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ESSAY REVIEW

A FEMINIST VIEW

THIS PAPER DESCRIBES the feminist challenge to the social sciences and discusses some of the issues emerging from this confrontation. It then reviews some of the social science literature on Zimbabwean women. An attempt is made to look at this literature in terms of the values both of feminism and of academic social science.

FEMINISM

Feminism is often seen as very different from the academic search for an understanding of societies. However, feminism has attempted to learn from and contribute to the social sciences, in particular sociology and social anthropology, attempting to describe and explain equality and inequality between the sexes. Feminism begins with an awareness of inequality, and with the knowledge that it neither began with modern capitalism nor automatically disappears in socialist countries.

But what is feminism? At one level it is an attempt to insist upon the experience and the very existence of women. It challenges the credibility of the social sciences at two levels. Firstly, it identifies sexism as a prevailing ideology in all societies, in that it generalizes from the experience of one section of society, men, to create an explanation of the experience of both men and women, of the organization of society as a whole, and of the power relations within it. Secondly, it sees sexism as justifying the distribution of advantages which arose from the sexual divisions: the division that it both ignores and conceals.

Throughout history women have fought for improvements in their lives. However, in relation to the Western academic world, feminism emerged in the 1960s as a movement organized against the oppression of women. In practical terms it struggled initially for equal educational and employment opportunities. But there was an early recognition that the liberation of women required the elimination of the social and material basis for that oppression, which meant a fundamental change in the social structure. This involved massive demands: for a shift from corporate profits to socially useful facilities; from defence expenditure to expenditure on health and education; it required also a radical reorganization of work and control over work, and a democratization of health facilities, education and the media. Women's priorities challenged the vested interests of the armed forces, the big corporations, the hierarchy of the civil service — and the priorities of most governments.¹ The movement turned from demanding 'equal rights' within societies to questioning the structure and institutions of these societies.

¹S. Rowbotham, L. Segal and H. Wainwright, *Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism* (London, Merlin Press, 1979).

Over the last two decades feminist academics have also attempted to assess the basic theories, paradigms and methodologies of the social sciences. They have found these to be defined largely by models representing a world dominated by White males, and studies to be limited by the particular interests, perspectives and experiences of that one group. As feminist academics challenged these interpretations, the structure of power and knowledge was shaken and new models of society began to emerge.

The main criticisms have centred around the consequences of the 'objectivity' of the social sciences. It has been pointed out that important areas of social enquiry have been neglected because of the use of certain conventional field-defining models. Firstly, the focus on the public, official and visible definitions of situations has been queried; it has been suggested that unofficial, supportive, private and invisible spheres of social life and organization may be important. Secondly, the assumption of a 'single society' has been attacked. It has been demonstrated that men and women may inhabit different social worlds. Thirdly, it has been argued that the emphasis upon Weberian rationality in explaining human behaviour and social organization denies from the start the existence of the equally important element of emotion in social life and structure.² Fourthly, it has been stressed that in several fields of sociology sex is not taken into account, yet it may be among the most important explanatory variables. Overall the critics argue that mainstream sociology tends to explain the status quo and does not explore social transformations, and that methodological assumptions and techniques limit the perspectives taken and produce partial and distorted findings.

In relation to anthropology the criticisms concern the ease with which many anthropologists move from biology to culture, suggesting that the woman's role in reproduction is responsible for the earliest forms of divisions of labour, and hence for the inequalities that followed. This explanation, however, does not identify the link between motherhood and cultural inequality, and does little to answer feminist questions. Although there appears to be much information on women, little of it comes from women. It is information from men which is presented as society's reality, rather than as only part of the cultural whole. As one author has phrased it: 'What women do is perceived as household work and what they talk about is called gossip, while men's work is viewed as the economic base of society and their information is seen as important social communication.'³ Kinship studies are centred on males and marriage systems may be analysed in terms of men exchanging women. These are examples of a deeply rooted male orientation, and all academic discourse can be filtered for these biases inherent in it. Biases are simply values, and for the academics who do not conceive of the social sciences as objective, the values are inherent in the ways data are collected, analysed and interpreted. Anthropology carries with it a double danger: the values that anthropologists themselves bring from their own backgrounds, and the values perceived when the society under study expresses male dominance.

²A.R. Hochschild, 'A review of sex role research', *American Journal of Sociology* (1973), LXXVIII, 1011-29.

³R. Reiter (ed.), *Towards an Anthropology of Women* (New York, Monthly Review Press, 1975), 12.

The methodology used in the social sciences has been identified as one of the barriers to a full understanding of societies. A large part of the feminist critiques of the social sciences has consisted of uncovering presuppositions of those who deny that they have them and use them. The question then becomes whether there is a conflict between women's values and the values of social science. Feminists have stressed that they are not attempting to be 'value free'. By creating a dialectic at the ideological level, feminists attempt to create the conditions in which a different kind of methodology may be approached. Some social scientists have agreed that freedom from values, or objectivity, is not possible.⁴ However, for many, to speak to a feminist methodology is clearly political, controversial and indicative of personal or political sympathies. Feminist social scientists counter this argument by demonstrating that in 'value-free' social science the place of women is subordinate, ignored and invisible. Women appear only as they are relevant to a world governed by the principles and interests of men.

Feminist academics stress the need for a reflexive sociology, where personal experience is used to formulate hypotheses. They criticize the distinction between objectivity and subjectivity built into science at all levels, and reproduced in the divisions between the production of our knowledge and its social uses, between knowledge and experience, between experts and non-experts, between the focus of our knowledge and the structure of social and economic power in society. And lastly, feminists have begun to insist on integrating theory and practice, and to avoid the type of academic discussion which renders research findings inaccessible to those who do not have the same background, training and vocabulary. This is particularly important when researching relatively powerless groups; research must be presented in a meaningful way to those studied.

WOMEN AND THE FAMILY

One area to which feminist academics have contributed considerably is the study of 'the family'. Four basic assumptions have been questioned.

Firstly, the notion that families were primarily biological units functioning in isolation from social forces and institutions, such as churches, governments, the availability of employment and access to land. Evidence was gathered to show that the concept of significant kin had changed dramatically, expanding and contracting as support by kin was more or less necessary. Stone — who is not a feminist in the sense that he does not start from the assumption that there is oppression of women — has documented the ways that the bureaucratic nation state in England deliberately set out to weaken kinship as a rival system of power and to press for values of loyalty to State and Sovereign.⁵ Similar evidence has been collected for underdeveloped countries following the emergence of centralist, usually socialist states. The redefinition of kinship has interesting consequences for women, who may be either isolated and pushed into private, marginal positions, or 'liberated' into equally marginal, but now public positions in relation to the economic organization of society.

The second issue queried was the notion that family relationships are the

⁴H. Becker, *Sociological Work* (London, Allen Lane, 1971).

⁵L. Stone, *Family, Sex and Marriage 1500-1800* (New York, Harper and Row, 1977).

only area where significant emotional contact takes place. It was argued that the preoccupation with marital love ignored other forms of relationships, in particular same-sex relationships, which have remained neglected.

Thirdly, feminist social scientists warned about the danger of assuming a unity or complete harmony of interests among members of the same family. Material was collected on the different perceptions by spouses of their two standards of living within families: that of husbands, in contrast to that of the wives and children.

Fourthly, role theory has been strongly criticized. Role theory has been an important part of functionalist theory and was used to provide explanations for what was seen as the harmonious functioning of families and societies. However, functionalism has been criticized for presenting a static and conflict-free picture of society, and for avoiding issues of power and strategies for change. There is lack of theory about what generates change and this is precisely what feminist academics have been searching for. Their alternative approach has been to stress that the family should be seen as a cultural entity and an ideology which exists for a larger social purpose: recruitment into household and class. The family can thus be seen as a unit providing normative recruitment to household activities, which in turn can be seen as part of a larger process of production, reproduction and consumption, and which varies by class. These types of explanations are very different from earlier biological ones.

ZIMBABWEAN FEMINISM?

Zimbabwean social scientists have in the last few years also turned their attention to the study of women and have raised various issues about women's roles in Zimbabwe society and the economy. The resulting studies have been very different: different in their approaches, in their aims and in their focus. Perhaps the main difference in approach is the dichotomy between conventional 'pure' and 'applied' science: studies which are academically orientated in contrast to those which have a practical focus. Secondly, the studies have different academic reference points: sociology and anthropology ask very different questions and use different theories to explain perceived phenomena. Thirdly, some of the studies are feminist and some are not. In other words, some start from the assumption that women are oppressed, seek to illustrate the contradictions and the conflicts of their lives, and relate them to the economic and political systems in which they live. These raise different questions and frequently employ different methodologies. While they are 'biased' in the sense that they do not adhere to traditional values of 'objective' empiricism, in other ways they go much further than empirical data-collecting surveys. The non-feminist ones approach the study of women in the same way as they would any other subject, using the paradigms of their respective disciplines.

One of the consequences of this is that there is often little in common between studies on women: the common focus is in some ways less important than the different approaches to it. Conceptually the studies are far apart; however, precisely because they are so different and because they are expected to be similar, it is important to bring them together and explore differences and similarities, as well as the implications for women as the subject of academic research and for women as participants in the social change that these studies are trying to document.

The first study to be briefly discussed is *The Genuine Shona* by Michael Gelfand.⁶ It is an attempt to describe the culture, philosophy and ethical behaviour of the Shona-speaking peoples; it is not a book concerned primarily with women, but with traditional Shona society, and as such it is a classic of its kind and a major source-book for social scientists. The emphasis on traditional society is both its strength and its weakness. It is its strength because it is a pioneering attempt to describe the Shona at a time in the country's history when ethnographic interest was overshadowed by political events in the country. It is its weakness because the approach idealized the Shona and treats them in the 1970s as if they were unaffected by contact with capitalistic society. There is no recognition of the systematic transformation of the country; of the effects of the creation of the land shortage, of the imposition of taxes, of the exploitation of the labour force and the serious consequences for African family life. This approach is unconcerned with change; it is descriptive rather than analytical and resorts at times to sweeping generalizations. The earlier criticisms of functionalism are particularly relevant here; a picture of a conflict-free society has been presented — well-meaning and romantic, but unhelpful.

These criticisms apply particularly to Gelfand's comments on Shona women. Firstly, there is no mention of any changes in the economic and social positions of women. Their contact with Western capitalism, whether directly through the marketability of their agricultural surplus, or indirectly through the effects of labour migration, is ignored. Changes in their status, their work and their responsibilities remain unexplored. Secondly, the only analysis of the position of women is in relation to, and subordinate to, 'the group'. Gelfand states that a wife cannot dispose of her earnings without her husband's consent, and that no agreement that she might wish to make is binding. He then asks if this is conducive to making a 'peaceful group', and concludes that it is. A woman's 'make-up' is thought to 'oblige her to seek his protection'. And because she is completely dependent on her husband, Gelfand argues that she respects him.

Gelfand's concern with women is never with them as women. He has accepted the subordination of women to collective values. Implicitly thereby women cannot have valid needs of their own, if those are in conflict with the needs of society. His generalizations reflect this lack of acceptance of women as a definable group with their separate rights. But where is there evidence in Shona society for the complete dependency of women on their husbands? Where does dependency, when it does exist, ever lead to respect for those one is dependent on?

Joan May's *African Women in Urban Employment*⁷ is a practical policy-orientated discussion of the factors influencing the employment of women in Zimbabwe. It has a theoretical section, discussing the legal position of Black women, employers' attitudes and industrial legislation. It then discusses a situational study of an industrial estate in Salisbury (now Harare). It stresses the importance of the contributions of women to household incomes and shows a sensitive awareness of the conflicts for women who have ties to both urban and rural homes. It identifies the major obstacles to wage-earning employment as

⁶M. Gelfand, *The Genuine Shona: Survival Values of an African Culture* (Gwelo, Mambo Press, 1973); reviewed *ante* (1973), III, 102-3.

⁷J. May, *African Women in Urban Employment* (Gwelo, Mambo Press, Occasional Paper, Socio-Economic 12, 1979), 83 pp., Z\$2.00.

general unemployment, employers' resistance, the legal position of women, and inadequate education. The recommendations include the provision of training to 'convey employers' expectations' and the provision of an agency serving as a women's bureau.

The study is a good empirical and sociological one; the questions it raises are specific and answered quite clearly. However, the focus of the study is narrow. Part of this narrowness is due to the constraints of industrial sponsorship of research and inherent in the use of sociology to support industrial development; part of it is due to the narrowness of empiricism which assumes that an understanding of a phenomenon is possible through the collection of 'objective' facts. As a result there is considerable information on the personal roles of women in relation to their homes; there is nothing on their involvement in wider organizations — in political parties, women's organizations and trade unions. Surely relating Black women to the political structures of Zimbabwe is as important as a part of their lives as workers as their marital status is. The attempt at objectivity results in a subjectivity that is limiting. The section discussing employment and fertility is particularly narrow. The focus on women as child-bearers raises important issues that are not discussed: if child-bearing is no longer seen as a barrier to employment, should it now be 'neutralized', or should there be an awareness and positive acceptance of the importance of reproduction to society? The latter has policy implications.

Secondly, there is little causal analysis in the study; it is descriptive without attempting explanations. The connecting factors between the legal position of women, employers' attitudes and industrial legislation are never explored. However, it is only when these are identified that the system can be understood and explained.

Thirdly, underlying the study is an assumption that women should be incorporated into the present labour-market structure, without changes to it. The conflicts between women's needs and the labour market's requirements should, however, lead to a reassessment of the kind of society that one is trying to create, rather than assume and implicitly argue for an increase in the contribution of women to the economic production of the country's wealth — at times mainly the wealth of the multinationals — irrespective of the costs. The Western European model of harassed mother, full-time employee and part-time housewife is not necessarily one that Black women should be fighting for; nor is the White Zimbabwean model of employment combined with domestic servants and one of the highest living standards in the world one that most Black women can realistically strive for.

Women in this study are not seen as a class: there is little concern with structural change in the labour market or in the country as a whole; there is little discussion of the impact that women could have, and maybe should have, on changing patterns of urban employment. The focus is incorporation rather than challenge.

In summary, the study is a good descriptive one, offering considerable information on the constraints and working conditions of urban women. But in terms of academic sociology it is atheoretical — which means that it is limited; that in terms of the values of feminism it fails, in recognizing discrimination but not oppression, which is not a semantic distinction but a conceptual one. The former demands equality of opportunity, the latter, structural change.

Olivia Muchena's *Women in Town* has the same focus as May's study: urban women; however, it has different aims and a different methodological

approach.⁸ It is an attempt to provide base-line demographic, social and economic data about women in towns, as well as providing a framework for assessing perceived needs and perceived deprivations. The questions asked in this study are very general, the aim being to present a picture of who the urban women in Highfield are, and to use the picture for possible development programmes aimed at improving the quality of life of the urban woman.

Muchena uses the concept of social visibility to organize the material that she has collected. Thus she divides the study into women's familial and extra-familial roles, familial and extra-familial status, and social visibility. The result is interesting and useful data, which altogether presents a clear and interesting picture, both 'objectively', of the women in terms of their personal characteristics, and 'subjectively', in terms of their own perceptions and judgements. The focus is as much on the extra-familial roles as on the familial ones; and the participation of the women in community or public activities is documented. Throughout the report the author offers vivid explanations and interpretations of the data collected, and these add enormously to the reader's understanding.

However, Muchena seems to be caught between two aims: to provide an academically good report, conforming to empirical paradigms of sociology; and, as she says (p.2), to raise the consciousness of women — and that of society at large — as a preliminary step towards change. The former aim has been achieved largely at the expense of the latter. The model that she uses does not allow her to achieve the second goal. The report is not concerned with causality, nor does it deal adequately with change; it merely touches on the power and political vitality of women as a class, motivated and organizing and moving in new directions. *Women in Town* is, in effect, a good introductory study which Muchena should extend. A sequel would require her to go beyond the data and the interpretations, and to relate all to a theoretical understanding of the position of women in Zimbabwean society and economy, and to abstract from the particular to discuss the less empirical, more consciousness-raising issues.

Siphikelelo Chizengeni's *Customary Law and Family Predicaments*⁹ uses a different approach in discussing the position of women in Zimbabwe today. She starts with an awareness and discussion of change. She contrasts the needs of the 'old society' — an agrarian, communal society, characterized by an intricate kinship network — with the needs of present-day Zimbabwe, and suggests that customary law needs to change to fit them. She begins with an explicit theoretical position and concrete hypotheses about the discrimination and hardship caused to women by customary law, and tests these using observations of court proceedings and interviews.

She starts by discussing nine case histories, then describes the legal system, elaborates on the meaning and administration of marriage, the status of women, and property rights. She discusses two legal and social problems in

⁸O. Muchena, *Women in Town: A Socio-Economic Survey of African Women in Highfield Township* (Salisbury, Univ. of Zimbabwe, Centre for Applied Social Sciences, 1980), 97 pp., Z\$3.00.

⁹S. Chizengeni, *Customary Law and Family Predicaments: A Report on the Application of Customary Law in a Changing Society and Its Effects on the Family, with Special Reference to Women and Children in Zimbabwe* (Salisbury, Univ. of Zimbabwe, Centre for Inter-Racial Studies, mimeo, 1978), 78 pp., Z\$5.00.

greater depth: the custody and guardianship of children, and deceased estates. The stated assumption throughout is that national social change implies the utilization of society's most powerful tool: state power. This requires that the law be employed as an agent of social change, and the report is concerned directly with areas where this is perceived as necessary and with the ways it can be done.

While the orientation towards change is one of the strengths of this pamphlet, it is not developed adequately either conceptually or practically. There is little awareness that change involves conflict, and that in this instance it is the rights of individuals that stand in contrast to the rights of the group, or women's needs that are in conflict with those of the family as a unit. The author seems unaware that the family is based on a division of labour which in practice, although not in theory, requires inequality. Thus, strengthening the family in its present role may in fact weaken women's rights to 'equality and freedom'.

Secondly, the triangle of State-family-individual remains unexplored. Not only is there a conflict of interests between choosing to strengthen individual rights or familial stability, but the State itself may have its own demands. The most frequent of these has been labour mobility. In Zimbabwe the effects of White settler policy requiring cheap labour began as early as 1893, with a direct confrontation between settlers and the Ndebele, the military defeat of the latter and the disintegration of the traditional Ndebele social structure. The current government's priority may be the increased agricultural productivity of the rural areas. Whether capitalist or socialist, governments are involved in attempting to form certain kinds of societies, and are concerned with larger and more complex issues than that of strengthening the liberal and democratic rights of individuals. Thus the political use of law and of social policy remains ignored.

Joan May's *Zimbabwean Women in Customary and Colonial Law*¹⁰ is similar to Chizengeni's *Customary Law and Family Predicaments* in both aims and structure. It, too, aims to show the effects on women of the application of customary law to most areas of their lives. May begins by discussing various theoretical perspectives on women in traditional societies in general, and in Shona societies in particular. She stresses that women are and always have been social actors who work in a structured way to achieve desired ends and goals. She then describes some of the applications of customary law in relation to bridewealth, marriage, inheritance, divorce and the custody of children. She also draws attention to the fact that the Lancaster House Constitution offers no safeguard against gender-based discrimination.

Her book is important in drawing attention to many of the problems arising from customary law in the 1980s. However, many of the shortcomings discussed in relation to Chizengeni's report are present here, too. May presents a strong case for changing the present system, but she does not examine the possible directions that these changes may follow. Inherent in this book is the assumption that change should lead to increased individual rights for women. This is presented as a neutral premise, and is neither discussed nor questioned. However, a focus on individual rights, as opposed to a focus on the kind of society one is trying to create, is not a neutral, value-free orientation. It is the Western, capitalist model of development, and its relevance to

¹⁰J. May, *Zimbabwean Women in Customary and Colonial Law* (Gweru, Mambo Press with Holmes McDougall (Edinburgh), Zambesiana 14, 1983), 128 pp., Z\$8.80.

underdeveloped countries can and should be questioned. Other models of change do exist; socialist models tend to emphasize obligations rather than rights. The result is a different kind of theory, a different law and a different society. It is in this context that the last section on socio-legal engineering is short and disappointing. A good comparative description of what other countries have done would have been invaluable; this one, however, is superficial. We are left with May's overall message, that the 'farthing legacy' in Zimbabwe is oppressive, discriminatory, and causes much suffering; but we are left searching for ways of changing it.

The above studies have been shown to be very different, yet they do have common features: all are concerned with women, yet none of them is feminist; all are rooted in empirical data-collecting social science, and none of them goes beyond it to contribute to social theory; none of them questions the fundamental basis of the structure of society.

In contrast, other studies are feminist; they do begin with the oppression of women and seek to illustrate its nature and its causes. Four approaches will be discussed: a report by the Zimbabwe Women's Bureau, one by the Ministry of Community Development and Women's Affairs, A. K. H. Weinrich's recent publications, and an article by Angela Cheater.

The report of the Zimbabwe Women's Bureau, *We Carry a Heavy Load*, is feminist in both theory and methodology.¹¹ Its starting point is the attempt to avoid 'new forms of subordination and oppression of rural women', and it is concerned with the marginalization of women. The methodological approach involves the use of quotations and of photographs to present the views of the women themselves. This is a deliberate move away from the presentation of numerous tables and figures and 'objective facts'. The methodology is qualitative and speaks vividly and strongly about the problems of rural women and of ways of overcoming them. The strength of this report is that it combines a theoretical framework with an approach allowing the subjects of research to speak for themselves. The framework interprets, explains and presents conceptual interrelations; it provides the tools with which to understand the material. It insists that women are not to be seen primarily as wives and mothers, but as workers; that their active role as unacknowledged producers is important, as well as their central role in maintaining the families of the present labour force and caring for those of the future.

The report is divided into two sections: one on the social status of women, and one on their economic status. An interesting part of the first section is the description of how women perceive themselves; it is here that the authors' framework is tested, and it is here that both the oppression and the joy of being a woman come across most clearly. The economic section identifies access to land as the most important factor in the lives of rural women, thus raising important issues for present-day Zimbabwe, and stressing that domestic work is a necessary part of the economy and that conditions surrounding it have not changed, in that it demands responsibility and hard work, and largely goes unrecognized. Both observations suggest that major structural change in society is necessary: a redistribution of rewards and of duties.

There are weak points. The material is not presented as well as it could be; some of it reads like a list of issues with no sense of priorities. The causal analysis suggests that previous governments, colonialism, and patriarchal

¹¹Zimbabwe Women's Bureau, *We Carry a Heavy Load: Rural Women in Zimbabwe Speak Out* (Salisbury, The Bureau, mimeo, 1981), 51 pp., Z\$2.00.

attitudes generally all share responsibility for the present situation; there is, however, little theoretical discussion on the motivation for and constraints on a serious redistribution of power. The conflict between the needs of women and other aims, such as centralized control by future or present governments, is not discussed. However, the report is a comprehensive guide to the very diverse needs of rural women, and although it does not offer one development strategy, it does suggest many directions for change. It is a much needed contribution to the development debate.

The Ministry of Community Development and Women's Affairs' *Report on the Conditions of Women in Zimbabwe*¹² sets out to 'provide baseline data on which the Ministry could find a basis for policy formulation'. This became a large survey: 5,208 people participated, and 1,678 of these were interviewed individually. A great deal of information was collected and is presented both in the text and in the tables. The focus is on identifying constraints on women and possible solutions to these. In terms of agricultural production the constraints identified include: inadequate tools, shortage of cattle, time-consuming tasks and discriminatory extension services. For conditions in the urban areas the report stresses the lack of education, discriminatory hiring practices, and the lack of markets, credit facilities and business skills necessary for successful informal-sector work. Health facilities are identified as another high priority, and the report also has sections on the legal status of women, on women and family needs, on their participation in public affairs and on women's organizations.

The descriptive part of the report is wide-ranging and sensitive. The recommendations, however, are quite narrow. Firstly, there is a great deal of emphasis on education, secondly, on the co-ordinating role of the Ministry, and thirdly, on further research for all difficult areas like 'family unification'. The report does not face the problems that it has identified. The issue of land rights is mentioned, only to be buried again; the problems of informal-sector work are to be met by increased credit facilities and training in business skills rather than by the restructuring of the formal economy; the legal status of women is to be changed by education in human rights.

Solutions offered in the report are individualistic and largely apolitical. They seem to reflect the projects which the Ministry feels it can be involved in within the present political and economic situation, rather than those activities that are needed to change, fundamentally, the condition of women in Zimbabwe. Nevertheless, the report is important in that it is the first post-independence, large-scale government report recognizing the needs of rural women in development terms.

A.K.H. Weinrich's *Women and Racial Discrimination and African Marriage in Zimbabwe* stem from the same research material.¹³ They are the results of a survey of the major African ethnic groups and the major settlement types, using both questionnaires and participant observation.

The former starts by outlining the changes in the economy of Zimbabwe over the past century, arguing that the transformation by both military and economic forces resulted in reducing many of the peasant producers to semi-

¹²Ministry of Community Development and Women's Affairs, *Report on the Situation of Women in Zimbabwe* (Salisbury, The Ministry, mimeo, 1982), 158 pp., no price indicated.

¹³A.K.H. Weinrich, *Women and Racial Discrimination in Rhodesia* (Paris, UNESCO, 1979), 143 pp., FF25.00; *African Marriage in Zimbabwe and the Impact of Christianity* (Gweru, Mambo Press, with Holmes McDougall (Edinburgh), Zambeziana 13, 1982), xx, 212 pp., Z\$9.30.

proletarians who were forced to sell their labour to survive. This transformation involved changes in the social structure, including the creation of new class divisions as African nationalism developed and was countered by the creation of a petty bourgeoisie. It is argued that the major effect on women was the burden of poverty. This in turn is related to the changing function of the kinship system — instead of being part of the infrastructure regulating production it became a welfare institution. The penetration of capitalism had also caused the destruction of traditional family life and given rise to new patterns of interaction. The author assumes the need to decrease the disproportionate burden on women, and argues for the communalization of the means of production, with women and men sharing control equally; in this way women can be liberated from their inferior position in the home and in society. She stresses that it is an illusion to think that primitive collective traditions facilitate the setting up of modern socialist structures, and insists that traditional family structures have to be broken to allow the creation of new communities based on socialist production.

This book is concerned with change and not with discrimination. The title is misleading, for although racial discrimination is certainly part of the oppression of women analysed here, more is involved. Change is central to the book, and there is a sense of optimism about its direction. Although the data were collected between 1972 and 1975, the book was written later and offers policy suggestions for a Zimbabwe on the threshold of independence and socialism. There are references to the enormous task facing the new government and a discussion of various policies, such as the nationalization of the means of production and abolition of private property, including brideweath, in an attempt to remove all traces of the capitalist system. Women are thus seen as central to the economy and to the new society, and their progress depends on the successful restructuring of society. There are few authors who have brought together so closely the problems of development for women and for society, or for feminism and socialism.

The global perspective does, however, rest at times on an idealism and an over-simplification which is sometimes unrealistic. The problems of mass unemployment following the rejection of the capitalist mode of production are dismissed lightly, and the problems involved in the people's 'freedom to develop their own resourcefulness in generating commodity production' remains unexplored. It is, however, precisely the constraints on these forms of development that need to be identified, and Zimbabwe's deep integration into the international capitalist economy needs to be taken into account. The author's somewhat utopian vision is based on a Marxist analysis of change, which does not consider that other forms of development are possible; and its assumptions are a little didactic. However, it is based on a social theory that offers a theoretical basis for the review of Zimbabwe's past and future; in sociological terms this is much stronger than the limits imposed by empiricism. Its concern with the oppression of women as rooted in the structure of society make it a feminist report.

Weinrich's more recent book, *African Marriage in Zimbabwe*, moves away from the battle between structural-functional social anthropology and Marxism to explore a different area — the interrelations between sociology and theology. Methodologically the same comments apply: there is a loose connection between the survey and the argument; in fact, the argument is limited to a series of statements about the role of Christianity in capitalism and socialism, and it is not developed. The book is also not feminist: its concern lies

with the Church and with the Christian faith, which are examined in relation to the realities of African marriage in Zimbabwe; the concern with women is almost incidental.

However, it is an interesting book. Weinrich's theoretical framework uses Segundo's basic distinction between ideology and faith to explore the role of Christianity. It suggests that Christianity is not an immutable system, but is constantly adapting its abstract values into new cultural forms. While faith must remain the same, ideologies surrounding it may differ, and may also pass through hermeneutic circles that allow people to change their customary conceptions of life, death, knowledge, society, and so on. Weinrich develops this in relation to Zimbabwe, suggesting for example that the independent churches have proceeded through the hermeneutic circle and have moved away from Western ideology. In contrast, the Christian churches still use legislation passed in Europe to meet European problems and hence remain irrelevant to Africans. She argues that the social function of Christianity was to integrate people into the capitalist sector of the economy, and that its role in the future Zimbabwe could be to integrate people into a socialist society — with changes in ideology but not in the essence of the faith.

The relevance of the book to this essay review lies in the fact that it is asking questions about the Church similar to the questions that this review is asking about the social sciences — is it useful for a changing society, can it move away from supporting the status quo, can it move in new directions? Weinrich thinks that it can, and that ideologies can change while the faith remains intact: feminists believe that paradigms in social science can be changed, while the tools of the discipline remain relevant.

The last piece of work to be reviewed is Angela Cheater's 'Women and their participation in commercial agricultural production'.¹⁴ This article is academically in a different league from the previous studies. It starts from theory, from hypotheses, and develops an argument using data to illustrate the unfolding of ideas. The main hypothesis is that the relations of production in commercial agriculture may generate structural forms that are novel, contradictory to traditional, accepted roles, and geared to an increasing appropriation of surplus from women as wives and dependent kin. Or, to put it simply, new forms of oppression may be emerging. She presents evidence for this, and the new forms of exploitation seem to exceed the extent of exploitation in peasant production systems.

Cheater, however, is concerned to provide an explanation as well as description. She suggests that the reason that a basically capitalist mode of production stabilized around relations of production characteristic of a peasant system is that it has involved partial proletarianization, the creation of a category of workers selling their labour. This system relies on increasing the appropriation of surplus through the labour of dependent wives. Her argument broadens out to show that cultural values are used to mystify the appropriation of surplus, that kinship systems feed into class relations, that bridewealth remains a means of controlling female labour. She concludes that there is an inherent conflict of interests, economically, between men and women, from the family level to levels of society in general, and that this is mystified.

Her work goes conceptually beyond that of the others by seeing women as a class and stating explicitly the conflict of interests within families and within

¹⁴A.P. Cheater, 'Women and their participation in commercial agricultural production: The case of medium scale freehold in Zimbabwe', *Development and Change* (1981), XII, 349-77.

communities. It has also moved conceptually beyond feminism — it is concerned with class formation and class oppression, and women are simply a class in this conflict. It raises important questions for feminists: whether one can be a feminist without adhering to socialist analyses of society, and whether, when one does emphasize structural inequality and class oppression, one necessarily loses sight of women as women. In some ways we have come full circle from Gelfand's book, where the group was more important than the individual. For Cheater, too, the overall nature of society is more important than the rights of individuals within it. But while the former supported the status quo the latter questions existing society, existing inequality and existing oppression.

What, if anything, can one conclude from the selection of material reviewed here? Perhaps one should again stress the diversity of theory and methodology, and argue that the common focus on women, while important, is insufficient to develop either a 'sociology of women' or a feminist society. Nevertheless, each of the authors has made a contribution to knowledge about Zimbabwean women, and this knowledge is important. It is a tool with which to challenge both the social sciences and our society.

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