. But it’s not that simple.

‘In late capitalist society,’ historians will say in 2069 A.D., ‘Consumption became (1) a substitute for human relationships, and (2) a substitute for identity.’

In these nightmare cities, so many of us live alone: the young, trying to make it; the housewives, left alone in a trap 12 hours a day; the old, used up and thrown away as if they were obsolescent products. These solitaries are driven to shops in search of the human contact denied them in their personal lives. Since women live longer than men, have fewer places to go, and are trained to shop, most of these wanderers are women. Men go to bars and ball games in search of the same human contact,

Listen to the half-hour conversation of the old woman in the butchershop, discussing the worth of a piece of meat; who else has she to talk to? With whom is her relationship more real? Watch the young girl rushing from dress shop to dress shop after work, trying on things, dreading closing time when she will have to go home to an empty apartment, unfulfilled by a purchase.

In earlier societies, the marketplace served a real social function, not an illusory one. You would go to the market to buy food, and you would buy it from people you *knew*, alongside people you *knew*. You would have known them all your life. Your relationship might be involved in the cash nexus while in the marketplace, but would continue outside of it on a personal or familial basis.

If people could find this kind of social fabric when they went to Macy’s, consumption might still be the human thing it is cracked up to be. But you shop *parallel* to other shoppers, not in direct contact with them. The only contacts you can make in a department store are with the rows upon rows of gleaming counters; or with the sad salesgirls or ogresses or snobs who tend them, whose work is so alienating that they are rarely in contact with themselves, let alone with you.

And what is it that we look for when we shop but a new self? The magical object that will make all the difference in our lives. The thing that will transform us into a princess.

We have probably all had the experience of going shopping when we got depressed. It was the only available relief for self-hatred. My friend and I used to go into the big department stores and the little boutiques, and she would get whole racks of things, almost at random, and try them on. She would put the dresses on, and turn to the mirror with an instant of wild hope in her eye. And I would say, “You look as if you were hoping that the dress would have turned you into another person,” and she would say, “Yes, that’s it,” or, “I hoped it would make me look beautiful.” She is beautiful, but will never believe it. And so she would try on another, and another; and none of them would be magical, so she would take those off too, and walk out of the store without buying anything, and on to the next, until it was too discouraging, and she was more depressed than ever.

Occasionally, when she was alone, with no other eye to deflate illusion, she would buy. And buy, and buy, whole cartloads of clothes. But by the time she got them home, the magic would have gone out of them.

This kind of consumption, which most of us practice to some degree, is an extreme of what Marxists call commodity-fetishism. Most people think of objects as if they had appeared in the shops by magic, and had magical properties, not as if they were made by people for other people to use. You buy a chair. You have no idea who made it, what the materials in it are, where they come from, how much they initially cost, how much the labor in it cost, and how much its price has been jacked up by profit and by waste like advertising. All of this is no more mysterious to you than it is to the factory worker who made one ingredient of the plastic that the seat of the chair is made of.

Thinking about products as if they had originated by magic results from a system of production where one class, because of its ownership of capital, controls the work and pay and products of another

class. Since the ownership of objects is connected with the power of this ruling class, it becomes exalted; since those who produce are powerless, the production of these objects is degraded. Objects become more important than men, and thus become mystified. They are further mystified by a system of production so complex that no one but a few in the ruling class understand it.

Some women think this way to the extent that they are willing to work for less at a trendy store like Design Research than they are at a more bourgeois store, because the prestige of the surrounding objects is thought to rub off. "I like to have nice things around me; it is part of being a nice thing myself." Other women will actually go without necessities to buy something that is the best, the most opulent, or the latest of its kind, rather than settle for one they can afford.

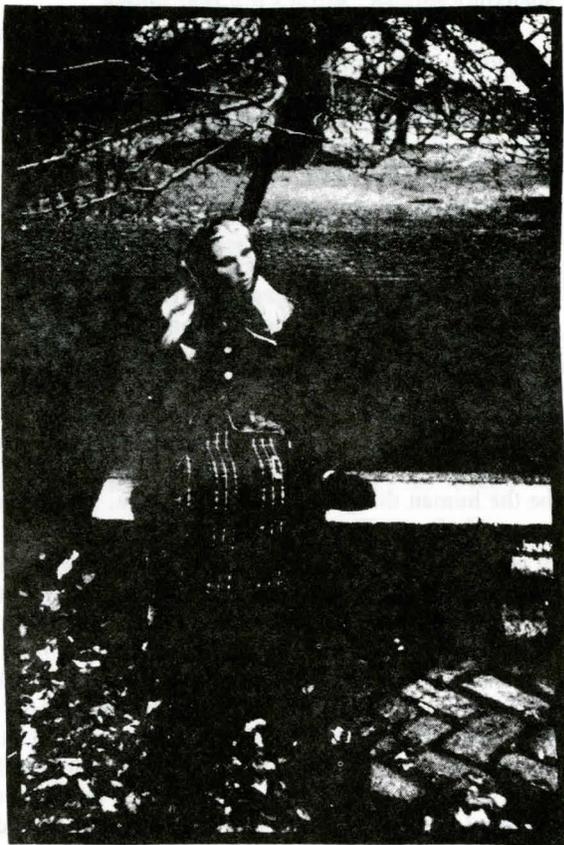
But the worst thing about consumer-fetishism is not the extremes it makes you go to monetarily—though that's bad enough—but the way it messes up your head. It requires an enormous, quantitative change in consciousness to get free of it. I'm not just talking about the two ladies in back of you on the subway who will talk from the Bronx to 34th street about the differences in the price of pink percale sheets at every store in the city; and whose total relationship is based on conversations like this, and no other kind. I'm talking about the window-shopping attitude toward life. Some people are trapped in this to the extent that they look on everything they pass, including people, as if they were reading price tags and deciding whether or not they wanted any. And some people think of themselves as articles of consumption for others. These are mostly women.

The only "woman's job" I was trained by my mother to do was shop. Other girls learn how to cook or how to clean things, but I was taught to shop. This was the only "work" activity my mother and I shared—the others being social: TV and visiting relatives. She took me to sales and shopping centers all over town, and went on comparative shopping sprees with me until I was old enough to do this work on my own. At that point I started going downtown to "shop" every Saturday after religious school—though I didn't have much money, so what this mostly entailed was covering a lot of ground, buying very little, and having my purchases graded as to quality and price when I got home.

It seemed to me that shopping was one of the few things grown women did that brought them into contact with the wider world (downtown), and was at the same time productive. And it was expressive as well; what you bought showed who you were.

Our minds get filled up with all kinds of consumption shit, not only by Madison Avenue, but by the whole process of our socialization and by the way meaningful work is limited for women in our society.

The time came, a couple of years ago, when I didn't have enough money. That is, I had enough to eat and sleep and buy an occasional newspaper; but not enough to "consume" in the shops. It never occurred to me to question my role as consumer until I could not longer fill it. As I walked along the streets looking in shop windows and constantly getting mildly interested in various objects, then having to say, "No, there's no point in looking," I realized how much of my mind had been trained just for imaginary acts of consumption, and now didn't know what to do. I became very nervous, and



began to re-examine that whole aspect of my mental life as a woman.

I realized that I was raised to be a consuming machine, to keep this ridiculously inflated economy going. I decided to resign from the role.

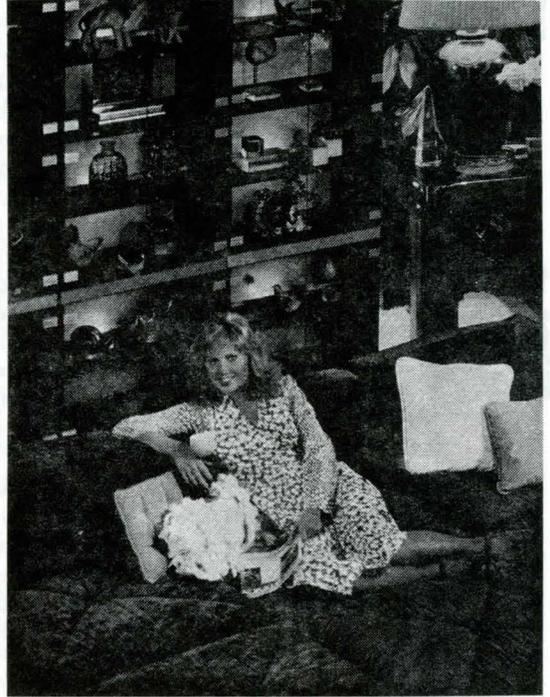
It is by realizing the nature of our oppression that we choose to live differently, to struggle against it. Women are not free to choose what we will wear, or how we will look in our jobs or our social lives. We are judged by the clothes we wear—measured by the window-dressing they convince us is all-important. We are pressured to buy not what we need, but what they want to convince us we need.

They (advertisers, businessmen, bosses, lovers, parents, husbands) don't care if makeup hurts our skin and makes it feel like it's not in contact with the air. They don't care if we're miserable and unable to move freely in high heels, tight skirts, and girdles. They don't care if our clothes don't feel like they fit us, personally, as long as they're fashionable.

What's worse is that they've convinced many of us not to care, or to feel like all that discomfort and misery is a small price to pay for attracting men, for being a "real woman." We're threatened with the loss of our social status and jobs if we don't wear the mask. But the price we pay for wearing that mask is a big one: agonies of shame for the size of our breasts, our hair color, our wrinkles, our very existence.

We should be proud of ourselves, our faces, our bodies. We should wear bright clothes to add color to the world. We should dress up in costumes, if we want to; or wear the same clothes for weeks on end if we prefer.

But it's not easy. Consumerism works partly by pitting women against each other in an endless competition for the "best-dressed" or "sexiest." These commercialized conceptions of self are deeply engrained in all of us. The only way we can overcome our training, the only way we can develop pride in ourselves and respect for each other, is through collective action for ourselves and against the forces that oppress us as consumers.



IV. PRODUCTION OF THE SELF: THE MOST ALIENATED WORK OF ALL

So far this paper has examined the problem of woman's alienation from herself, through the lenses of experience and of existential psychology. We can also view it through a Marxist analysis, by examining woman's work and her place in the modern capitalist economy. (Note: a similar analysis could be made of woman's place in earlier economic stages, or in a socialist society.) To begin with, let's take a look at the general terrain: what is work?



Work is a relationship that takes place between you and nature, involving some material interchange. You take a chunk of raw material and do something to it; both you and the raw material are changed as a result. You put some of your mental and physical energy into the material, thus losing this energy, and the material becomes a product, a thing to be consumed by others.

In capitalist society, the chunk of raw material belongs to the capitalist; so does your energy, which you rent out at some fixed rate. So the capitalist takes the product that you have made. You have been making whatever-it-is, not for yourself, but

for someone else, as his agent or tool. This is alienated labor—when your work is done on material you don't own, towards ends that are mysterious to you, and from which you get nothing but money. You lose part of yourself and get nothing back but the ability to buy the products of other people's labor.

Labor takes place when the same interchange between you and nature (raw material) goes on, but without an intermediary between you (the producer) and the consumer. There is no very good example of this in capitalist society. Even work done for yourself becomes alienated before it reaches the consumer; the fine art market is an example of this alienation in its crassest form. The only comprehensible example in capitalist society would be selling something you've made to a friend. Say you carve a statue from wood. The wood is changed in the process; it becomes a statue. You are changed as well; you are exhilarated and exhausted. You are not *made less* as you are under capitalist conditions of production; you have had an experience you can understand, it has given you pleasure, and you have something that you made out of yourself and wood. Unalienated labor is similar to play, but in play the producer and the consumer are one.

Leisure is the span of time that is free from alienated labor.

In your labor, you build up certain abilities. Take muscular ones as an example: by toting that barge and lifting that bale, you become physically strong. This strength, your productive power, is what the capitalist buys. When you go home, you must recoup this productive power that has been used up, by eating, sleeping, watching TV, etc. This is *recuperation*.

On the brute levels of existence, where survival is at stake, recuperation cannot be elevated to an art form as it is on higher economic levels. The important thing is for the worker to recoup himself physically and mentally; the quality of the means by which he does it (hamburger or filet mignon, comic books or Shakespeare) aren't important.

All work in this society is alienating. Jobs which prohibit friendly contact between workers, which are highly regimented, repetitive, physically exhausting, and degrading, are brutalizing as well. The greater the degree of brutalization, the less possible it is for the worker to recover his humanity. He is likely to use his leisure time expressing his despair: getting drunk, or beating his wife and children, are such expressions. Where labor is less exhausting (professional jobs, for instance), artistic means of recuperation become possible; a man may use yoga, for example, to recover the use of a body which has been sacrificed to a sedentary form of labor.

Some jobs do not use up all a man's labor power (strength of various kinds); he has some left over, or can build up a little extra over the weekend. This is *play*, the consumption of one's labor power by oneself for one's own ends. It can mean exercise, sex, going to the movies or on an excursion. It can involve an interchange with nature, or the kind that characterizes unalienated work, but in this case the work will be for oneself alone. One will paint a picture or practice an instrument for the sake of doing it, not for the public utility or pleasure in the result, and not for money.

Many people cannot play; they never recoup themselves



to that point. Others have developed labor skills, or powers, that are so specialized that they cannot use them off the job, and they are unable to ease the extreme character of their alienation. Computer programmers or skilled machinists are examples of this problem. They will attempt to play on the job—by making up joke programs or stamping out jewelry—but this is fake play, a reaction against the extremity of their alienation rather than a completed game, for the joke programs are never carried out, and the programmers cannot make up real ones of their own (play as *invention*) under capitalist conditions.

If the categories describing man's use of his labor-power are work, labor, recuperation, and play, what categories describe woman's use of her labor-power? Women are not only exploited as workers in the same ways as men; women are also exploited as housewives and as sex-objects, both at the workplace and at home.

What men produce on the job is labor-products for someone else's consumption. What do women produce at home for other people's consumption?

Laundry. Cleaning. Taking care of children. Sewing and mending. Washing clothes and dishes. Shopping. Cooking.

In our stage of society, where most necessary production work has been taken out of the home (like baking bread, raising chickens, weaving cloth), the job of housewife is to produce the labor-power of others. The housewife feeds, clothes, cares for, and does psychological repair work on her husband and children, so that they can be resold in the capitalist marketplace each morning. She is not paid in any way that is defined as remuneration for this work, because it is not defined as a job. Her husband supports her as an appendage of himself, but no employer pays her for her labor. Apart from this central fact, the jobs of cooking, cleaning, and child-care are not intrinsically more alienating, or as alienating, as work in an office or factory.

But there are two crucial differences between a housewife's work and work in the public sphere, and in these lie the peculiar alienation of the job.

The housewife does not produce anything tangible, anything that lasts, or that has market value. Her job is to maintain the *status quo*. Her labor never ends, because it is involved in maintaining a process, rather than making products.

The other difference is that, unlike other lowgrade maintenance work, the work of the housewife is done in solitude. Its reality and value are not acknowledged either by payment, or by the presence of others engaged in the same work. The housewife's work is treated by society simply as though it did not exist as work! It takes place in some limbo of private time and space. Even its standards are subjective; there are certain obvious things the housewife must do (like cook dinner), but she does them according to standards set by her own or someone else's personal preferences, and not by some necessary standard inherent in the work. Mostly no one else even notices her work or considers it as such. It is as if the 60 to 80 hour work week she puts in (according to the Chase Manhattan Bank) were imaginary, and all she really did, as far as others were concerned, was to sit on the sofa, munch chocolates, and read *True Romances*, as she does in cartoons.

There is one other thing that woman produces for the consumption of others: *herself*. This is obvious on the material level. She interacts with material objects (makeup, curlers, diet soda, pretty clothes) and both come out changed. She has made the *material* part of herself a more appealing article of consumption, but what has happened to the *producer* part of herself? What more severe alienation can there be than in this case? A split between mind and body are inevitable; the kind of fear, or disgust, or wonder, or ignorance, that most women feel about their bodies is a by-product.

But yet another kind of labor is involved, for women must be desirable objects of consumption not only in body, but also in behavior. This necessitates a kind of *immaterial production* difficult to define, which consists of one part of a woman's mind directing her behavior (to be appealing, sexy, comforting, etc.) to be attractive. Her behavior is an object of consumption not only as a sex-object, but also as a "wife," in which role she must be comforting, undemanding, restful, without needs of her own, a buffer zone between a man and his rage at being alienated from himself. The split in a woman's mind which this process necessitates is more severe and detrimental than the split between mind and body, and can be called *female schizophrenia* (cf. pp. 4-7).

When producing your own mind and body is your work, there's no such thing as leisure—no time when you can really recuperate. The hour or two of privacy which are free from housework are insuf-

ficient to relieve the strain. And so the housewife's production process, nervous and physical, frequently breaks down.

In the ideal form of male-dominated society, *sex is labor for women and play for men*. For men, sex is the consumption of their labor-power for their own ends. For women, sex is the consumption of their labor-power by another (the consumer), and the use of their labor-product (which is their material and behavioral selves) by another. It is therefore alienated.

In this ideal pattern, sex appears to men as a means of transcending their everyday experience, that is, it is something special and extraordinary, the subject of fantasy. In sex, men make use of their labor-power, the productive ability they have built up at work and use on the job. They experience sex as play because it is (1) using this ability for themselves, not for others, and (2) using it in a qualitatively different way from labor. It is a transcendence of their role as worker.

In fact, in our society, many men cannot experience sex as transcendent. The patterns that they bring to relationships with women are those they have been taught are "masculine" in other situations: the same anxiety about not measuring up; the same competitiveness; the same tendency to regard everything as a threat to their masculinity; and the same achievement-orientation, which concentrates on results rather than process, prevail. These attitudes which are socialized into men, are tremendously destructive of any possibility of meaningful personal relationships. But these patterns, while oppressive to the men involved, also cause these men to oppress women. Men may suffer from the fragmentation, the anxiety, the false consciousness, and the sense of undefined loss common to oppressors in other situations. But messed up as they may be, they still have the power in most sexual relationships.

For it is material power in society, not psychological givens, that determine the structure of sexual relationships in general. Men are consumers of women because they hold most of the power in our society. Some men have more power than other men. And a few women, like the Queen of the Netherlands, have more power than most men. But almost every man has power over some woman; and men as a sex control almost all social institutions, including those that only women use (like pregnancy wards), dictate public policy, earn most of the national income, and control almost all jobs. The marriage relation is a business deal; the man hires the woman, in both her aspects of producer and product, for an unspecified length of time. Either one of them can get out of the contract, these days, if they wish; but the woman will have to end up by being "hired" by someone else (unless she gets lots of "severance pay") if she does. Getting doors opened for you isn't power.

Sex is not transcendent to women, because it is a continuation of their work role. Even in their housework, in their shopping, they are trained to relate to everything, to all the world, as a latent sexual object. Sex is no enrichment of their work experience, or change from it; it is no alternative mode of being; it is merely the fulfillment of an everyday expectation. It is a relief (they have been successful on their job) but not an escape. It is just another way of giving service. Women are taught to think that they are sexual failures if they don't take pleasure in even the most perfunctory or brutalized sex (cf. *Cosmopolitan*), and so they will act the part of mistress, even when they feel nothing but exhaustion or despair. They fake their own experience so that their man will not be denied the illusion that he has pleased them, so that they will not feel failures as women, so that they will not have to answer a string of questions beginning with "Did you come?" This falsification of the emotional content of sex adds another dimension of alienation to the problem. But at least their product has been consumed. Most women's lives are so limited that their only outlet is fantasy. And even their fantasy life is all too often merely a glorification of the objectified sex roles they are cast in everyday.

In the socialist society one imagines, all labor will be unalienated. The worker will understand the whole process, know what it is for, know how he fits it and feel so much a part of the community that consumes his product that it will be as if he were producing for his friends and himself. There will be time for play, on the job, with the same raw materials. Women will work alongside of men, at the same jobs. Power relationships between people will vanish, and institutions which are based on inequities in power, like the bourgeois family, will vanish or be transformed.

How does this projection relate to sex? What will sexual relationships be like in a truly socialist society? Will women free themselves from being both objects of consumption and the products of their own labor? Is it possible that they will cease to need to be "attractive" or "comforting" as these are now defined—that men will cease to demand it of them, or that equal material opportunities will change the relation between men and women so drastically as this? If work were not so decimating,



“comfort” would be unnecessary. “Attractiveness” would become a personal quality in each of us, rather than a market ideal. Will we live to see such changes in society as a whole?

One thing is certain: women will never be able to experience sex as *play*—for ourselves—until each of us has a *self*—that is, not three or four conflicting selves, but one integrated self. Out of the conflict between our pain and the way we were socialized has been born a new creation: the women’s liberation movement. Out of the conflict between the women’s liberation movement and society will be born a creature who does not yet exist: a liberated woman.

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