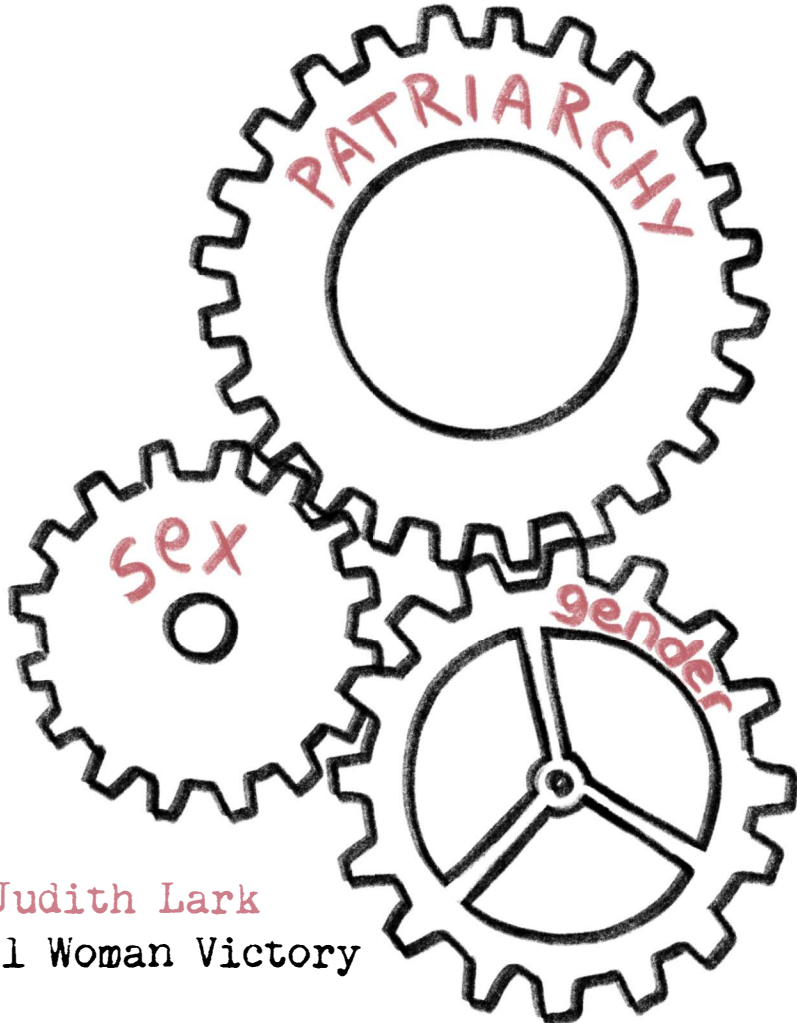
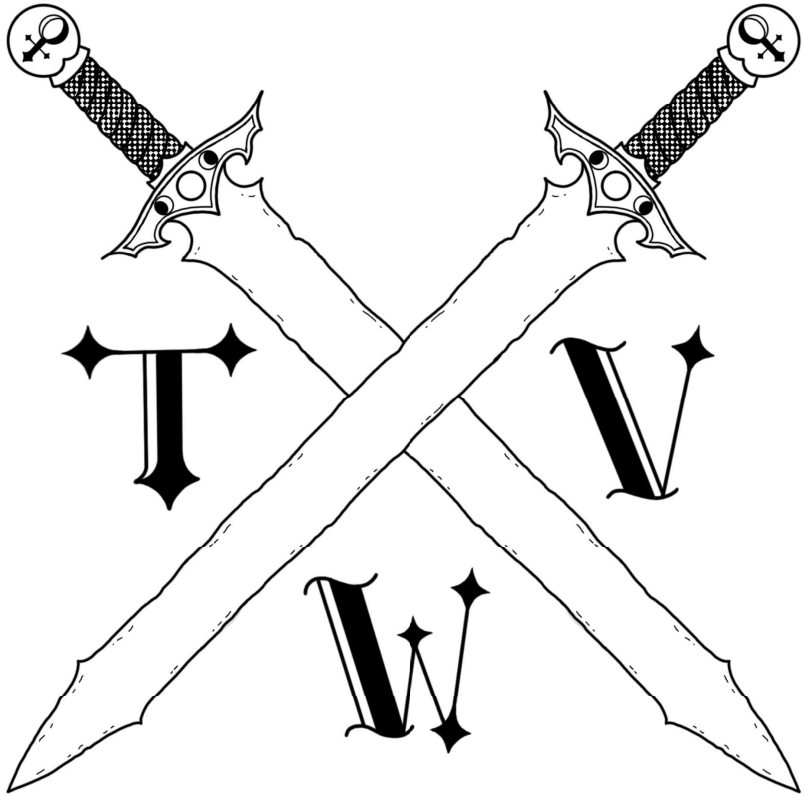


Politicizing

Sex



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for Total Woman Victory

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To leftist men who insist that patriarchy is a peripheral issue, I suggest a reading of Thomas Sankara's *Women's Liberation and the African Freedom Struggle*, 1990. Our black-and-white thinking in the west makes us feel as though we can only cooperate with people who fully share our complete list of priorities in the same exact and distinct order of importance. A solely universalist politics can alienate groups who suffer particular struggles—but intersectionality (specifically of the kind that reduces oppression to personal identity rather than a system of power) can also be used as a weapon to alienate others. A look at the history of relations between feminists and Marxists shows that we are stronger and more successful when we work hand-in-hand toward our shared goals while simultaneously working on our particular goals and maintaining our autonomy as a political union of women.

As with practice and theory, the universal struggle for emancipation must inform and in turn be informed by particular struggles (for women, racial/ethnic groups, national sovereignty, disempowered classes and groups) in a synergistic feedback loop. Good examples of a similar structure in practice are the ongoing efforts to de-antagonize the contradiction between rural and urban communities in China and women's role in the political structure in Burkina Faso under Thomas Sankara.

The struggles of sex/gender, race, and economic class are interconnected—not competing—and we should maintain a sovereign women-lead structure while collaborating synergistically with groups that share the goals of our two imperatives. Feminists must expose and politicize the systemic contradictions emergent from sexual difference, and opponents of the imperialist/capitalist system *must politicize sex also*. The only viable feminist political framework is one that recognizes these contradictions as fundamental—capable of either dismantling patriarchy or enabling its persistence, depending on whether they are mediated by a just social system.

neoliberalism, sovereignty for the Global South from systems of global finance that seek to extract wealth, and study of economic history and mechanisms.

Whether we refer to this as Marxism, socialism, or communism, it is inextricably tied to our most basic political imperatives. I believe that if we keep these two imperatives at the center of our political project, they can help us remain focused on making material gains and act as a filter to determine whether cooperation with other political forces can be fruitful.

Dialectical materialism allows us to examine a contradiction in both its universal form and particular forms and to perceive contradictions as being interconnected. The contradictions between women and men, productive and non-productive forces, and racial/ethnic divisions each simultaneously have a universal form and a variety of particular forms, and each contradiction exists in an interconnected system. To take into account only the universal form of struggle or *only* a particular form of struggle is to abstract away from material reality.

This framework can be used to understand why, in a material and historical sense, co-optation and division has been successful both between and amongst feminist and Marxist groups. In feminist groups, counterrevolutionaries exploit the tension between a strictly universalist feminism and a strictly particularized feminism. The same occurs in Marxist groups, and the same occurs when either feminists or Marxists attempt to subsume one struggle completely under the other. Marxists who completely exclude women's struggle from their politics, insisting that economic struggle must completely succeed *before* women's struggle can be addressed, are counterrevolutionaries. Feminists who insist on the complete and full emancipation of women *before* any struggle for economic or national sovereignty can begin are also counterrevolutionaries.

Feminism today finds itself paralyzed by fragmentation. Battles over identity and language have become all-consuming, drawing our collective energy away from addressing the material conditions that structure women's oppression. Much of our political discourse has been depoliticized into symbolic debates over inclusion, individual affirmation, and discourse policing, while the material system of patriarchy continues to reproduce itself. To stop the cycle of argumentation around abstract theory, our theory must be informed by the material situation throughout history and today, and must be oriented toward use in political action. I conclude from an examination of the material conditions from which patriarchy emerges that sexual difference is a contradiction with revolutionary potential. Additionally, if we reflect on the decades of co-optation and divide-and-conquer strategy, it becomes clear that politicizing sex is crucial not just for feminists, but also for all opponents to the imperialist/capitalist system.

The Origin of Patriarchy

The aim of feminism is to end systemic oppression of women, which cannot be done without an understanding of the dynamics of the system. Patriarchy did not arise arbitrarily; it emerged from fundamental biological asymmetries in reproductive investment. In other words, asymmetric reproductive investment is the starting condition that leads to women being disadvantaged at the systemic level. Species in which one sex invests significantly more in reproduction tend to develop social hierarchies where the lower-investment sex competes for access to mates, while the higher-investment sex becomes a resource to be controlled.

In human societies, female reproductive investment (pregnancy, childbirth, and nursing) has historically been exploited to justify social structures that enforce women's economic dependence on men. However, while this biological reality may have provided the *initial conditions* for patriarchy, it does not determine our destiny. The task of feminist politics

is to disrupt and restructure the social arrangements that turn reproductive labor—specifically, the disproportionate burden of pregnancy, childbirth, and child care on women—into a site of oppression.

In the past, feminists emphasized the similarities between men and women to combat misconceptions about the comparative ability of women in fields dominated by men. This is an important emphasis in that context, and does not contradict a simultaneous recognition of how pregnancy and childbirth can disadvantage women on the level of the social system if not balanced with similar levels of investment from men. Rather than rejecting biology outright, radical feminism should incorporate these insights dialectically—*recognizing* that sex-based differences exist while rejecting the patriarchal framing of these differences as hierarchical or deterministic.

Just as other species have evolved alternative social strategies (cooperative breeding, shared child care), human societies can and must reorganize to eliminate the structural disadvantages imposed on women. As an example, we could examine the resulting social dynamics in species of primates where the males assist with child care enough to lessen the asymmetry in energy investment between males and females. Many different paths could be taken, as long as we work to mitigate this asymmetry (the root of patriarchy) by adjusting the social structure accordingly.

The Corollary: Politicization of Sex

We've stumbled upon a crucial point that follows from this identification of the origin of patriarchy—sex must be central to feminist politics. We must politicize sex not in the essentialist sense of valorizing biological difference, but in the structuralist/dialectical sense of recognizing that sex, in conditions of asymmetric reproductive investment, functions as the organizing principle of women's oppression. This means organizing around reproductive labor and reproductive

domestic labor by either men, other family members, the community, or a combination thereof.

Many other political demands follow from this recognition of women's reproductive labor and women's current disproportionate share of child care and domestic labor: **reproductive self-determination, universal healthcare access, state-subsidized child care, state-subsidized housing.** But patriarchy is a complex system that manifests at many other levels, such as cultural, as well: **commodification of women's bodies, harmful beauty standards, sexual violence, gender roles, limitations on women's mobility and education.** As demonstrated by the reversal of policies like legalization of abortion in the early USSR, transformation of material conditions must be paired with transformation of cultural conditions.

The second imperative, which necessarily follows from the need to reallocate investment in child care and domestic labor: **Economic surplus must be captured, redirected toward productive use and improvement of living standards, and maintained under a system controlled by the many (not the few) oriented toward living standards over maximization of capital.**

From a political economic analysis of sex, we arrive at the basis of Marxism. A distinction can be made between subsistence economies (which produce less than or just enough food, shelter, and basic goods for everyone to survive) and surplus economies (which produce more than enough for everyone to survive). Now the crucial questions: **Who has the surplus and how do they use it?** When the few are allowed to capture the surplus (both within countries and internationally), the surplus is drained and instead of being reinvested in production or living standards, it is used unproductively (e.g., asset price inflation) to further consolidate wealth and the economy polarizes. This leads to increasing inequality and stagnation under austerity. The second imperative necessitates **struggle against imperialism and**

take many diverse forms; throughout this article, I have spoken of a structuralist framework because of the utility in learning from the history of structuralism as a response to previous schools of thought. For a more accurate and robust analysis, I would advocate for the use of complex systems theory—the approach that is currently revolutionizing science and sociology, and that bears a striking resemblance to dialectics. The important point for our purposes is not that we have a hyper-specific dogma, but rather that we align with people who have shared material goals. That means refocusing on material struggle by moving away from the liberal political project of inclusionism and toward reproductive and economic issues as the primary battlegrounds of feminist politics.

Imperatives

There are two vital imperatives which necessarily follow from a material analysis of the present contradiction between women and men.

In order to address patriarchy, we must understand its dynamics and identify root elements that could be leveraged to facilitate a process of transformation. In primates (and other mammals), females typically have higher energy investment in reproduction than males (due primarily to gestation, childbirth, and lactation). This fact does not guarantee (but often leads to) a hierarchical social system. A variety of social systems have been observed (even within the same species): male-dominant, female-dominant, co-dominant, and more egalitarian systems. While females' bodily investment in reproduction is immutable, investment in child care is mutable. There is a correlation between social systems and the allocation of parental investment in primates. In more egalitarian or female-dominant systems, males and/or other group members tend to participate more in child care.

The first imperative: **Women's disproportionate share of investment in reproductive and domestic labor must be counterbalanced by higher investment in child care and**

self-determination, forcing state institutions to absorb the costs of caregiving, dismantling economic dependence on men, and perhaps abandoning the nuclear family structure in favor of larger family or community support systems.

Effective politics requires clarity. Therefore, I will attempt to peel back the deeply confusing layers of gender that have complicated politicization of sex. I do not intend to arrive at a fixed blueprint for feminist praxis in regards to gender, nor do I claim to have definitive answers for the most divisive questions in our movement. Instead, my purpose is to make clear the political dynamics of gender so that we can learn from history and sidestep political fragmentation.

Historical Dynamics of Gender

The historical development of gender ideology follows a pattern that reminds me of the historical progression from essentialism to existentialism to structuralism. To grotesquely simplify hundreds of years of philosophy, essentialists believed that things have a fixed meaning, or "essence," often ordained by a god; existentialists denied this and declared that one can determine their own meaning; and structuralists critiqued both for having an incomplete analysis divorced from context. In reaction to the contemporary emphasis on individuals/particular elements, structuralists focused more on relationships between elements in a system as the origin of meaning.

Throughout much of human history, gender has been understood in essentialist terms. In many religious and traditionalist frameworks, a person's sex determines not only their reproductive role, but also their temperament, social function, and political status. To be a woman is to be nurturing, passive, and domestic; to be a man is to be assertive, rational, and dominant. These roles were presented as natural, self-evident, and immutable.

The feminist movements of the 19th and 20th centuries

challenged this essentialism, exposing it as an ideological construct designed to justify women's oppression. Thinkers like Simone de Beauvoir shifted the discussion from biological determinism to social construction. This existentialist turn in feminist thought emphasized agency: gender was not an innate truth but something imposed and, therefore, something that could be changed.

However, this rejection of essentialism created a new set of contradictions. The existentialist deconstruction of gender—especially as developed in postmodern and queer theory—sought to dissolve rigid categories altogether, arguing that gender is simply a fluid performance, a repeated stylization of the body that has no necessary connection to biology. While this critique was useful in challenging normative expectations, it also introduced a paradox: if gender is entirely socially constructed, then what remains of the material basis for women's oppression? If "woman" is merely an identity anyone can adopt, then what happens to political movements that seek to identify and abolish the root of systemic oppression of women?

This is where structuralist and dialectical approaches become crucial. Both essentialism and existentialism fall into the same trap: they treat gender as something that exists *apart* from the social/material totality in which it is embedded. Essentialism views gender as a timeless, natural truth; existentialism sees it as an individualistic, subjective choice. But gender is neither purely biological nor purely performative—it is a historically contingent social structure that emerges from the material conditions of sexed reproduction.

Structuralist critiques of existentialism point out that human subjectivity is not self-contained—it is always mediated by broader linguistic, cultural, and material systems. Consciousness does not operate in isolation; it is shaped by the structures within which it exists. In this framework, gender is not merely an individual performance, but a system of meaning that arises from sexual difference and is reinforced through

economic, political, and ideological structures. This means that gender cannot be simply "abolished" through linguistic revision or identity claims; oppressive gender roles must be dismantled at the level of social/material organization. The categories of "man" and "woman" are not just personal identities—they are positions within a system of power that structures labor, reproduction, and political agency.

What drives the historical struggle around the meaning of gender? Universal concepts, such as "woman" or "man," are always in contradiction with their particular material instantiations. This contradiction generates tensions that demand resolution—either through reinforcing the universal concept (essentialism) or rejecting it altogether (existentialism). Essentialism enforces a rigid, hierarchical division of gender roles, creating alienation for those who do not conform. Existentialism reacts to this by dissolving the category of gender entirely, which paradoxically leaves existing power structures intact by making them invisible. These two positions radicalize one another: essentialism tightens its grip in response to existentialist deconstruction, and existentialists become more extreme in their rejection of gender categories.

A structuralist, dialectical perspective allows us to see both perspectives as partial truths that must be sublated. Yes, sexed differences exist, and they have real-world consequences. But no, these differences do not justify rigid social hierarchies. The contradiction within gender—between its biological basis and its social construction—cannot be "solved" through identity claims alone. Instead, it must be politicized as a site of *collective* struggle against patriarchal exploitation.

If radical feminism is to regain its transformative edge, it must reject both the biological determinism of essentialism used to justify oppressive gender roles and the individualist detachment of existentialism. The way forward lies in an understanding of gender that takes into account *both* the social and material systems of which it is a part. This framework could