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"Women's Liberation Movement"

Marlene Dixon

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"Women's Liberation Movement," Marlene Dixon
Portland State University
May 26, 1970

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MARLENE DIXON: Does anybody know if somebody is supposed to come and go through the usual female masochism scene of apology? I am sorry I'm late. But I'm not, you know, we did all these Le Mans race driver tricks to get here. And it's the fault of Oregon, because I was checking it out because the hot breath of the Man daily grows warmer, and I decided that I would come where I could commune with nature. That was until I found nature costs \$200 a foot. [laughs] Anyway, you have a beautiful coastline, what you can see of it in between the Standard Oil signs. Um, so I was checking that out far from here.

I'm Marlene, and what with all of our multiple adventures I don't have any notes or anything on me. It's just me. Which can be a down-trip or an up-trip, depending. Now the question is, I don't know what people, because I haven't had an opportunity to talk to Portland sisters, I haven't the wildest idea of the umpteen million things that one can talk about with respect to women's lib, to women's liberation, what I should talk about. That is, what people in, what sisters in Portland would be interested in hearing. So, let me try and find that out. I think it's going to be very low-key tonight. If I start listing to one side you'll know that sleep has overcome me. If you start listing to one side I'll know that sleep has overcome you. How many people here on women's liberation? OK. I see we have a caucus over here.

[laughter]

Uhh, maybe we have an autonomous movement and that's even more right on. Uhh, how many are lib symps? [laughter] Uh huh. How many are merely curious? Uh huh. How many are here to foment trouble? [laughter] Do we have attack squad sisters? [laughter]

OK, so, what we really have are a lot of people who are not familiar with women's liberation. So maybe I should start with number one. The problem with number one is that my mind goes totally blank at the thought of saying it one more time.

[laughter]

Uh. OK. I... What I'm going to do is, because you've been sitting here for so long, I'm going to try to be relatively brief and say enough that will perhaps elicit questions that bear somewhat on the topic. And let it go from there. Is that more agreeable to you than having to sit for another 40 minutes? Good. So what I'm going to do... Um, also I may jump from topic to topic 'cause I don't have notes. And I have enough professorial weaknesses left that without notes I tend to slip from this topic to that topic. So, I'll just ask you to bear with me. I know, I mean, what the heck. And what I want to talk about is the characteristics of human exploitation. 'Cause fundamentally, women's liberation is a freedom movement that springs from the real contradictions of human exploitation. It's very important to understand the exploitation of women, because it predates capitalism and has been perpetuated after socialism. It is for this reason that those people who are in the left, or who are socialists, talk about women's liberation almost in a sense of being a primary contradiction, or primary source, of human exploitation. As such, our understanding of the exploitation of women is very essential to understanding what is required in a revolutionary process. And what is required after, to institute a society which is truly liberated society.

Now I want to talk about words like revolution and left-wing and things like that. Particularly for older women who have become interested in women's liberation but don't know what all that means or what all that is doing. When the big problem is that one is trapped in one's house or one is earning 40 percent less on the job than somebody else. So, it's necessary...

DIXON [aside, to someone]: Thank you very much. Does somebody mind closing the back door? I hate open doors, they make me nervous.

DIXON [resuming lecture]: Before we get down to theoretical nitty gritty, it's necessary to understand a little bit about this mass movement which is now present in every part of North America. Not just the United States but Canada as well, a little bit about where it came from and who's in it. 'Cause that will help you locate, locate the rhetoric, the words that we use. There are two movements, really. One is a movement of older and professional women. It's best represented by the National Organization of Women. Which was founded by a group of women in Washington and Betty Friedan, who wrote the book The Feminine Mystique. The Feminine Mystique was addressed to middle class housewives who were trapped in suburbia and it blew their minds. There's no other way to describe what happened. It absolutely blew their minds. Because it articulated their discontent for them. Unfortunately, at that time, Betty Friedan had not yet been forced by reality to become a social democrat. She was still a liberal. And so, she kind of advocated things like pottery-making and extra, you know, dance lessons or something as a solution to the problem. She's come a long way since then, so has the National Organization of Women. They're not on the left wing, but they've certainly moved in that direction along with everybody else in the country except, of course, the silent majority.

The other movement is a much younger movement. It was originally made up of women in the civil rights movement and later in the new left. These women formed a movement out of the contradiction of having been in a freedom movement, a movement dedicated to human freedom, to human equality, to equal justice under the law, to participatory democracy, to find out that there wasn't equal justice under the law for them, there weren't civil rights for them, and they sure as heck were not permitted to participate in participatory democracy. And so, they went, they formed a caucus and as all youthful movements fresh and full of naivete, full of the civics that one learned in high school, during that general [...] phase—there's no politics in high school. There's politics, but we would call it silent majority politics. Anyway, they went [...] and asked for their civil liberties. And they went to the men. First a Black woman went. She wrote a paper. A Black woman. Okay? Ruby Doris Smith, called "The Position of Women in SNCC." You have to understand that Black women are very strong and that some of the finest organizers working in the South were Black women. So, it was not unusual that the first statement was made by a Black woman. Unfortunately, the answer to her paper, that was made by Stokely Carmichael, was that the position of women in SNCC was prone. Then, there followed the division of the civil rights movement, the end of the civil rights movement, in which Black people expelled white people. And we have to understand a little bit about that because the parallel between the Black experience and women's liberation is quite close. You see we can say, we women can say, in a very real way, the Black movement has been a vanguard party for us. If you don't understand that, that's OK, there are kids who do. We do it on two levels. No? It is truly a vanguard party, because so much of our experience and our politics has been learned from the Black experience. We have to be concerned about racism in our movement. But one of the reasons we can overcome that racism is because of what we're able to understand. Anyway, out of that division was created...

[pause; sound of shoes walking across the floor]

DIXON [aside, to someone]: That's OK.

DIXON [resuming lecture]: Out of that division, was created the new left. And the women within the new left made a caucus and they went to the men. And they said, "Hey men, we're on the barricades and we're fighting and we're getting our heads broken and we're going to jail. But we're not making any of the decisions. Right? And we're cranking the mimeograph machine and we're washing the dishes, we're looking after the children and we're looking after you. But we're not making any of the decisions. And so what you have to do for us is you have to give us our civil rights. But we love you." They had a big sign that said, *But really, make sure, we love you*. The men, however, did not love them, unfortunately. Because the men went into a ridicule trip. And they made a lot of very bad comments and statements. Like, "Take her down and give a good fuck and she'll get over that nonsense." They did things like that. So, the women were very discouraged, understandably. Because, they hadn't expected that. They had really thought, "Well after all, aren't we taught in the university that it's a question of being reasonable? And aren't we taught in the university that it's a question of presenting the evidence? And aren't we

taught in the university that rational debate will always, is the reasonable, peaceful, proper, appropriate way to do things?" So, they engaged in rational debate and they presented their arguments and the clear contradictions. Unfortunately, what they had learned in the university was wrong. And so, none of that rationality, none of that clear argument worked. It was quite clear.

Now we've had about four people walk out. Which can be (a) the babysitter's time is up, (b) they are bored, or (c) they don't like my politics. But I am very up-front about my politics and I don't lie about them. And I assume that those women who feel their oppression enough to come to a meeting like this, if they're ever going to be any good to their sisters, would be patient enough to find out what it's all about. And why is it that so many women who are actually moving and doing something about the oppression of women sound like I sound? See, 'cause I'm not going to lie to you about what I believe. I might not say it altogether just point blank, but...

[smattering of laughter]

OK. You can, I mean like, I mean short of walking out, you could twitch. And if you have to go save the babysitter, don't feel intimidated.

OK. So, the women made an enormous discovery. What they discovered was what they call male chauvinism. That is the racist, in nature, if you understand racism as a form of oppression, the racist, chauvinist belief, in the inferiority of women, the superiority of men, and the fundamental right which the men denied, because they are an oppressing group, is the right to rebellion. The women were not permitted to rebel. And that is male chauvinism. The justice of the case, all you have to do is look at the differentials in what people are paid for doing equal work. You get 40 percent less. You do the same work. That's wrong. I mean any two-year-old child can see that. However, the men couldn't. It's like white people have a little trouble understanding about Black people. Right? Because white people oppress Black people. So, the women continued to organize very quietly. However, they dropped the "I love you" from their statements. And they continued doing that until 1968.

1968, the first national women's conference at Seneca Falls was held outside of Chicago. And in 1968 there was the official birth of what is called the Autonomous Women's Movement. That is a movement for women, by women, and dedicated to the liberation of women. And that autonomous movement was not the consequence of a few unfucked, neurotic women who were men-haters and divisive, running-dog, bourgeois, personalist lackies of imperialism either.

[laughter]

That movement was a consequence of the simple fact that women were in fact oppressed and the men would not get out of the way. And since they would not get out of the way, it was necessary for the sisters to move by themselves. And this is what they have done. And the

movement which now extends from New Orleans, in Louisiana, up to Moosejaw, Saskatchewan, that movement has been the growth of the autonomous women's movement.

Now, in the early stages of our movement, no one would let us be oppressed. You see we were supposed to be neurotic or sexually unfulfilled. But we certainly could not be oppressed. And so, women got together in what are called, what were then called, consciousness-raising groups. And a consciousness-raising group, it's a fancy name for really women sitting down and rapping with one another. And they did an unprecedented thing, for women that is, as women spend almost the majority of their adult life, ministering to a man feeling uncomfortable with women, or taking care of children and feeling uncomfortable with women. The women did this unprecedented thing. They kicked out all the men. So that just women sat down, and not at coffee klatches either, the "illness without a name," which is described by Betty Friedan, but to talk openly about what it was like to be a woman. Now that had to happen, that's where people said, Well, they're just a lot of neurotic women sitting in there talking about lord knows what. Well that isn't what was happening. There is no vocabulary for the oppression of women. We talk about the freedom, the dignity, the liberation, the revolutionary struggle of *mankind*. You see for us, there is no language that even describes our oppression. Tell me the word in the Marxist vocabulary that describes the following familiar event: (I'm going to take my examples out of the left movement because that's where I live, okay?) You go over to somebody's house. Two men, two women, maybe, you know, six people altogether. The men sit down their rapping it down. Their laying all out, Lenin, vanguard poli, pro-Stalin, anti-Stalin, this is the history of the Bolshevik revolution. No, Mao Tse-Tung said, hot and heavy, oh wow, *choo-choo-choo-choo*.

There are the wives. They put out the newsletter. They knock on the doors. They crank the mimeograph machine. They sit there in the first five minutes, they get this silly look on their face.

[laughter]

This is to indicate acute interest in the scintillating, intellectual debate going on between the men. But observe about 8-10 minutes and you get this look.

[laughter]

And then you get a very surreptitious on the part of braver women. She picks up...

[Dixon is acting something out while the audience reacts with giggles.]

That is a state which I call acute catatonia.

[laughter and a smattering of applause]

Familiar to you, is it, sisters? We call it the process of the stupification of women. Now, some liberal women may say, "Aww, the only thing wrong with those women is they didn't try to take

part in the conversation.” I will now describe to you what would happen had they tried to take part in the conversation. [laughter]

[Dixon speaking in a lowered tone, imitating a man’s voice] On page 245 Lenin said... [becoming unintelligible on purpose, blathering]

[changed to a higher speaking tone to imitate a women’s voice] Hey, I read a...

[Dixon acts out a conversation between a man and a woman where the man speaks authoritatively, interrupting, and does not allow the women to interject]

In other words...

You see it’s a solid wall. No one will hear her when she says it. Now if she’s persistent, right, finally one of the gods will turn about and say, “On page 245 he didn’t say anything like that.” *Chhhunng!* Absolutely crushed. And you sit there and figure out, [in the woman’s voice] “...but I’m sure he did. I’m sure he did.” But by this time there is nothing left. Now usually, of course, if you’re really persistent, your social life, it just becomes a catastrophe area. And pretty soon you aren’t invited to dinner anywhere because it always ends up to be a fight. So, there isn’t any point in saying *if only the women would try harder*. ‘Cause we all know what happens when you try harder. Women are to be seen and not heard. They are to be decorative but they aren’t supposed to talk.

“Ahh,” says another woman, “What about Lenin?” [Dixon imitating a man’s voice] “I don’t know anything about Lenin.”

Now comes in bourgeoisie college girl. “Ahh, if all women would just study Lenin.” But you see, they are chauvinized in their mind. They’ve learned to have contempt for women. I want to know, what good does Lenin do you? You need a theory of the vanguard party to buy floor wax? To figure out which diaper service to use? You need to read Stalin on the Nation and the State to clean the house? This is also part of the process of the stupification of women. There was one woman I met. And she got up and she was really, I mean like her mind was blown, and she said, “I met my husband grading *his* paper. Because I was a graduate student in anthropology when I met him. After a year and a half, after I had my baby, I didn’t talk to anybody. There was nothing left in my mind!” The process of stupification. Now, most women don’t even get encouraged into the university unless you’re into Home Ec or English. You know, because we’re supposed have really cosmic vibes. We’ve got lots of rhythm. So, we can groove on English and Art, right. Somehow those cosmic vibes set up impassable barriers within our gray matter so we can’t learn Engineering or Chemistry or Medicine. You know useful things like that. Like Chemical Engineering, Structural Engineering, Mining Engineering, [laughs] Electrical Engineering, useful things like that. So, I lost my train of thought.

[laughter]

Very woman. I don't apologize. I was describing. Ah, that's what I was doing. I was describing what women did in their consciousness-raising groups. And what they did was to make the discoveries that I just talked about. And there's no vocabulary for that. What do you call that? And yet every woman who has suddenly waked up and discovered that many alternatives, how many alternatives there were for her. What possibilities in life she might realize. The kinds of people that she might have been, had she been free, or had she been encouraged, or had she not been told that she was stupid, or had she not been constricted to primarily twitching her twat in order to find out where she belonged in life. That was recognized as oppression. And it was at a very gut level and it was very primitive. Because women's liberation is a part of the revolutionary youth movement and was made up of those young women who were part of the youth movement. When they rapped down their oppression, they tended to focus on their sex lives. Because that was where the contradiction touched them in a most direct way. That is, in terms of the young men they were sleeping with, living with, or relating to. And it was for that reason that the Miss America kinds of demonstrations, the very early demonstrations in the movement, focused on the use of women as sexual objects in advertisement, in daily life. And on the definition of a woman's value and identity, primarily in sexual terms. But after all, as time passed, these women did belong to a revolutionary youth movement, they were new left, these women. And they began to realize they had to reach out and they had to understand the position of other women. They had to understand working class women, they had to understand women who had to work in factories and in offices and who taught and who were social workers. They had to understand welfare mothers. They had to understand Black women, Third World women all together. And so, they had to develop an analysis which would explain the oppression of women in order that they would know how to fight against that which crippled, limited, and oppressed women. That brings us back to talking about human exploitation. And I'm going to try to do that relatively quickly so that we can move into discussion. If you want to.

Well, one of the things that we did was to rediscover our own history. We rediscovered that there had been an older women's movement. That it had grown out of the struggle for the abolition of slavery. That those women had worked on the Underground Railway; had risked their lives running slaves to freedom out of the South. That in that movement women had learned to do petitions, give meetings. We read further and discovered the history of our sisters in Britain. Where they got into terrorism. They were prone to blowing things up and burning things down. We discovered that women fought in the streets. And there are some fine old flicks showing women in those long skirts fighting like mad against the Man. All very familiar. And then we discovered there was much to be proud of in our old movement. And that had been a long struggle, a hundred years of struggle. But it had failed. It had almost totally failed. The legal emancipation of women had almost been achieved. Women had been given the right to vote. And yet women were not only as oppressed as ever, but given, say the period 1920 to 1940, 1950, women had lost ground. They had become more oppressed. In other words, the oppression of women had not been ended after a hundred years of struggle. And the question

that women asked was, "Why? Why not? What had gone wrong?" They asked themselves a second question. They checked out the Soviet Union. They listened to Fidel. They observed China. And they said, *Even after socialism, racism and chauvinism exist. Why is that? If that's true, why are we fighting this revolution? Why are we fighting in a revolution that doesn't also set us free?* Two central questions. Let's take them in order.

The older women's movement. I think that the consensus, and you have to understand that we're dealing with a changing and developing and extremely vibrant intellectual effort. The development of theory which no one gave us and certainly not the Marxists. Only the dimmest hint is present in Marx and Engels of any adequate discussion of the oppression of women. But we'll come to that under the second question. Anyway, coming back. What went wrong? Number one. The women's suffrage movement was a middle class movement. And it occurred during a historical period in which [...] dead. They had no rights and no rights over their property. If a woman, middle class, comfortable, part of the entrepreneurial class, were to leave her husband, were to abandon her family, she would not have the happy result that is implied in Ibsen's A Doll's House. Much more likely, she would work in a mine or she would work in a sweat shop as a seamstress or she would work as a mill girl, 16 hours a day at half the man's wages, and the men were starving on their wages. The trade unions in the United States refused to organize women because their wages were so pitiful they couldn't pay dues. And it didn't pay Mr. Samuel Gompers to organize women. Women have been striking, organizing their own strikes, and demonstrating their militancy and labor struggles since 1844 in this country. But the men didn't want to organize the women. One of the finest woman organizers, Leonora Barry, wrote that it was almost hopeless because the men stood in the way of the organization of women. Another woman, a typesetter, wrote a statement that "the bosses treat us better than our colleagues at the union office do, even when we go out to strike to support the men." The result, of course, is that American women have never been organized. They aren't organized to this day. And they remain the largest unorganized, and therefore potentially radical labor force in the country. It is like untouched, if you will forgive the expression, for an organizer, it is virgin territory. [laughter]

Now, however, because a middle-class woman would lose whatever security or position she might have, were she to, you know, leave her married state. And because the suffrage movement, the women's movement which became a suffrage movement was middle-class, those women were not able to make an alliance with the working-class sisters who have such a fine history in the American labor movement. They were alienated from working-class sisters. What they did instead was to be social workers and charity workers. And they opened up the settlement houses and they pushed for laws that would end the abuse of children. See, because children are mouths to feed, and so they were sent to work in the mills when they were 5 and 6 years old, and they died when they were 24 from malnutrition, tuberculosis, and overwork. Free enterprise. At any rate... So no alliance was ever made. And secondly, the middle-class women did something else. Because they weren't radical, and I'm arguing that it was because what it would cost them to be radical. They took the role of mother. That idealized, twisted,

Victorian conception of the sexless woman on a pedestal, who existed for no other purpose than to bear and nurture children. And such a useless woman. Because, after all, to do nothing but bear children is relatively useless, given the range of activities you have in the world, could only be afforded by affluent, rich people. Ordinary women worked. They worked very hard at home producing things that were needed. Or they worked in the factories. But this idea of the noble woman up on a pedestal was forced on working-class women.

I have to stop at this point. I want to give you two contradictions. I want you to really dig this. One. Here is a legislator saying, "Oh, we can't possibly let women into the state colleges. For women are too fragile and too delicate and too nurturing to be able to bear the rigors of a college education." The same man on the next day refuses to vote on a law that would put an end to child labor and the working of women in the mines 18 hours a day. You see his wife may have been too fragile to go to the university, but those mill girls they weren't too fragile to work 18 hours a day in the mills, now were they? Now I'll give you another example. It's very important.

There was a meeting a long, long time ago. You see, they don't tell you about the very powerful, strong Black women who were in the early women's movement. One of those women was Sojourner Truth. Sojourner Truth was born into slavery. She as a young woman fell in love and asked her master for permission to marry. The answer that her master gave her was to take the young man and have him beaten in her presence and sold. She was later forced to marry another man. She bore 13 children, most of whom were sold into slavery. And finally, in New York state, the slaves were freed and Sojourner Truth made her way to New York City and joined the abolitionist movement. And as a women's member of the abolitionist movement also became an advocate for the rights of women. Because you will recall that when the slavery was ended in the South, men could vote, but the women, they were not permitted to vote. At any rate, at this meeting there was a minister, a preacher, and he was saying things like, well, he didn't think that women had a right to vote because women had to be helped into carriages and aided over puddles. And women just weren't up to the rigors of being able to make the decision to vote. And the preacher was winning because the press people are easy to oppress. Women are afraid to rebel. And the preacher was intimidating the women present. So finally, Sojourner Truth asked permission to speak. And there was a lot of hissing. And people were saying, "Oh, she's an abolitionist. Don't let her talk. Eh, she's Black. Don't let her talk." But they were overruled 'cause somebody said, "Well let her talk, she's a woman." Of course, Sojourner Truth was probably one of the greatest speakers the movement ever had. I can't reproduce what she said precisely. I haven't memorized it, although I'm going to. But, in effect, she said something like this. She said, "This man over there says that women can't have the vote because they have to be helped into carriages and aided over puddles. But I worked in the fields. And I worked as hard as any man. And I bore the lash too. And ain't I a woman? Nobody ever helped me into carriages or put me over a puddle. And ain't I a woman? And I bore 13 children. And when they were sold off into slavery, nobody heard my cry but Jesus. And ain't I a woman?" Says it doesn't it? It really says it altogether.

OK. Now we come back to the suffragette movement. What they did was to take this image of woman, this fragile woman, that's connected into the direct vibes of the universe and turn that into a political ideology. A political ideology. And what they said was this: Give women the vote and the new Jerusalem will instantly occur. Why? Because women, being nurturant, being compassionate, being motivated by the finest instincts of motherhood, will, upon being given the vote, outlaw war and bring reason and compassion to government. Well, they finally got the vote. And of course, they voted precisely the way their husbands told them to vote. Which is just the same old way. And that was the end of the women's movement. But it taught us a lesson. And the lesson that it taught us is that a liberal answer, a reformist answer, is not an answer that will guarantee or address the liberation of women.

OK, we can see that in terms of the mistakes we made in the past. But maybe we can see it a little better. And that brings us to our second question. Why is it that male chauvinism and racism is perpetuated under socialism? And to understand that, we have to understand what the fundamental contradiction or the fundamental nature of human exploitation is.

DIXON [aside, to someone]: Ten more minutes. Can you stand it for ten more minutes? OK.

DIXON [resuming lecture]: Marx and Engels got close to it. Because what they argued was: The first use of a human being as property was the use made by men of women. Because women had been turned into property. The Latin word *familia* means a man and his slaves. It's the stem of the word family. Juliet Mitchell argued this way: We can't reconstruct history. We can't know actually what happened. But we can understand the biological functions of women and their oppression. She said it isn't a question of strength. In many societies in the world the women do all of the heavy labor and the men don't do any of the heavy labor. It isn't a question of strength, 'cause women can be almost as strong or as strong or stronger than men. It was, Juliet Mitchell argued, a question of the monopoly of violence. It's very simple. If you are 6 months or 9 months along, you are not about to heft a spear, pull a bow, or hunt the wild boar. Right? And women throughout most of human history have been perpetually pregnant. It's very simple, perpetually pregnant. In the year 1888, women spent some 16 years of their lives pregnant and nursing babies. 16 years: that's the best and the most youthful vigorous part of a woman's life, was spent in relative perpetual pregnancy. Any number of those babies were lost, of course. And the women died young. On the frontier of the United States, on the average, historians tell us, a man would wear out four women. He would kill them with work and child bearing. So that meant that the men became the hunters and the warriors, because they didn't get pregnant. And because they had a monopoly on violence they could reduce the women to chattel. And form out of women a hereditary, servant class, a caste. A caste that lived in a different world and stood in a different relation to men. Because of that monopoly upon violence, which in time became institutionalized in the form of the family. But... [speaking as an aside] Yeah, heavy... that is what we mean by the primary contradiction. That the oldest exploitation of one human being by another human being was the exploitation of women by men. And we find that throughout history and we find that in almost all human cultures.

But then, the means of production changes and technology develops. And we have not only a revolution in the modes of production, we have a revolution in the modes of reproduction as well; i.e., we now can control pregnancy. The result is in 1965, a woman spent only four years of her life pregnant and nursing, and she lived to be 65 or 70. That is, the biological basis for the exploitation of women no longer exists. Furthermore, technology meant that people worked with machines and became extensions of machines. What that means is it takes an index finger, right, to hit the typewriter keys, to push a button on a computer, or to pull a trigger. The technological basis for the exploitation of women equally does not exist.

But capitalism did something else. The development of the family during the period that we call the Industrial Revolution, which was in fact the birth of the capitalist mode of production, you know like the United States today, changed the structure of the family. In the olden days... [speaking aside] I'm almost done. I know, you're tired. I'm responding to your twitches. ...In the olden days, women were part of an extended family unit with grandparents and uncles and aunts and cousins and children. And there was communal childcare and some grandmothers took care of children. The women worked in the fields. The women spun the wool. The women wove the cloth. And because she was an essential part of the economic unit called the family, while her position wasn't the greatest, it was much better than it was to become under capitalism, because she was an essential producer in the family. But under capitalism, people were forced off the land into the cities and became subject to the labor market. They became, as Marx put it, like slaves, only they didn't have any guaranteed board and room. What that meant was you had to have isolated and mobile families. Because you had to move to where the work was. Furthermore, in the old family, children were an asset. Because they could go out into the fields and work. And feed the chickens. And take care of the animals. And they were useful. But under capitalism, they were nothing but an extra mouth to feed, and there wasn't enough food to go around. That's why parents sent their children into the factories. Do you know what a kid would earn for a week's work, working 12 hours a day? 25 cents a week. Do you know what women earned? A dollar and 25 cents a week. But another thing happened and that is that whereas the women used to weave the cloth, make the clothes, take care of the pots, do basketry, and so on. Those functions were taken over by the factories, that became mass-produced. In other words, you no longer had somebody sitting there with a spinning wheel. You had cotton mills. That meant that a family could no longer produce what it needed. It had to *buy* what it needed. Which meant it had to work for money. It had to engage in wage labor.

Well, before very long, the only labor that was called legitimate work was wage labor. Now the women, according to the Chase Manhattan Bank, work on the average of 99.6 hours per week. And what do you think they are doing? Eating bonbons all day long? You know, maybe you think they do nothing but watch soap operas all day long. In fact, what they really do is to produce an enormous volume of absolutely essential labor. They take care of the worker, the

maintenance of the worker. They prepare the meals. They take care of the house. They do all of this mind-breaking, stupefying, ugly, ridiculous labor. I mean, how anyone with a straight face can think that obsessing about your floors and dust is any kind of adequate challenge to the intelligence and creativity of a human being is beyond me. If women want to quote the “Ladies’ Home Companion” to me, then I will deal with their false consciousness. Because if that is the total calling of a creative and talented human being, I don’t see it. A machine can wash the floor better than you can. So, I’m not sure where that puts, maybe it’s the tender loving care makes a difference in the vibes in the house. Dig? But that labor is not wage labor. And because it’s not wage labor, it is said not to be labor at all! What does that mean? It means a woman is not paid wages for her work. That means that her husband is taxed for her upkeep. So a worker who is not making enough anyway has to use his salary to support the wife and the kids. That means that capitalism gets two workers for the price of one. And as any capitalist will tell you, any time you can rip off something for nothing that’s good business. [laughter]

More than that, it also means that a woman gets up in the morning, prepares the breakfast, cleans the house, gets into the car, takes the kids to school, brings them back from school, makes the lunch, does stuff in the afternoon, irons the clothes, goes out and buys junk, goes out picks up the husband, brings him back, makes the dinner, washes the dishes, puts the kids to bed, says, “How did you do with work today, Dear?” *Choo, choo*, as he moves the *L.A. Times* and does whatever he does, you know. *Choo, choo*, then she picks up some more stuff. Then she takes off his slippers. Then he goes to bed. Then she checks the children. At 11:30 maybe she drops into bed, zonked. But you’re not supposed to be tired. Because you are by social definition, parasites. *Dependents*. Incapable dependents. The man says to his wife, “You’re a millstone around my neck. If it hadn’t been for you, I could have been a sea captain in the Caribbean.” [laughter]

The effect, then, is that the primary contradiction of the exploitation of women by men has been intensified and brutalized under capitalism. As has almost every aspect of human life. The reason is very clear. You can have two kinds of societies. One society can be based on the concept that the unit of value is human life and human potentiality. And that what the society must strive to do is to guarantee the development, the health, the welfare, and the potential contribution of a human being. Or, a society can be based on the primary obsession that the universe was created so that man could primarily, through his aggressive and individualist instincts amass a greater and greater pile of capital profit. In which case, human beings stop meaning anything. Human beings are to be bought, to be sold, to be manipulated, and if they don’t make it, why then, they starve to death or they die or they go to jail. Because after all, it’s the survival of the fittest. Right? And those who are fit are those who are rich. And those who aren’t rich deserve to die. Because after all what value is a human life? Especially if it’s gook [sic] life. If it’s gook life, that’s even better, then you can drop napalm on it. You can practice genocide against it. You can shoot it down the street when it’s 12 years old, menacing somebody’s property. Well, what is the life of a 12 year old Black child if he menaces somebody’s car? Why, he might be thinking about stealing that car. We can’t have people

stealing cars, now can we? So, what is the value of one 12 year old Black child? Boom, boom, he's dead in the street. Pity, isn't it? Terrible shame. About those Vietnamese, too. Rough. We're gonna have a peace movement, right? There may not be any Vietnamese left by the time there's a peace movement. But that's all right too. Well you see, that thinking comes from a society in which the unit of value is not a human being.

Now, let us... I'm going to wrap it up. Let us imagine the revolution comes. It's important to understand that women have always known their oppression. If you read a history of the French Revolution. You read a history of the Russian Revolution. You read a history of the Chinese Revolution. You read a history of the Cuban Revolution. You will discover that women are always in those revolutions. You will discover that they always carry guns in those revolutions. They sometimes sit and knit while the heads of the ruling class drop. You may even read Leon Trotsky, and you may read there in about the third chapter, about the early days of the Russian Revolution, that Trotsky described the International Women's Day and the wildcat strike of the women, the garment workers of Petersburg. You remember? How many of you know that story? Well, I'll tell it to you then. You must know. They were the Bolsheviks, the vanguard party. Right? Dig it. Their going to make the French Revolution. [Acting out a scene] "You women can't go out. We haven't done enough base work. We haven't done enough work with the army. You go out and you're gonna get all killed." Women said, "We know how to be brave for our children. We're dying anyway." And they went out on strike. And they said, "Are you coming with us?" Some of the men said, "Yeah, we're going with you." That day was the triggering of the day in Petersburg that started the Russian Revolution. And Leon Trotsky wrote, he said, "Let it be noted by history that the most oppressed sector of the proletariat started the Russian revolution. The women garment workers of Petersburg." But, aha, when Lenin came to power you had the most enlightened legislation concerning the position of women that the world had ever seen or existed in the world at the time. But it didn't last, did it? Then you get Fidel saying, "The liberation of women: divisive. Why, if the women don't cook and take care of the children, who will?" [laughter] So that you get women as an auxiliary army being moved by their oppression, to being often the triggers for revolutionary action. Which is certainly true of the French Revolution, in the Russian Revolution and in the Chinese Revolution.

But after the revolution, you find the perpetuation of male chauvinism. Why? The answer is simple. Because in the revolutionary movement itself, the exploitation of women was perpetuated. The structure of the revolutionary movement was built on the exploitation of women. Just as it was in the South, and just as it was in the North. And we have a revolution which may or may not occur within an advanced country. Now maybe there won't be enough left afterwards. Who can tell? And so the women say, "Well, we can understand that the very structures of capitalism are based upon the oppression of women. And we can see that if we want to be truly liberated as human beings, and can see new ways in which people relate, new ways to rear children, new ways to do work, new ways to live in a society, we can dig that we're going to have to [...], to turn around, to turn upside down to change the whole society. But why do we have to do it through socialism? Because look at socialism." So, one of the answers that

the women's movement has developed is that we have to change the nature of the revolutionaries themselves. And since, we had an awfully hard time doing that on a one-to-one basis. *Hey Jack, I tried to talk at a meeting and you didn't listen to me again. Hey Paul, I can't take care of the baby tonight, I've got a women's meeting. Hey Fred, will you stop telling me I'm dumb?* Or, official meeting: [in a lowered voice imitating a man's voice] You divisive, bourgeois, running dogs of capitalism. Divisive. As if the cry of an oppressed people to end their oppression was divisive. What is divisive is those who will stand and block and obstruct the movement of a people for their liberation.

[applause]

And sisters, when you relate to the Black movement, you keep that lesson equally in mind. 'Cause when you want to look for your allies in a struggle that's going to take everybody, you want to make sure you've got the right allies. And as far as I'm concerned you can dig who those allies will be. I'll answer that specifically if you like.

So that's kind of the story in brief. Do people want to stop now to either split, or ask questions, or make points or argue or what? Let's take a vote. Okay? How many people want to split? How many people want to ask questions?

SOMEONE ELSE IN THE ROOM: What are the other choices?

DIXON: Well I'm going to think of all of them I can. How many want to have discussion? How many want to break the women down and go do consciousness-raising workshops where women can talk among themselves? You want discussion? [Voice in background: We do that at our lib meetings.] You do that in the lib meetings. OK. So, you want to do discussion, kind of. And a lot of people are apathetic or other people are undecided. You don't want me to go on talking. [unintelligible response in background] Well, no I mean once you push the button on me it just works automatically after a year.

[...]

That's true. A lot of people don't know about the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union. [unintelligible reply from audience member] Yeah, right, right on. Let's let everyone split in comfort now, who needs to go home now. And just, I mean, go ahead. Don't be uptight, it's late. Just a second, we'll let everyone shift themselves out.

[noise of people talking and leaving the meeting]

Do we have all the people that are going to stay who are kind of in the back a little bit?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Should we move into a circle?

DIXON: Yeah, why don't we move into a circle. That's right on. Yeah, we'll do this for about half an hour.

[noise of chairs and people moving]

[program ends]