VANGUARDS OF WOMEN'S LIBERATION:
THE OLD LEFT AND THE CONTINUITY OF THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT
IN THE UNITED STATES, 1945-1970S

DISSERTATION

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

For many years historians writing about the Old Left regarded the American Communist Party (CP) as a Soviet-controlled and totalitarian organization that had little relevance for understanding the progress of struggles for social change in the United States since the 1920s. In the last two decades a younger generation of historians and

writers has begun to rehabilitate the history of the American CP. Countering the Cold War analyses of the 1950s and 1960s they have described the Communist Party of the 1930s and 1940s as the center of a vital mass-based progressive movement whose participants made important contributions to the labor movement, the civil rights movement and the New Left, even though Party leaders often followed inappropriate political directives from the Soviet Union.  

Despite some historians’ recognition that the American Communist Party had an impact on most of the progressive movements that emerged and grew between the 1930s and the 1960s, however, scholars exploring the history of the most recent wave of the U.S. women’s movement have consistently accorded the Old Left little, if any, importance. Basing their conclusions on studies of the 1930s, most who have examined the CP’s treatment of women cite its emphasis on the primacy of class, celebration of the family, and refusal to support the Equal Rights Amendment as evidence that the organization was not feminist and had little significance.

for the women's movement. Instead authors have argued that other groups sustained feminist ideology through the 1940s and 1950s and that the civil rights movement and the New Left stimulated the resurgence of mass feminist activism in the 1960s. But although the Communist Party reached the height of its size and influence during the 1930s, Communists' real challenges to hegemonic notions about women and their place in the world came after 1945 when the organization was increasingly marginal and isolated from the

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masses of American women. Building on the social history approach that historians such as Roger Keeran and Robin Kelley have taken to American Communism during the last twenty years, this study documents the impact of the gender politics of the American Communist Party of the 1940s and 1950s on the women’s movement that emerged out of the New Left in the mid-1960s. I argue that although it rejected "feminism" as the term was defined in the first half of the twentieth century, the Communist Party sharpened its commitment to women's liberation in the anti-feminist decade after World War II and, in doing so, helped to preserve the legacy of earlier militant feminism. At the insistence of rank-and-file women, the CP expanded the boundaries of its earlier work around women’s issues: it analyzed the contribution of culture to women’s oppression, considered the special problems faced by African-American women, and prompted some women and men active in the movement to examine the impact of sexism in their family lives and personal relationships. The greater attention paid by the

3Keeran’s The Communist Party and the Auto Workers’ Unions (1980) and Kelley’s Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression (1990), and most of the writers included in the book New Studies in the Politics and Culture of American Communism (1993) edited by Michael E. Brown, et al., concentrate more on rank-and-file activity than on the ins and outs of official CP policy. Most of these writers conceive of the American Communist Party as the center of a large and influential communist movement that was devoted to a variety of progressive struggles including the labor movement, the civil rights movement, and the peace movement during the period between the 1930s and the late 1950s.
Party to the woman question after 1945 inspired radical women to engage in debate, writings and activities for women's liberation. These efforts, in turn, consisted the basis of an enduring framework that informed the work and writing of some women politicized by the Left even after the Party's influence began to wane in the 1950s. The legacy of the Old Left, then, did prove important for the women's movement: elements of its ideology and terminology and its analysis and activities around the woman question survived into the 1960s and ultimately provided one point of departure for resurgent feminism.

During the first decade of its existence the American Communist Party was absorbed in a long process of defining itself in opposition to the more moderate Socialist Party from which it had split in 1919. This process caused intense and frequent factional disputes that, along with the external attacks that stemmed from the anti-radicalism of the 1920s, necessitated the Party's frequent reliance on political directions from the Soviet Union, limited its ability to carry out "mass work" or build its membership, and prevented Communists from devoting much attention to issues such as the "woman question." 6 Despite the fact that

numerous women who had participated in the militant feminist and suffrage struggles of the 1910s joined the Communist Party in the 1920s, the organization did very little to organize women and the percentage of women members in the CP remained quite small throughout that decade. When the Communist International urged all Communist Parties to set up women’s departments and to support an approach to women’s oppression that recognized the need to incorporate them into public life and to socialize household tasks, the American CP complied only minimally. It adopted the position that women should be allowed to participate fully in the workforce and politics but abandoned support for the reorganization of the private sphere, and it created a Woman’s Bureau which failed to create a program or put one into practice. 

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efforts to formulate an adequate analysis of women’s oppression and women’s liberation that was consistent with its primary goals of analyzing the oppression of the working-class under capitalism and preparing for class-based revolution.

According to Rosalyn Baxandall’s "The Question Seldom Asked" (pp. 144-145) and Mari Jo Buhle’s Women and American Socialism, 1870-1920 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), pp. 319-323, feminist Socialists and suffragists who joined the American CP in the 1920s include Ella Reeve Bloor, Anita Whitney, Maud Malone, Rose Pastor Stokes, Juliet Stuart Poyntz. Of course others, including Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Florence Luscomb, and Mary Inman joined the Party in the 1930s as well. I could find no figure for the percentage of women in the Communist Party in the 1920s. According to Baxandall, women made up only 10% of the Party’s membership in 1930. I assume that it must have been even smaller in the 1920s.

The 1930s was a decade of dramatic change for both the Communist Party and its position on the woman question. By 1929 the Party had resolved many of the internecine debates that had divided and weakened it during its first ten years, built a membership of approximately 18,000, and organized many of its important internal institutions such as its daily newspaper The Daily Worker.9 When the Great Depression began in the same year the Communist Party was ready to take advantage of the widespread loss of confidence in capitalism that suddenly overtook so many working-class and middle-class intellectual Americans. Because the Depression affected every area of American life in the 1930s Communist activists no longer restricted their struggles to the workplace; instead they spread to farms and urban neighborhoods and worked among the masses to protest evictions, high prices, unemployment, and malnutrition. This new emphasis on the broad social and economic problems of the working-class meant that the Party could no longer dismiss domestic issues as irrelevant to the class struggle. In the early 1930s the Communist Party actively encouraged rank-and-file women’s efforts to organize Women’s Councils

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9Encyclopedia of the American Left, p. 150. It was also in 1929 that the Communist Party, which had called itself various other things throughout the 1920s, finally settled on a name for itself: the Communist Party USA.
and neighborhood committees and by 1936 the number of women in the CP had increased to 25%.\textsuperscript{10}

The Party's decision to embrace Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal and join in the international "Popular Front" against fascism in 1935 had perhaps an even more significant effect on its place in American social and political life and its orientation toward women's issues. The Party's emphasis on democracy in this period allowed it to back away from the tactic of catastrophic revolution and to embrace more typically American forms of political activity such as electoral politics. These developments made it possible for the CP to attract large numbers of new recruits and to attain a wide following in many sections of American life. According to Paul Buhle and Dan Georgakas, by the later 1930s the CP "provided national, regional and local leadership to many important industrial unions as well as liberal, student, and cultural organizations," and "Communists and 'fellow travelers' served as a dynamic wedge of radicalism within the dominant New Deal liberalism."\textsuperscript{11}

Thanks to the success of Popular Front recruiting efforts in the late 1930s the CP was not only the core of a mass progressive movement that provided leadership to struggles

\textsuperscript{10}For discussions of this shift see: Baxandall, "The Question Seldom Asked," pp. 148-157; and Van Gosse, "'To Organize in Every Neighborhood, in Every Home.'" The figure on female membership in 1936 comes from Shaffer, p. 90.

\textsuperscript{11}Encyclopedia of the American Left, p. 151.
as diverse as union organizing in the north, equal rights for African-Americans in Harlem and in the South, and the Spanish Civil War in Europe, but for many women it was also "an arena for political action and a rich social life...that was freer than the dominant culture." By the end of the decade women, who made up between 30-40% of the CP's rapidly increasing membership, were participating in a limited way in both national and local Party leadership, writing for Party publications, organizing and joining workplace and neighborhood struggles, and pushing the Communist Party to take their problems more seriously.

The Communist Party was certainly doing a lot more for women in the 1930s than it had in the 1920s: in the Popular Front period it not only empowered the CP Women's Department and increased the circulation of its progressive women's magazine from 2,000 to 7,000, but it supported women's access to free and legal birth control, endorsed the Woman's Charter as an alternative to the Equal Rights Amendment that would codify women's equality without threatening protective legislation, and encouraged women to challenge male

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13The membership figure comes from Shaffer, p. 90. For fuller discussions of women's participation in CP political and social activities in the 1930s see: Dixler, "The Woman Question"; Shaffer, "Women in the CPUSA"; Gosse, "'To Organize in Every Neighborhood, in Every Home’"; and Baxandall, "The Question Seldom Asked."
domination in the workplace.\textsuperscript{14} Despite this progress, however, it was still extremely necessary for Communist women and their progressive comrades who were not official members of the Party to push the CP to take a more radical stance on the woman question. Although on the one hand the Popular Front strategy forced the Party to take women more seriously, on the other hand the CP’s desire to appeal to the masses in the late 1930s actually limited its ability to oppose traditional gender arrangements in the family and in society at large. When the most radical women in the Communist Party protested sexism in Party ranks and in their own families and relationships, and when they proposed that cultural as well as economic factors contributed to women’s oppression, their ideas often met with resistance from the upper levels of Party leadership.\textsuperscript{15} By the end of the 1930s the Communist Party had 55,000 members, approximately 22,000 of whom were women. But although it supported women’s liberation in theory it did not, in this period, embrace a practical program for ending male supremacy in the family, in Party settings or in American society at-large.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{14}Shaffer, "Women in the CPUSA."

\textsuperscript{15}Dixler, "The Woman Question"; Shaffer, "Women in the CPUSA"; Ware, American Women in the 1930s: Holding Their Own, pp. 131-133; Baxandall, "The Question Seldom Asked."

\textsuperscript{16}Membership figures come from Nathan Glazer’s book The Social Basis of American Communism (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961), pp. 92-93 and Shaffer, p. 90. For more detailed discussions of the CP’s failure to combat male supremacy in the Party and in U.S. society in the 1930s see
Except for the brief period between August of 1939, when Stalin and Hitler signed a non-aggression pact, and June of 1941, when Germany invaded the U.S.S.R., American Communists continued during the first half of the 1940s to pursue the Popular Front strategies of embracing reformist politics and portraying themselves as regular and patriotic American citizens. Using these tactics during the WWII years, the Communist Party successfully increased its membership to 65,000 and, by 1943, women finally achieved numerical parity with men in the organization.\(^7\) Despite these gains, however, the accommodationist nature of the Popular Front still prevented the Communist Party from expanding its conception of women's oppression to include cultural and personal factors. Not until after 1945, when the Party's Popular Front leader Earl Browder was dismissed from his post and expelled from the organization, did the American CP begin to examine its position on the woman question with a critical eye. Between 1946, when the Communist Party began to lend its support to progressive women's attempts to organize independently, and 1956, when Kruschev's revelations about the crimes of Stalin finally destroyed what little was left of the Communist Party's mass base after years of anti-communist intimidation, Communist women and their allies forced their Party to rethink its

\(^{17}\text{Baxandall, p. 156.}\)
narrowly economic understanding of women’s oppression, to clarify the relationship of gender oppression to race and class oppression, and to acknowledge that women’s so-called personal problems had political solutions. These activities, much more than the Communist Party’s problematic analysis of women’s oppression and work for women’s liberation from the 1930s, laid important practical and theoretical groundwork for the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

It is well known that the years between 1945 and the early 1960s were not particularly conducive to struggles for women’s equality. Americans’ desire to return to some kind of "normal" life after years of depression and war, combined with widespread efforts to push women back into the home after WWII and influential neo-Freudian arguments that equated feminism with neurosis, effectively thwarted the development of any mass-based women’s movement in the late 1940s and 1950s.\(^8\) Despite the hostile social and political climate, however, a number of single- and mixed-sex groups including the National Woman’s Party, the United Auto Workers’ Union, the YWCA, and the American Friends Service

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Committee persisted in their demands for women’s equal rights and in their opposition to post-war prescriptions for femininity.¹⁹ The Communist Party in this period did not identify as a feminist organization, and although they were actively engaged in fighting sexism in a variety of contexts after 1945, Communist women did not see themselves as feminists. In fact, although Communist women called themselves the heirs of the 19th century women’s movement, the suggestion that they were part of a larger specifically feminist trajectory probably would have appalled them.

Feminism in the 1940s and 1950s was the domain of the tiny National Woman’s Party (NWP) and its allies.²⁰ The Woman’s Party was created in the wake of the suffrage movement in 1920 and spent the next fifty years lobbying elected officials to improve women’s status and campaigning for the passage of reforms, especially the Equal Rights


Amendment. But while the NWP worked actively to win formal legal equality for women, it had strong ties to the traditional political system and its members were in many cases conservative and even reactionary when it came to other struggles for social change. Alice Paul, the founder and leader of the NWP through the 1940s and 50s, was well known for her anti-Communism, her opposition to the labor movement, and her racism and anti-Semitism. Because the NWP claimed the terms "feminist" and "feminism," the Communists wanted nothing to do with them. In the minds of most progressive women in the United States, to be a feminist meant not only that one supported the ERA rather than protective legislation for women workers thereby placing gender concerns above those of class and race, but as numerous articles in the Party press suggested, that one was probably racist and anti-Semitic as well.

While keeping in mind that the Communist Party and progressive women were hostile to feminism as it was defined in that period, I suggest that their work during the dozen or so years after 1945 was one important component of a larger effort to preserve women’s struggles and to fight for women’s emancipation in a unfriendly social and political climate. At the same time that women in the NWP were pushing for the adoption of the ERA and women in the labor movement were demanding equal pay for equal work, I have found that women in and around the Communist Party were
contributing to efforts that sought to rectify social, economic and political discriminations against women. Taking my argument one step further, I suggest that Communist efforts on behalf of women in the 1940s and 50s were, in some ways, more advanced and far-reaching than those of reformist organizations of the time. Communist women and their allies understood the need for women’s liberation and variations in women’s oppression according to race and class. Many tried to live out their politics in their personal lives. These factors give them more in common with some 1960s feminists than with their feminist contemporaries. The similarities between the two movements were not, I submit, merely coincidental.

There were, of course, some stark differences between the gender politics of the Communist Party and those of the 1960s women’s liberation movement. Communists saw gender and race oppression as derived from class-based economic exploitation while feminists from the radical branch of the movement pointed to the existence of male domination in precapitalist and so-called socialist societies as evidence that gender superceded class. These divergent views went

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along with opposing strategies for dealing with sexism. The CP insisted that the common interests of women and men required them to work side-by-side to oppose all the exploitative consequences of capitalism, including male supremacy which they often made secondary to larger social and economic reform. Feminists, on the other hand, argued that the New Left’s broad agenda favored "male" issues over female ones and that sexism made it difficult if not impossible for women to work for their own liberation within the larger mixed movement; many ultimately split from the male dominated New Left so that they could put women’s liberation first. Furthermore, although Communist activists recognized the personal implications of their political beliefs, they tended to focus primarily on larger social and economic institutions as sites of struggle against male domination and, by and large, to neglect questions about sex and sexuality. 1960s feminists, although they certainly worked to change economic and social structures, placed much more emphasis on the need to transform themselves and their surroundings; their programs for feminist social change made issues of sexuality central.

These and other differences are significant; they certainly mitigate any suggestion that Communist women incited the women’s movement or that 1960s feminists adopted the gender politics of the Old Left wholesale. But although the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s was in many
ways different from what came before it, the movement did not spring full-blown from the New Left. Rather, 1960s feminists built upon the work of various groups of women activists that preceded them, including the work of women who inspired and were inspired by the Communist Party’s efforts to take women’s issues seriously after 1945.

Researching and writing about Communists and Communism in the post-Cold War but still anti-communist environment of the 1990s has presented numerous challenges and difficulties. First, because the Communist Party USA has been on the defensive in this country since its very beginnings, the group has not always kept the most reliable records and it is very protective of organizational records it has maintained over its seventy year history. Unlike those who research the Y.W.C.A. or the United Auto Workers’ Union, for example, historians of American Communism cannot go to an archive or a microfilm collection and gain access to decades worth of organizational history.\(^{22}\) Without minutes of meetings, membership lists, budgets and internal memos and other such organizational documents we must rely instead on scattered and often fragmentary evidence, much of which has been compiled by individuals or groups that were

\(^{22}\)There is a Communist Party archive at the CP headquarters in New York City, but it is notorious for claiming that records do not exist and for refusing to give scholars access to the records whose existence it will acknowledge.
hostile to Communism such as the U.S. Subversive Activities Control Board or the Federal Bureau of Investigation. That evidence which has not been tainted by anti-communism often bears the mark of intense Communist partisanship. In the fight between Communists and anti-Communists everyone took one side or the other and available sources certainly reflect both extremes; it is always a challenge to sort out the biases and exaggerations—both positive and negative—and to determine what from these sources is useful and what is not.

For historians of Communist women the problems are perhaps even more difficult. Despite Communist women’s efforts to reform it, the Communist Party remained a male-dominated organization throughout the 1940s, 1950s, and later, and women’s issues often remain submerged within the Party’s larger discussions of oppression and liberation. Women’s activities on their own behalf usually occurred at the grassroots level and did not get very much attention at the top levels of Party hierarchy or in the Party press. Furthermore, modern manuscript processing conventions still do not take gender into account as often as they should. The sparse material on Communist women that does exist is often buried in larger collections and completely hidden in the inventories of those collections. Many archival collections relating to progressive women’s activities that are possible to locate remain closed to researchers until
they women whose lives detail can no longer be hurt by the revelation of their associations with the Communist Party. And Communist and progressive women who are still alive to tell the tales of their work for women's issues in the post-war period are, because of the caution that was necessarily instilled in them during the McCarthy period, still extremely hesitant to talk to a young woman who calls them up and identifies herself as a history graduate student.

Despite these difficulties, however, I did ultimately to find the evidence I needed to begin to piece together the history of women's activism in the CP in the 1940s and 1950s and to show how their activities helped to change the Communist Party's position on the woman question in those years. First, I made use of archival sources including the papers of individual Communist and progressive women including Ella Reeve Bloor, Betty Gannett, Dorothy Healey, Mary Inman, and Mary Van Kleeck; organizational records of Communist-inspired groups such as the Congress of American Women and the Women's International Democratic Federation; and the FBI's fragmentary compilation of documents relating Communist "women's matters." These collections included miscellaneous pieces of correspondence with Party leaders and other internal Party documents not otherwise available in addition to personal papers. They proved most useful for uncovering the origins of the radical critique of male supremacy that progressive women formulated in the 1930s,
documenting the ways women sustained those and ideas through WWII and reintroduced them within the more receptive Communist Party of 1945-46, and for making sense of the process through which rank-and-file women’s demands were at least partially incorporated into official Party policy by the late 1940s.

Second I used published anti-communist sources, including records compiled by the House Un-American Activities Commission, the U.S. Subversive Activities Control Board, the U.S. Department of Justice, and the F.B.I. I also relied a great deal on published sources from the Communist Party itself including books, journals, pamphlets and its three major newspapers. The letters columns of the Communist newspapers the Worker, the Daily Worker, and the People’s World, which served as forum for rank-and-file Communists to express their opinions about many aspects of CP life, proved surprisingly useful for revealing rank-and-file women’s dissatisfactions with the Party line. Articles and advertisements in those publications described the activities women undertook to solve their gender related problems within the Party. All of these sources, especially the Communist newspapers, journals and pamphlets, provided the evidence necessary to trace the evolution of the Communist Party’s official policy on the woman question and to show how women successfully transformed the CP’s approach to women’s issues between 1946
and 1956. Such texts do not usually reveal the complicated processes by which CP leaders decided to change the Party's official position on women, but because they are the best source available, I have used them as the basis for my discussions about how such changes took place. CP publications are also probably not always reliable indicators of the extent to which Party policies and positions actually affected the day-to-day activities of Communists, but they do show that at least some Communist women were thinking and writing about the issues of women's oppression and women's liberation and that the CP came to endorse their ideas. The articles Communist women published in CP publications such as The Worker and Political Affairs in this period undoubtedly exposed thousands of Communist and progressive readers to a radical critique of male supremacy that they would not have encountered elsewhere.23

23According to David Shannon's The Decline of American Communism (pp. 88-91) the Worker had a circulation of 64,348 in 1948 and the Party's theoretical journal, Political Affairs had a circulation of 12,500. The two publishing houses the CP used to publish its books and pamphlets, International Publishers and New Century Publishers, were, according to Shannon, "very busy." In 1946 they published over two million copies of CP publications. Halfway through 1947 they were running ahead of 1946. Of course these figures dropped dramatically by the 1950s as the Cold War and McCarthyism did their damage to the CP. According to an FBI estimate published in Glazer's The Social Basis of American Communism (pp. 92-93) the Party's membership had decreased from approximately 65,000 in 1945 to 22,663 by 1955. Nevertheless, also according to the FBI's report on the Communist Party Press (in the FBI's "Reports on the Communist Party and Radical Organizations, 1953-60, reel #6) the circulation of the Worker was 28,822 in 1954 and the circulation of Political Affairs had increased to 17,000.
Such exposure was important even if many of those readers did not ultimately resolve to fight male chauvinism in their own personal and political lives.

Finally personal interviews with Old Left women about their attitudes and experiences in the 1940s and 1950s proved to be important sources of evidence about the real lives of Communists in this period. I conducted nine semi-structured, opened-ended interviews myself, six with women who were active in the Communist Party in the post-WWII period (one woman’s husband also participated in the interview along with her), and three with daughters of Communists who were later involved in the women’s liberation movement. I also made use of four oral history interviews with Communist women that had been recorded by the Oral History of the American Left project at New York University, and one interview with three Communist women that was conducted by historian Katherine Campbell in 1981. Locating potential interview subjects was difficult and the advanced ages of many of the women I interviewed meant that they did not always remember as much about their activist lives as I would have hoped. Nevertheless, despite their problems these women’s recollections supplied information about the rationale behind some Party decisions that would have been impossible to know otherwise. They also yielded information about the impact of CP policies on individuals’ personal
beliefs and family lives that was difficult if not impossible to detect in printed sources.

In contrast, examining the 1960s and 1970s women’s movement for evidence of Old Left influence was relatively unproblematic. The women’s movement, like the New Left, was extremely prolific and created a large body of writings that laid out its analyses of women’s oppression and strategies for women’s liberation. Many such unpublished writings are readily available in archival collections. In addition to well-known published sources by women’s movement participants I made extensive use of the Women’s Liberation Collection at Smith College’s Sophia Smith Collection, which contains hundreds of pamphlets, manifestos, and mimeographed documents from early women’s liberation organizations, and the microfilmed edition of the International Women’s History Periodical archive known as the "Herstory Collection," which contains mission statements and newsletters from local women’s liberation groups all around the U.S. These sources, in addition to the interviews I conducted with feminist daughters of Communists all provided abundant evidence that, despite the power of McCarthyism, various elements of the Old Left’s thinking about women’s oppression and women’s liberation filtered down, in a variety of ways, to a younger generation of feminists who were educated and politicized in the distinctly anti-feminist and anti-communist 1950s.
Once I had located the sources to reconstruct the gender politics of the Communist Party after WWII, the second question I faced in my research and writing was what to call the women I was writing about. Because of their disputes with the National Woman’s Party and their repudiation of the term "feminist," Communists and other progressive women who worked for women’s liberation frequently struggled with the problem of what to call themselves. As one woman with close ties to the Communist movement wrote to a woman member of the CP at some point in the early 1940s:

I have gotten so conscious of being a subject sex that I see everything from the non-feminist woman angle. Incidentally, we are going to have to coin a word to describe our platform on the woman question. We are not feminists, we are equal rights advocates as that phrase has been used. We are, I guess, just progressive women, but we need a good descriptive word for those of us who believe that the ending of discrimination against women is fully as vital a problem today as the ending of discrimination against Negroes, foreign born and Jews.  

Unfortunately Communist women never did come up with a concise term that embraced both their Marxism and their commitment to women’s liberation. Even at the height of their efforts to convince the Communist Party that "women’s work" was just as important as "Negro work" or "youth work" they were still simply calling themselves Communists or progressives or sometimes "good Communists" and "good

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progressives." In order to respect these women's avoidance of the term feminism I have refrained from calling them feminists as well. Throughout the dissertation I use the term "progressive women" to refer to Communist women and their left-wing allies who supported women's liberation and have employed the term "Communist women" only when discussing those women who were actually members of the Communist Party.

Finally, this issue of CP membership also proved to be a thorny one. I spent many days early in the research process feeling guiltily like an FBI agent or a HUAC member as I tried to figure out which women who were mentioned in Worker and Daily Worker articles were actually Communists and which were not. I also spent a considerable amount of time agonizing over the question of how to be sure about whether or not older progressive women who played some role in the women's liberation movement ever joined the Communist Party. Gradually I realized, however, that because the Communist Party's membership lists were completely unavailable, there was no way I could ever prove that any woman or man was a "card carrying" Communist unless they publicly stated that they were. Fortunately, at about the same time I also realized that the question of membership was not very important. Because the Communist Party was actually at the center of a large progressive movement that encompassed many organizations there were thousands of women
and men who were profoundly influenced by the Communist Party, who read the Party press, and who participated in formal and informal Party activities even though they never officially joined the organization. Their exposure to and support for Communist ideas and beliefs about women’s oppression and male supremacy, I decided, was what really mattered. Both some progressive women who joined the Party and some who did not learned from CP writings and classes about the woman question and, inspired by their new knowledge, continued to champion women’s issues throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s. Ultimately it was their tenacious commitment to women’s liberation, not the level of their commitment to the Communist Party’s principles, that sustained a feminist legacy upon which 1960s feminists could build.

This dissertation examines the origins of a radical critique of women’s oppression within the Communist Party of the 1930s, explains how those ideas were revived and expanded by Communist and progressive women between 1945 and 1956, and documents the ways that the gender politics of the Communist Party in the post-WWII period survived to influence the second wave of the women’s movement that developed in the United States in the late 1960s and 1970s. In chapter 2 I reconstruct the life and work of Mary Inman, the Communist woman most responsible for articulating an analysis of women’s oppression that considered cultural and
personal factors as well as economic ones. I discuss the way her work both built upon and extended the CP's women’s work of the 1930s and outline the role she played in creating the influential notion that the Communist Party was hostile to women’s liberation and irrelevant to the history of the women’s movement. I begin chapter 3 by explaining the Communist Party's position on the woman question during the World War II years. The bulk of the chapter, however, recounts the history of the Communist-led organization the Congress of American Women which revived Mary Inman's ideas in 1946, popularized them in progressive circles between 1946 and 1949, and made them the basis of a new Communist women’s movement by the time it disbanded in 1950. In chapter 4 I show how rank-and-file women’s efforts to make the Communist Party take their problems more seriously led to the expansion of its theoretical analysis of women’s oppression, to the removal of sexist images from Party publications, and to a variety of new classes, publications and activities aimed to promote women’s liberation inside and outside of CP settings. Chapter 5 considers the ways that CP women pioneered in creating an analysis of women’s oppression that considered race and class differences among women and demonstrates that, long before the Civil Rights movement burst onto the American political scene in the mid-1950s, the Communist Party supported the struggles of African-American women and other women of color.
Communists' and progressives' attempts to create alternative cultural forms that did not oppress women and their efforts to live out their politics in their personal and family lives are the subject of chapter 6. Finally, chapter 7 concludes by illustrating the ways in which progressives and their daughters preserved the Old Left's work on the woman question during the hostile social and political environment of the late 1940s and 1950s and transmitted it to the women's liberation movement that grew out of the New Left in the late 1960s.

Ultimately this study shows that the American Communist Party was much more than just a small, embattled, authoritarian, and sexist organization during the period 1945-1956. First, it shows that although Communist and progressive women failed to generate a mass women's movement after WWII, they successfully lobbied the Party leadership to take women's concerns more seriously and pushed the CP to make great strides in the area of women's liberation in the post-war years. Second, it shows that Communist and progressive activists integrated work for structural change with an emphasis on the need for personal transformation and created a form of prefigurative politics that preceded those of the New Left of the 1960s. And finally it shows that even such small and repressed organizations as the Communist Party have had a substantial impact on the social and political life of the United States in the second half of
the twentieth century. By persisting in their struggles against male supremacy and for consistency in their personal and political lives and resisting the status quo politically, economically, and culturally, Communist and progressive women and men not only foreshadowed the movements of the 1960s, 1970s, and later, but helped to shape them as well.
CHAPTER II

In 1941 Mary Inman, a long-time Marxist from Long Beach, California, launched a one-woman battle with national leaders of the American Communist Party over their response to her book *In Woman’s Defense.* Inman’s fight—provoked by Communist leaders’ resistance to her suggestion that housework, like factory work, is productive labor—lasted for over forty years until her death in 1985. Clearly Inman did not back down easily. Despite the CP’s often well-deserved reputation for inflexibility Inman turned out hundreds of pages of argumentation aimed at convincing Communists and anyone else who would listen that she was right and the Party’s leaders wrong. Her tracts, with titles such as *Woman Power*, "Thirteen Years of CPUSA Misleadership on the Woman Question," and "Can the Strangling Hand of Browder Revisionism Be Removed from the Throats of Women in These Perilous Times?," not only criticized Communist leaders for refusing to redefine the

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1Mary Inman, *In Woman’s Defense* (Los Angeles: The Committee to Organize the Advancement of Women, 1940).
economic nature of housework but lambasted them for
"purposefully liquidating the Party's work for women."²

For many years few people took notice of Mary Inman's
campaign, and her story might have been just an interesting
footnote to the history of the Communist Party, except that
she ultimately played a critical role in the process of
interpreting the Party's position on women. After two-
decades of obscurity Inman finally got some recognition when
feminists, inspired by the Women's Liberation Movement to
seek out their foremothers, rediscovered her work. Still
reeling from their own fight for the recognition of male
chauvinism in the New Left the organizers of the first
national Women's Liberation conference wrote to Inman in
1968 asking for copies of her books.³ In the 1970s numerous
women's historians contacted Inman asking for interviews
with her and for copies of her work. In 1978 Inman, still

³Mary Inman, Thirteen Years of CPUSA Misleadership on
the Woman Question," mimeographed paper dated 1949, pp. 23-
24. Inman's Woman Power (Los Angeles: The Committee to
Organize the Advancement of Women, 1942), "Thirteen Years of
Misleadership," "Can the Strangling Hand of Browderist
Revisionism Be Removed from the Throats of Women in This
Perilous Time," (1962) and the rest of Inman's personal and
political papers can be found in the Mary Inman Papers,
Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, MA, box
3. Documents from this collection will hereafter cited as
Inman papers, followed by a box number. When I looked at
the papers in November, 1992 they were in large boxes, in
un-numbered folders, and still being inventoried. It is
likely that the box numbers recorded here are no longer
applicable.

³Letter from Helen Kritzler to Mary Inman, 12/22/68, in
Inman papers, box 2.
hoping to win support for her position, sent copies of her 1946 "Program for Women" to various scholars including Ellen DuBois, Amy Swerdlow, Madeline Davis and Nancy Gabin, and her "Two Forms of Production Under Capitalism," to Meredith Tax. In 1979 she sent copies of several of her writings to Joan Kelly. In the last years of Inman's life, historian Sherna Gluck won her trust and interviewed her extensively. Although Inman insisted that their conversations not be tape-recorded, Gluck was later able to share what she learned with others.

Correspondence between Inman and Joan Kelly can be found in the Inman papers, box 2.

In the last decade historians have relied heavily on Inman's version of her story, obtained through her writings and from Gluck's interviews, as an indicator of what happened to Communist women who were interested in the issue of women's liberation. They present Inman as one of only a few women who dared to suggest that women, as a group, are oppressed, and they conclude from her experiences and writings that the Party opposed any discussion of or organization around the problems of women's oppression before World War II and in the late 1940s and 1950s as well.7 Certainly the Communist Party had numerous limitations in this area but Mary Inman was never an isolated critic of male chauvinism in the Party and at no time was it the thoroughly sexist organization that she described in the 1940s and later. On the contrary, Mary

Inman was able to write and sell many copies of *In Woman’s Defense* precisely because the Communist movement in the 1930s provided an atmosphere that encouraged progressive women and men to take women’s oppression seriously; Party leaders criticized Inman’s work not because she wanted to organize women, but because they were worried that her equation of domestic work with productive labor glorified housework and could be used to reinforce the reactionary notion that women’s place was in the home. But while the CP dismissed Inman’s arguments about housework, it also adopted many of her other views. Even as she was denouncing Communists for neglecting women’s problems after 1945, they were incorporating many of her points about the causes and effects of women’s oppression into their analysis, thereby strengthening it significantly.

Mary Inman’s efforts to prove the correctness of her theory became her life’s work. Although *In Woman’s Defense* contained important insights and made vital contributions to Communists’ understanding of women’s oppression, her subsequent works became increasingly dogmatic and removed from the reality of many women’s experiences in the Communist Party. By the time feminist historians made contact with Inman in the 1970s, her isolation, her single-minded focus on the events of 1940-43, and her sense that she was the victim of a Communist conspiracy against women had taken a toll on her; she was not a reliable source of
information about the controversy that developed around her book or about women’s status in the Communist movement more generally. This chapter uses Mary Inman’s personal papers to reconstruct the story of her life and work, describes how *In Woman’s Defense* both reflected and enhanced Communists’ work for women’s liberation in the 1930s and 1940s, and examines the controversy over the book from both sides to show how the events actually unfolded. The sources reveal how Inman’s ordeal has been misinterpreted and her version of events mythologized by historians who mistook her accounts of the past as statements of objective truth. Mary Inman’s significance, I suggest, comes not from her parting with the Communist Party, but from her contributions to the organization’s analysis of and programs for women and, ironically, from her ability to convince historians that the Communist Party resisted women’s efforts to organize on their own behalf.

Ida Mary Inman was the youngest of 9 children (5 boys and 4 girls), born to Mildred Taylor Inman and James Jett Inman in Kentucky on June 11, 1894. At age 6 she moved with her family to Creek Nation Indian Territory in Oklahoma where she lived for the next 17 years. The other details of Inman’s personal history are sketchy, and most come from her own incomplete autobiography, a document clearly constructed to show her early development as a pioneering Marxist and
feminist and to help redeem the place in history she thought she had been denied. According to Inman's account, her mother died in 1905 and after her older sister died two years later she had no choice but to take over as "woman of the house," and to spend the next 10 years taking care of her father and older brothers. Despite her heavy responsibilities at home Inman wrote that she became a Socialist, joined Eugene Debs' Socialist Party in 1910 at age sixteen, and "on fire with zeal for...politics" played "an active role in the political movement" that included work for woman's suffrage. That same year she met her future husband, 25-year-old J. Frank Ryan, Secretary for the Oil Workers Union of the I.W.W. in Tulsa. She was drawn to him because "he listened to me attentively and even encouraged me to talk about my vision of a future world without war, poverty and crime." After a long courtship the two were married in July of 1917. When they moved to Kansas City, MO in late 1917 to escape anti-Wobbly vigilantes they began to live and work under the name Inman

Mary Inman's autobiographical fragment, "part labor history, part problems that still exist, as well as a record of a good life that I would not live different if I could do it over again," was written on 7/20/78. Inman did not get very far in her attempt to write autobiography but her efforts, including numerous handwritten autobiographical notes, dated and undated, are in the Inman papers, box 1.

Autobiographical notes, Inman papers, box 1.

Ibid.

Ibid.
and continued to do so for the rest of their lives.\textsuperscript{12} There is no record of when or why the Inmans moved to Southern California or when Mary Inman began her associations with the Communist Party, but by the late 1930s Frank was working for Pacific Telephone and Telegraphic Co. and Mary was writing \textit{In Woman's Defense} in a rented office in a downtown Los Angeles office-building.\textsuperscript{13} Inman finished the manuscript in 1936 and, by 1939 was a strong supporter of the Communist Party, especially active in women's work.\textsuperscript{14}

By contemporary standards, the American Communist Party's work on women's issues between 1930 and 1945 had

\textsuperscript{12}Mary Inman's explanations about their various name changes are found on a Social Security Administration form dated 10/18/56, Inman papers, box 1. According to Gluck, later in her life Inman jokingly called herself a "Lucy Stoner," a woman who kept her own name after marriage. In fact Inman did describe her marriage as egalitarian. In the 1970s she wrote in her autobiographical notes (box 1): "It was the first and only marriage of each and we lived together continuously as husband and wife for forty-two years until his death in Long Beach, CA, in 1959. There was never any of the so-called 'war between the sexes' in our life together. We had a common political goal and our life together was one of working-class partners."

\textsuperscript{13}Sherna Gluck, "Socialist Feminism Between the Two World Wars," p. 291.

\textsuperscript{14}Inman papers, box 1, folder of James F. Inman's personal documents. According to a letter from Elizabeth Gurley Flynn to Harrison George, the editor of the \textit{People's Daily World} dated 8/5/41 Inman was a CP "friend and sympathizer" before she finally joined the CP officially in late 1939 or so. A copy of Flynn's letter can be found in the Inman papers, box 3.
some serious shortcomings as well as some real strengths. On the one hand, even though the Party maintained a theoretical commitment to women's rights, it also accepted some traditional attitudes about gender, sexuality and the family. Many women were recruited to the CP but, although a significant number of these became local leaders in this period, very few climbed ranks of the Party's national leadership. Images of women in the Party press were often either idealized working-class wives and mothers or sex objects, scantily clad in bathing suits and high heels. On the other hand, the CP's political work and cultural and social life also gave significant numbers of women awareness of their oppressed status and opportunities, training, and self-confidence they probably could not have gained elsewhere. The Party's theoretical commitment to women's emancipation and its Women's Commission and women's magazines educated both black and white women about the


16 See literature in note 14 and also interviews with Rose Kryzak, Mollie Goldstein, Rose Raynes, and other women in the Oral History of the American Left Collection, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, NY. Interviews from this collection will be cited hereafter as OHAL.
distinctive and common obstacles they faced in American society and encouraged them to confront those obstacles head on. In their work as union and neighborhood organizers, in consumer boycotts and rent strikes, in meetings and on picket lines, Communist women learned how to make speeches, write leaflets, and argue with men who disagreed with them. Furthermore, the Communist Party never suggested that women's concerns would have to wait until after the revolution when socialism could guarantee women's emancipation. Rather, the CP demonstrated that there were strategies women could use to improve their status in the present and in the future. Even as the Party often idealized women's roles as wives, mothers and sex objects, it also pushed them to transcend those roles and to work alongside men in political activities that would ultimately lead to their complete emancipation.

In the period of the Popular Front against fascism, which lasted from 1935 until the declaration of the Hitler-Stalin pact in 1939, the Communist Party dramatically expanded its work among women. The Party, as always, made an effort to recruit women workers but also began to conduct recruiting drives among housewives.17 In the absence of a unified women's movement, Communist women appointed

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17Van Gosse's "'To Organize in Every Neighborhood, in Every Home,'" analyzes the Party's shift from exclusive concern with industrial workers to broader interest in domestic and community issues in the 1930s.
themselves as the heirs of Lucy Stone and Sojourner Truth and attempted to forge ties with women in organizations such as the YWCA, the League of Women Voters, the Parent Teacher Association, and the Women’s Trade Union League, not only to oppose Nazism but to fight for women’s rights and access to birth control.\textsuperscript{18} In 1936 and 1937, Communists won the support of women union members and some middle-class women’s rights advocates (including Mary Anderson and Mary Elizabeth Pidgeon from the Women’s Bureau of the Department of Labor, Mary Van Kleeck of the Inter-Professional Association, Dorothy Kenyon of the Consumers’ League and Charl Williams of the National Federation of Business and Professional Women’s Clubs) for their campaign for the "Women’s Charter," an alternative to the Equal Rights Amendment intended to guarantee equal rights for women in all areas of life without undermining protective legislation for women

\textsuperscript{18}Margaret Cowl, \textit{Women and Equality} (New York: International Publishers, 1935). See Louise Mitchell, "Ninety Years of Women’s Rights," \textit{Daily Worker} 7/17/38 and Ella Reeve Bloor "The American Woman," in \textit{The Communist} 18,9 (September, 1939): 829-835 as examples of Communists’ assertion that the CP inherited the legacy of the nineteenth century women’s movement. The Party’s desire to work in coalition with other women’s organizations is clear in a letter from Margaret Cowl, Director of the CP National Women’s Commission to all State and District Women’s Commissions, July 5, 1938 in the Mary Van Kleeck Collection, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA, box 35, folder 619. Documents from this collection will hereafter be cited as Van Kleeck papers, box number, folder number.
workers. When the Women's Charter coalition dissolved in 1938, Communists urged women instead to "celebrate" the 90th anniversary of the birth of the American women's movement by advocating the passage of Federal laws to safeguard women's health in employment, to cover maternal and child health services under the Social Security Act, and to guarantee equal rights for black women.

In addition to organizing such broad-based campaigns for legal and political reforms, Communist women in the 1930s also articulated the problems of male supremacy within the CP and began to fight against it. In 1935 the Sunday edition of the Party's newspaper, The Worker, sponsored a "Dear Mr. Husband" contest and published letters women wrote "telling him in what ways he treats you as an inferior, why he does it, and in what ways he is harming himself by doing so," and women were encouraged to write to the paper at other times with similar complaints. One woman wrote:

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21 The Worker Magazine, 7/5/36. See also Shaffer, p. 73 and Baxandall, "The Question Seldom Asked." pp. 154-155.
I'd like to bring to the attention of your readers the narrow-mindedness of some of the members where their wives and daughters are concerned. Apparently meetings, parades, dances, and picnics and other Party activities are reserved only for the male sex, while mother and daughter are supposed to sit quietly at home and knit. Observers can notice these men beaming and approving of the work of other girls and women when they see them selling Daily Workers, distributing leaflets, or carrying on the work of the party. But it is different, should they confront their own wife or daughter mingling with others and helping the Party. Make this question clear to these men comrades. It would benefit the Party as well as these wives and daughters.22

Other complaints published in the paper at various times involved husbands who would not help with housework and childcare, male Party organizers who intimidated or ignored women members, Communist men who made fun of the suffrage movement, and husbands who encouraged their wives to go to Party meetings butclamped down when they expressed interest in becoming Communist speakers or leaders.23 The Party's National Women's Commission and its state and district women's commissions took complaints like these seriously and made a valiant if not always successful effort to legitimize and address such problems.

It was in this relatively sympathetic environment that Mary Inman researched and wrote In Woman's Defense between 1936 and 1939. Her experiences as an adolescent housewife

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22The Worker, 9/6/35, p. 6, quoted in Shaffer, p. 94.

23Daily Worker 2/20/34, p. 6 and 2/12/34, p. 4; Party Organizer, October 1936, pp. 16-19; Working Woman, September, 1936, p. 13.
and her exposure to the struggles for women’s rights waged by Socialist women before 1919 probably influenced her work to some extent, but many of the views presented in the book grew directly from the Party’s Popular Front perspective on women.24 Serialized in the West Coast Communist newspaper, the Daily People’s World in 1939 and published in 1940, In Woman’s Defense incorporated much of the Party’s approach to the woman question in the 1930s. Building on Margaret Cowl’s 1935 assertion that “all women are in an unequal position with men in all countries,” Inman argued that despite their class differences women are subjugated as a group.25 She suggested that male supremacist attitudes emanate from the ruling-class but that they permeated every level of society, right down to the working class where working men became the buffers between women and their real oppressors.26 The solution to women’s problems, she

24Mary Inman mentions the work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman favorably at several points in In Woman’s Defense. According to Barbara Garson’s entry on Gilman in The Encyclopedia of the American Left, although Gilman never joined the Socialist Party her work bridged the views of the nineteenth century woman’s movement and socialist analyses of the “woman question” that were common by the early 1900s. For a thorough discussion of the Socialist view of women’s rights see Mari Jo Buhle, Women and American Socialism, 1870-1920 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983). In a letter to Lorna Hall (Inman papers, box 1) in June of 1973 Inman wrote, “Did the Party influence me? Of course....over and above all, of course, credit should go to Marxist-Leninist theory and practice.”


26Inman, In Woman’s Defense, p. 37.
reasoned, would not be found in the feminist "battle of the sexes," but in the Progressive movement which, as the rightful heir of women's early struggles, could overcome women's "ideological backwardness" by drawing them out of their isolated households and into active struggles for a variety of causes, including women's rights. Inman also recognized the need to change "the backward attitude" of some Progressive organizations and "their reluctance to effectively take up the task of organizing women." Like other Communists who wanted to combat male chauvinist attitudes and behavior in the Party, she compared discrimination against women to discrimination against African-Americans, which was not tolerated in Communist circles.

_In Woman's Defense_ reflected these important elements of the CP's analysis of women's status in the U.S. in the 1930s, but it also contributed several important new insights, doing much to refine the Party's understanding of the woman question in the 1940s. Before the appearance of Inman's work discussions of women's oppression in the Party press rarely, if ever, moved beyond economic explanations of women's problems. Although they recognized that male

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supremacy played some part in keeping women down, Communists cited women’s exclusion from the workforce and their isolation in the home as the fundamental sources of their subordination. Mary Inman added to this view by suggesting that although women’s oppression has economic origins, it is largely perpetuated through cultural norms and practices. She argued convincingly that childrearing methods "manufacture femininity" by training little boys to be "confident and independent" and "little girls to be cautious and dependent," and she showed how much sexism pervades American culture by listing 99 derogatory names for women and challenging her readers to think of more than one or two such names for men. Inman also pointed out the absurdity of admonishing women not to beat their husbands and wrote at length about how the "overemphasis of beauty" is used to keep women in subjection. She devoted three chapters of the book to prostitution, documenting its control by big business and its relationship to the sexual objectification of women and linking it to the double standard and the notion that women require men’s protection. Inman suggested that Progressives needed to fight these manifestations of male supremacy as well as to fight for larger social and economic change. As we shall see in chapters III-VI, by

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30Inman, In Woman’s Defense, pp. 48-52 and p. 25.
31Ibid, pp. 53-56 and 72-75.
1948 these ideas would all become central to Communists' view of women's oppression.

Mary Inman's analysis of the economic nature of housework and motherhood was the second major point of the book. Whereas official CP theory, based on Engels' classic *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, asserted that the confinement and isolation of women in the home led to their oppression, Inman claimed that the widespread denigration of housework and childrearing was key to women's subordination. In an attempt to compensate for these attitudes and to strengthen the Party's existing efforts to recruit housewives in the 1930s, she argued that women--by keeping house and bearing and raising children--actually produced the labor power of present and future generations of workers. In other words, she suggested, women worked not for their families, but for capitalists who paid them through their husbands' wages; they were not parasites, dependent on their husbands for survival, but workers who contributed directly to the process of production and who were entitled to its benefits. Inman did understand that housework was a terrible burden on women and, alongside her discussion of its merits, she detailed the problems that came from performing hours of such work every day in isolated homes by outmoded means. She assured her readers that these problems could be solved under socialism when families would live communally with the
benefits of round-the-clock nurseries, socialized housecleaning systems, and centralized laundry and cooking facilities. But until socialism was achieved, Inman wrote, housewives—like industrial workers—could fight for better wages and working-conditions in specially organized housewives unions that would simultaneously change people’s attitudes about women’s inferiority, educate women about the real sources of their oppression, and give them a decisive role to play in the larger struggle for social change. In other words, it was not necessary to draw women into the workforce so they could fight for justice alongside workers; they were already workers themselves. Inspired by the examples of Communist women who were organizing in their communities to fight, as consumers, for better housing and against high prices, Inman argued that housework could be the source of women’s strength and that housewives could play a central role, as producers, in the fight against capitalism.\textsuperscript{32}

In Woman’s Defense was very popular among Progressives all around the U.S., and it went through three printings in 1940. In a letter to Barbara Giles of the New Masses, a representative of Mercury Printing Company, the printer and distributor of the book, wrote that:

The book has had a good reception here on the West Coast. The Frontier Book Shop in Seattle has sent us an order each week for the past six weeks, and

\textsuperscript{32}Ibid, pp. 136-160 and 166-174.
each week's order was larger than the previous one. They say it promises to be a best seller....The YWCA and other women's organizations have reviewed it and stimulated sales from their members. The other day we received our third order from the Educational Committee of the Steel Workers' Organizing Committee of the C.I.O. at San Francisco. They have been buying the book for their members.33

The Daily Worker reviewed In Woman's Defense favorably in 1940, and Communist Party schools around the country began to use the book as a textbook in their courses on the woman question.34 Enthusiastic readers from around the U.S. wrote to Inman to express their appreciation for the book and to ask further questions. Most correspondents did not mention her arguments about housework, but instead expressed excitement over her explanations of the widespread existence of male chauvinist attitudes and behavior. In 1941, for example, she received a letter from a woman who wanted to know "whether the little courtesies on the part of men, such as opening doors, helping one off street cars and others of that sort amount to sex chauvinism."35 In late 1940 Inman


34Elizabeth Gurley Flynn to Harrison George, 8/5/41, Inman papers, box 3. Inman quotes the favorable Daily Worker review in "Thirteen Years of CPUSA Misleadership on the Woman Question," as saying: "The book is of great value as a source of information and as a basis of extending progressive work among women....It is the first work of this worth in the world available to English readers since Bebel's Woman and Socialism."

35Joan [no last name indicated] to Mary Inman, 2/28/41, Inman papers, box 2.
received a letter from the grandniece of suffragist Susan B. Anthony, Susan B. Anthony II, who confided:

I must tell you that prior to reading [In Woman’s Defense] I had always thought my name and relationship with Susan B. Anthony an unfortunate burden to be ignored rather than cherished. Since your book, however, I am very happy that I have a label that should help in the work for women you have outlined as such a necessity.  

As a consequence of her popularity, Inman also began to teach a course at Workers’ School in Los Angeles entitled "Woman’s Status Under Capitalism and its Relation to the Labor Movement" and to speak and lecture at other Progressive events around Southern California.  

By late 1940 many in the Communist movement regarded Mary Inman, who was by then a CP member, as the leading Progressive expert on the sources of women’s oppression and the struggles necessary to overcome it.  

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36Susan B. Anthony II to Mary Inman, 12/20/40, Inman papers, box 1. Inman and Anthony conducted extensive correspondence after this time, discussing women’s oppression in detail and mulling over plans for a cross-class women’s congress that might begin to work towards solutions for women’s problems. I will discuss their relationship and Inman’s influence on Anthony--which becomes extremely apparent when Susan B. Anthony becomes a central figure in the CP mass organization the Congress of American Women--in greater detail in chapter 3.

37See Workers’ School Materials, Inman papers, box 3 and her speech, "The Attitude of People’s Organizations Toward Women and the Role of Women in People’s Organizations," given before the Spanish Speaking People’s Congress in 1941 in the Inman papers, "speeches" folder, box 3.

38In a letter to Harrison George dated 8/5/41 Elizabeth Gurley Flynn states that Inman had been in the CP for about a year. The letter is in box 3 of Inman’s papers at the Schlesinger Library.
At the same time that many Communists cheered Inman’s efforts to show the pervasiveness of women’s oppression, some Party members criticized her book. No one objected to her suggestion that sex oppression affected all women, criticized her arguments about the cultural causes and effects of women’s subordination, or suggested that organizing women to fight male supremacy would hurt the class-struggle. Rather, the emerging critique of Inman’s work was limited to her assertions about the economic value of housework. "Glorifying" housework, the critics suggested, could have dangerous and reactionary implications; people could use Inman’s argument to justify keeping women in the home and, in that way, impair existing efforts to win them to the Progressive movement. Their difference with Inman was both theoretical and tactical: should Communists work to improve women’s status by accepting the sexual division of labor as a given, promoting housewives as workers, and pushing for better working conditions within their homes? or should they oppose housewifery as part of an oppressive sexual division of labor and encourage women instead to join the workforce so they could fight sex and class oppressions on an equal basis with men? In 1940, as now, there were no clear answers to these questions, and numerous people debated the
implications in the Party press in late 1940 and early 1941. This debate led local Party leaders in the Los Angeles area to examine Mary Inman’s argument about

Articles from the 1940-41 debate included: Ruth McKenney, "Women are Human Beings," and "Women are Human Beings II," New Masses, December 10 and December 17, 1940. Responses to McKenney’s article include: Harrison George, "22,000,000 Housewives Take Notice," New Masses, February 11, 1941, pp. 10-11; Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, "What Price Housework?" and Beatrice Blosser’s letter in the Readers’ Forum, New Masses, March 4, 1941.


In the 1970s and 1980s a this debate has been expressed in arguments over the principle of comparable worth and as a question of whether fuller recognition of women’s culture and women’s work can bring about women’s equality or whether sex equality must be achieved by giving women and men equal opportunities. The literature representing both sides of the question is vast and cannot be listed here. The most well-known expression of this debate comes from the 1985 sex-discrimination case, EEOC v. Sears Roebuck and Co., in which women’s historians Rosalind Rosenberg and Alice Kessler-Harris both testified, one for the prosecution and the other for the defense. The details of the case and its implications for women’s history are spelled out in detail in Ruth Milkman, "Women’s History and the Sears Case," Feminist Studies 12, 2 (Summer, 1986): 375-400 and in "Women’s History Goes to Trial: EEOC v. Sears Roebuck and Company," Signs 11, 4 (Summer, 1986): 751-779.
housework more closely. On the night of Monday March 24, 1941, after teachers at the Workers’ School concluded that the theory was problematic, L.A. Party leaders Eva Shafran and Al Bryan came to Inman’s classroom and explained to her students that, despite what their teacher had told them, housework is not productive labor. Inman argued with Shafran in the classroom and continued to defend her work in the weeks that followed. She attempted to clarify her argument and insisted that she did not want to limit women to domestic work but only to organize those housewives who could not find jobs in industry. At the end of the term each woman was frustrated by the other’s refusal to see her point. Shafran, exasperated by Inman’s unwillingness to concede that there might be problems with her analysis, cancelled Inman’s course permanently.  

Mary Inman was understandably upset by the this turn of events. As much as she was unable to see that the implications of her analysis could have negative consequences for women, so Eva Shafran was also unwavering in her insistence that Inman’s arguments had no merit. Inman defined herself as a writer, theorist and teacher and apparently drew much of her self-esteem and sense of purpose from these activities; Shafran’s influence in California threatened Inman’s status as the foremost Progressive

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thinker on the Woman Question. In order to preserve her prominence and popularity—to preserve her perception of herself as an important Progressive intellectual figure—Inman was willing to go to great lengths. She appealed her case to Party leaders in California. When those efforts failed, Inman and her husband requested a meeting with representatives of the CP’s National Committee. In August 1941 travelled to New York City to meet with Party leaders Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Ella Reeve (Mother) Bloor, Avram Landy, and Johnny Williamson, hoping to win a reversal of the California decision so that Mary could resume her work and protect her good name.

Despite the sympathetic views held by some on the Committee, the Inmans’ meeting with representatives of the CP’s national leadership did not go well. Inman was defensive from the start and refused to answer many of the questions Party leaders asked in order to understand what had taken place over the preceding months. Mother Bloor wrote to a friend afterwards that she "had a clean understanding heart" in the early phase of the meetings but that "Mary Inman became intensely personal to any one of us who offered any disagreement in theory," and that "she left us with the feeling that she considered us enemies."\(^{41}\) Flynn reported that although she initially "felt

\(^{41}\)Typewritten copy of letter from Ella Reeve Bloor to Effie M, 8/4/41, Inman papers, box 5.
considerable sympathy with Mary and thought she had been dealt with rather severely," after more than two days of Inman’s "determined argumentation," sectarian name-calling, and personal attacks she decided that Inman could not be satisfied with anything less than total vindication and "that the Party in California--State, County, and at the Workers’ School in Los Angeles--acted correctly and did the only thing that could be done in relation to her." 42 Her "one track minded-ness [sic]; her lack of a sense of proportion and her fanatical assumption of a messianic role," Flynn said, made it impossible for the National Committee to compromise with her. 43 After more than three days of meetings they arrived at an impasse: Landy, Bloor and Flynn were "convinced by [the Inmans’] attitude that further discussion would be futile." 44 According to Flynn, "[Mary and Frank] went back to California convinced that everyone here is wrong." 45

In the wake of the August meetings, Party leaders decided that because of its implications, Inman’s theory about housework should not be represented as the CP’s position. On the basis of Inman’s behavior in the meetings, 

42Typewritten copy of letter from Elizabeth Gurley Flynn to Harrison George, 8/5/41, Inman papers, box 3.

43Ibid.

44Ibid.

45Ibid.
Bloor and Flynn both worried that she would try to create a faction around the housework issue and, because of her popularity, present a real danger to Party unity. In a letter dated August 4, 1941, Bloor asked a friend to "show Mary Inman that we are sincere honest comrades and really tried to get at the 'common denominator' of the proposals and not to have her go home bitter and resentful." Flynn wrote at length to Harrison George, Editor of the People's Daily World and promoter of Inman's work, describing her perception of the situation and asking him to help teach Inman how to be "useful and happy in our Party," to "do [his] best to stop the prologation of this controversy" and to explain to Inman that "she isn't discredited as she believes, but she will be by her actions." But Inman could not be consoled. When she continued to press her point in communications with Communists around the country, the National Committee asked Avram Landy to write an article for the CP's theoretical journal, The Communist, outlining the Marxist-Leninist line on housework in order to make the Party's position clear and visible. If Mary Inman was not willing to accept Landy's interpretations, the National Committee instructed, she would have to refrain from public

46 Typewritten copy of letter from Ella Reeve Bloor to Effie M., 8/4/41, Inman papers, box 5.

47 Flynn to George, 8/5/41, Inman papers, box 3.
activity on the woman question for one year. Landy’s article appeared in September 1941; it did not refer to Inman or her book by name, but outlined her analysis and proposed alternately that since housework was useful but not productive, women should be organized as workers and in trade union auxiliaries, not in housewives’ unions. In October 1941 Inman wrote to Susan B. Anthony II that "[t]hings had reached such an impossible situation that life was unbearable under existing conditions" and that "reluctantly and painfully" she had decided to resign from the Communist Party.

In the 1980s and 1990s, historians’ rendering of Mary Inman’s conflict with the Communist Party has differed significantly from the one outlined above. In their version, based on Inman’s written and oral accounts of her experiences dating from 1942 and later, the Party attacked Inman for analyzing the issue of women’s oppression from a Marxist perspective, banned her works, and expelled her in

48 Mary Inman to Susan B. Anthony II, 10/26/41, Inman papers, box 1.


50 Mary Inman to Susan B. Anthony II, 10/26/41, Inman papers, box 1.

51 See especially Ware in "Women on the Left: The Communist Party and its Allies"; Sherna Gluck’s entry on Inman in Buhle, Buhle and Georgakas, Encyclopedia of the American Left; Baxandall’s "The Question Seldom Asked."
1942. The male leaders of the Communist Party, they suggest, were unwilling to debate the woman question openly and freely because they thought it would be heretical for women to organize separately around their unique oppression. Even discussing women's special oppression, these works suggest, "proved too threatening for the Party to handle. Women would have to wait until 1956 to debate the issues of female liberation." This interpretation does not mesh with the one suggested by sources from the other side of the conflict. What accounts for the discrepancy? One could argue that Communist leaders had an interest in placing the blame for the intensity of the conflict, and the impossibility of compromise, on Mary Inman herself; that they wanted to protect themselves and their Party and that they could only do so by discrediting her as

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52 See works listed above. Gluck and Baxandall say that Inman was expelled; Ware writes that Inman was forced to leave the Party, rather than that she was expelled. During her life Inman was actually infuriated at any suggestion that she had been purged from the Party. In 1944 she wrote letters to the Daily Worker and to the Party's National Chairman, Earl Browder, asking that they "publish in the Daily Worker a retraction of the harmful and untrue statement that [she] had been expelled from the Communist Party." She explained further, "Never at any time was I expelled from the CP....That] false statement is derogatory of my character and injurious to my work and should be corrected both in the interest of my work and that of your paper...." (Reprint of letter from Inman to Browder and Daily Worker in "Facts for Women, v. 2, numbers 8, 9, 10 (August, September, October 1944) p. 4 found in Inman papers, box 3).


obsessed, fanatical and personally difficult. In fact it was the combination of her extreme single-mindedness, belligerence and tenacity that finally provoked Communists to attack Inman and her theory explicitly in 1943 and that led Inman to produce the volume of documents that made her an obvious source for historians working in the 1970s and 1980s. Inman’s post-controversy writings provide much evidence to support Communist leaders’ assessments of her as bitter and angry and even as obsessed and fanatical.

Historians’ dependence on the documents Inman produced after 1940, and their uncritical acceptance of her appraisal of Communists’ work on women after WWII, led them to write a history of women in the Communist Party in the 1940s and 1950s that mythologizes the views of one hostile person and erases the experiences of many who built on Inman’s analysis and continued to fight against male supremacy inside and outside the Party.

Mary Inman’s departure from the Communist Party in the fall of 1941 did not signal the end of her conflict with its national leaders. No longer subject to Party discipline, Inman criticized the leadership more severely as a reluctant former-Communist than she ever had as a Party member. After her resignation from the CP, Mary Inman’s goal was not primarily to organize women but to win the recognition she thought she deserved from Communist leaders for her theory
about the productive nature of housework. In August 1942 she published Woman Power which accused the Communist Party and Landy (to whom she referred as "Professor X") of attacking housewives by denying the importance of their work by organizing them as consumers rather than as producers.\textsuperscript{55} When Party leaders responded by publishing Landy's pamphlet, "Marxism and the Woman Question," and reviewing it prominently in the Daily Worker in July 1943, they abandoned the restraint they had exercised up to that point.\textsuperscript{56} Since late 1941 the Party had actively supported a U.S. victory in WWII and by this time Party leaders, like mainstream politicians, were actively encouraging women to leave their homes and to enter the wartime labor force. In part because of their greater emphasis on women's place in the workforce and in part because leading Communists were completely fed up with Inman's attacks on the Party, Landy challenged Inman much more directly.\textsuperscript{57} The pamphlet and the review reiterated the Party's views on the backwardness of

\textsuperscript{55}Mary Inman, Woman Power (Los Angeles: The Committee for the Advancement of Women, 1942).

\textsuperscript{56}Avram Landy, Marxism and the Woman Question (New York: Workers Library, 1943).

housework and denigrated Inman's theory explicitly, calling it "false and deceptive," and "a weird distortion of economics and biology." But their efforts to end the conflict once and for all only served to make Inman more determined. She published a four-page newsletter, Facts for Women, ostensibly for the purpose of educating and organizing women, from 1943 until 1946. In reality, however, the newsletter carried articles with titles such as "Marxism on Woman Question Outlawed in California in 1941" and publicized her "Program for Women," her "alternative" to the Communist Party's nearly identical list of demands.59

58Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, "A Keen Analysis of Women's Role in Our Changing World," Daily Worker 7/30/43. Party leaders' confusion about what to do in response to Woman Power is evident in Ella Reeve Bloor's correspondence with California Party leader Anita Whitney when she writes: "I found Elizabeth very indignant about the book by Mary Inman....Her new book contains a bitter attack on Landy, calling him Professor X. Perhaps it would be well to have a notice in the People's World that she is not a member of the Party. Of course this is not official and I do not know whether it would be wise or not. You will use your own judgement about it. The book is really worse than the other one. I think notices will be sent to every book store asking them not to handle this book. Certainly not as one of our publications." This letter comes from the Ella Reeve Bloor papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA, box 13, folder 146. Documents from this collection will hereafter be cited as Bloor papers, box number, folder number.

59Inman's "Program for Women" can be found in Facts for Women volume 4, #s 4-5 (April-May, 1946) pp. 1-4. The program is proposed as an alternative to the Communist program, but there are very few differences between the two. Inman, like the CP, calls for day and night nurseries for small children, full maternity and infant care, a national women's congress, equal rights legislation compatible with protective laws for women workers, and defeat of the cultural manifestations of male supremacy. In addition
After ceasing publication of Facts in 1946, Inman turned her attention entirely away from organizing women and instead devoted her time to writing documents and letters that condemned the Communist Party for its "anti Marxist-Leninist" distortion of the woman question and presented her theory as the one true basis for Marxist women's work.

Inman made her most scathing attacks on the Communist Party and its leaders between 1949, when she produced "Thirteen Years of CPUSA Misleadership on the Woman Question," and 1972, when she sent a 66-page typewritten letter detailing "Browderism on the Woman Question Today" to CP National Chairman Gus Hall and three progressive magazine editors. In these manuscripts Inman claimed that she documented how World-War-II-era CP Chairman Earl Browder "wrecked the woman question" and demonstrated the Party's failure to "correct these liquidatory practices affecting women as was done in the case of other issues and groups"

Inman also calls for housewives' unions to improve women's working conditions in their homes. "Marxism on Woman Question Outlawed in California in 1941," appears in Facts for Women, volume 3, #s 8-12 (August-December, 1945), p. 3.

Mary Inman to Morris Rubin, Editor of The Progressive, Carey McWilliams, Editor of The Nation, and Gilbert Hanson, Editor of The New Republic, and Gus Hall, National Chair, CPUSA, 2/17/72 in the Dorothy Healey Collection, California State University-Long Beach Library, Special Collections Department, Long Beach, CA, box 125, folder 147. Documents from this collection will hereafter be cited as Healey collection, box number, folder number.
after the change in leadership in 1945.\textsuperscript{61} There was a grain of truth to Inman’s appraisal of Browder—he did dismantle the Party’s National Women’s Commission in 1940 in an attempt to integrate women’s work and general Party work—but Communists also maintained at least a partial commitment to women’s issues all through the war and initiated a new phase of serious work on the woman question after Browder was unseated in 1945. Inman’s emphasis on the notion that Communist leaders continued to carry out their liquidation of Communist work among women after 1945, despite reams of evidence to the contrary, shows how far she was willing to go to prove her point. Her insistence that this "liquidation" was carried out "in a secret and semi-secret manner" verges on conspiracy theory, and her assertions that the Party’s work on women’s issues was really intended to create conflict between men and women Communists makes little sense.\textsuperscript{62} In Inman’s mind, the Party’s liquidation of women’s work explained why CP leaders rejected her theory in 1940; their secret perpetuation of that liquidation and purposeful distortion of the woman question after 1945 explained why she was not invited back into the Party to lead its work in the area. Because Mary Inman believed that her theory was the only true basis for effective work on

\textsuperscript{61}Inman, "Thirteen Years of CPUSA Misleadership on the Woman Question," 1949.

\textsuperscript{62}Ibid.
women's issues, she had to insist that until the CP adopted her idea it was forsaking women's work completely.

In order to "prove" her analysis Inman resorted to blatant distortions of the truth and personal attacks on Party leaders. She argued, for example, that Landy's 1941 article "branded such work [as] raising children....as socially unnecessary," and purposely "killed the nursery movement," even though, in reality, Communists and others associated with the Progressive movement practically led the fight for daycare centers in major cities throughout WWII and for several years afterwards.63 When Party Chairman William Z. Foster called for a "persistent struggle ideologically against all manifestations of masculine superiority" and an effort to overcome "a pronounced reticence in dealing with questions of sex" in 1948, Inman could not concede that Communist leaders were doing something right, even though these suggestions resembled those she had made in her book eight years earlier.64 Instead she was forced into a strange sort of double-think that attributed positive-sounding plans to deceptive

63Ibid, p. 11. The Daily Worker during World War II and until about 1948 is filled with stories about Communists' efforts to win state-funded daycare centers for children with working mothers and, after a few centers were established during the war, to keep those centers open in major cities after the war.

ulterior motives. In this case Inman reasoned that Foster was a "double-dealing hypocrite" who directed Party members "into the blind alley of bourgeois feminism" and consciously presented a "diversion [that] detracts from more important and more pressing phases of work amongst women," such as organizing housewives.65 Her analysis verged even further on the bizarre when she went on to suggest that the Communist Party's neglect of women's issues began when organizations set up by Herbert Hoover in the 1920s influenced N.I. Bukharin in the 1930s who later influenced Browder and Landy and others.

By 1972, when Inman wrote her lengthy letter to Gus Hall and the editors of The Nation, The Progressive, and The New Republic, the Communist Party was no longer a significant force on the American political landscape, and its role as the primary left-wing proponent of radical change in the U.S. had been assumed by the broad-based civil rights, anti-war and student movements that began in the 1960s. Women's status in the U.S. had also changed dramatically by this time as millions of women joined the paid labor force and participated in the resurgent women's movement. But despite these new opportunities for radical and feminist activism, Inman remained interested only in calling attention to the "Browder revisionism" of the 1940s

65 Inman, "Thirteen Years of CPUSA Misleadership..." pp. 25 and 34.
and 1950s.\textsuperscript{66} In 1973 she was still focused on the past. Although she was certainly aware of the women’s movement, she was unable or unwilling to shift her attention to the new political context. Even though American women were actively advocating equal pay, free daycare, and non-sexist child-rearing practices, Inman continued to spend her time lobbying the Communist Party to renounce Landy’s "shoddy writing," to reverse its position on domestic work as productive labor, and to take up her program for organizing women instead.\textsuperscript{67}

Mary Inman was by no means the only Progressive in the 1930s and 1940s calling for more attention to women’s issues in and around the Communist Party, and although her early work broadened Communists’ understanding of women’s oppression, it appears that her later work served only to isolate her from left Progressives and post-WWII feminists alike. When Communist women, motivated in part by ideas presented in \textit{In Woman’s Defense}, resumed their struggles to fight for women’s liberation in the newly formed Congress of American Women and in the Communist Party in 1946, they did so without Inman. Her narrow focus after 1941 on the issue of housework as productive labor prevented Inman from seeing how Communists had adopted many of her other ideas and

\textsuperscript{66}Inman to Rubin, McWilliams, Harrison, Hall, 2/17/72, Healey collection, box 125, folder 147.

\textsuperscript{67}Mary Inman, "Maternity as a Social Function," \textit{Political Affairs} 52, 1 (January 1973) pp. 56-60.
required her to deny that anyone in the Communist movement was doing useful and constructive work on women's issues. Her essays that "document" the absence of Communist work among women bear little relation to reality. They were written not by a pioneering feminist trying to continue her work in isolation after her expulsion from the Communist Party, but by a hostile and resentful woman, desperate to regain the prominence she believed she was denied by a Communist plot against women. As sources about what really happened to women who fought against sexism in the Communist Party they are of very little value.

By the time historians corresponded with and interviewed Inman in the late 1970s and 1980s, her anger, isolation, and longstanding belief that she was the victim of a conspiracy against women had taken a toll on her stability. She was not only still consumed by the desire to win the recognition she thought she deserved, but she was troubled by fears of harassment and even persecution. She continued to write letters to various people, including officials in the Soviet Union, trying to win support for her theory. 68 She read a variety of documents from the women's movement, carefully underlining and checking the parts that

68See Inman's correspondence files in boxes 1 and 2. In her autobiographical notes (Inman papers, box 1) Inman lists her greatest achievement as: "When the Supreme Soviet of the USSR wrote into their 'Fundamentals' (comparable to our Constitution, 'We accord the work of the wife in the home as of equal value to that of the husband at his workplace,' theory which I developed."
corresponded to her theory and indicating "not true" and "no" where they disagreed. Following her usual pattern she suggested that because most feminists were not proceeding according to her prescriptions for organizing women, they were not proceeding correctly. Inman kept a file of "notes on homosexuals" to "document" the CIA's recruitment of lesbians whom it could use to "discredit and weaken" the women's movement as it gained influence. She also kept a file of notes documenting her neighbors alleged efforts to persecute her by making strange phonecalls, throwing garbage in her yard, and spraying "odorless poisons" into her garage. It is no wonder that Inman was reluctant to grant interviews and that she would not allow Sherna Gluck to tape-record their conversations. Given her state of mind it seems clear that Inman's account of her associations with the Communist Party was neither a reliable

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69See, for example, her marked up copy of the conference summary from the Women's Liberation Conference held in Chicago in November of 1968, Inman papers, box 3; copies of Delores Hayden, "Redesigning the Domestic Workplace," Chrysalis, 1, 1 pp. 19-29; Ira Gerstein, "Domestic Work and Capitalism," Radical America 7, 4-5 (Fall, 1973) 101-128; Ellen Malos, "Housework and the Politics of Women's Liberation," Socialist Review (1978) 41-71, all in box 5.


71See Inman's file "notes on homosexuals" in box 5; Mary Inman to Lorna Hall, 6/1/73, box 1; Mary Inman to Carl Bloice, n.d., box 5.

72Inman papers, box 1.
indicator of the way the organization dealt with women's issues nor a credible source of information about her own significance. Her determination to discredit Communist leaders and promote her theory not only clouded her interpretation of the past but made her more rigid and dogmatic than the Communist Party itself. Despite these problems, Inman got some of the recognition she had worked for when historians wrote about her ordeal and, following her lead, condemned the CP for quashing debate on the woman question. Because she was prolific and completely unwilling to concede defeat, her 40-year obsession became the myth upon which the history of women in the Communist Party was written.

Mary Inman's story--her report about how she was driven from the Communist Party in 1941 and her analysis of the Party's abandonment of women's issues in the succeeding decades--has served as compelling evidence for historians who have inquired about women's experiences in the Old Left. But the way her story has been used by historians illustrate the potential problems presented when oral histories and autobiographical documents are used as primary sources. It is a good example of the pitfalls that can come with generalizing from one person's experiences to write the history of an entire group or subject. Inman's story also shows the power that one person's interpretations can
command once they have been written down and published. Without context and evidence from opposing perspectives, historians accepted Inman’s illusions and rationalizations, along with her grains of truth, as facts. Once these "facts" were established they were cited and passed from one publication to the next and Inman’s myth quickly became history. By 1990, it seemed, the verdict was in: organizing and discussion around the issue of women’s oppression was incompatible with class struggle, and women who displayed gender consciousness before 1956, if they were noticed at all, were treated with disdain by the Communist Party.

Mary Inman is a significant figure for the history of the CP’s work on women’s issues, but not because her story actually supports historians’ conclusions about Communists’ failure to address gender oppression before and after World War II. Rather, Inman is important because her post-1942 work, despite its inaccuracies and distortions, convinced many that the Communist Party had little concern about women’s oppression and little interest women’s liberation. It is most ironic that by denouncing Communists’ efforts to combat male supremacy and denying their significance for the later women’s movement, Inman also effectively obscured her contributions to the CP’s program for women’s liberation and concealed her own significance for the history of feminism. Her book, In Woman’s Defense, informed many Progressives’ views on the woman question. By 1945 numerous Communist
women adopted Inman’s assertions about the pervasiveness of women’s oppression and the cultural manifestations of male supremacy and began to implement her ideas for a cross-class women’s congress devoted to women’s issues. Created in 1946, the Congress of American Women subsequently raised the consciousnesses of hundreds of Old Left women who, in turn, demanded that the CP address their concerns about male supremacy inside and outside the Party. It is to the story of the Congress of American Women that we now turn.
CHAPTER III
THE CONGRESS OF AMERICAN WOMEN:
CATALYST FOR WOMEN'S LIBERATION

1945 was a watershed year for the U.S. women's movement. For most organizations and individuals concerned with women's rights or women's emancipation, the years immediately following WWII were marked by disappointment, dashed hopes, and retreat. Although the war appeared to be a harbinger of greater freedom and opportunity for women, the conservatism of the post-war years put mainstream women's organizations on the defensive.¹ By 1946 the media's attacks on feminism created a hostile atmosphere for

¹On the anti-feminism of the period 1945-1963 see: Marty Jezar, The Dark Ages: Life in the United States, 1945-1960 (Boston: South End Press, 1982); Eugenia Kaledin, American Women in the 1950s: Mothers and More (Boston: Twayne, 1984); and Elaine Tyler May, Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era (New York: Basic Books, 1988). In her article "Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958," Journal of American History v. 79 (March, 1993): 1455-1482, Joanne Meyerowitz challenges the dominance of such anti-feminist, domestic ideology in post-war mass culture. In her book Not June Cleaver (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994) Meyerowitz shows that many other groups on the margins of mainstream society and culture in the U.S., like Communist women, were also ignoring or resisting the re-emergence of domesticity in the 1950s. Despite these examples, however, it seems clear that domestic ideology was a powerful cultural force that had a great deal of impact on many women in the 1950s.
women's activism, and even relatively conservative feminist groups such as the National Woman's Party retreated to the margins of American politics.\textsuperscript{2}

Although the antifeminism of the post-WWII period was both intense and widespread, it did not impede every segment of the American women's movement to the same degree. Mainstream feminists lost ground after 1945, but women activists who were used to defining themselves in opposition to dominant political and cultural ideologies continued to see the post-war period as an opportunity for new beginnings.\textsuperscript{3} Inspired by women's mass participation in the war effort internationally and still undaunted by increasing anti-communism and anti-feminism at home, American Communists hoped to resume and improve upon the women's work they had abandoned at the start of the war. With Party leaders' approval, Communist and other progressive women


worked to create a new cross-class, multi-ethnic and racially-integrated women’s organization that they hoped would revive the struggles of the 19th century woman movement and attract women radicalized by their wartime experiences into the larger progressive movement.

The Congress of American Women (CAW), launched in 1946, lasted only four years.\(^4\) Throughout its short life the organization’s membership remained small and, despite efforts to expand, limited no more than 20 cities. But although the CAW never became the mass organization its founders envisioned, the group’s failure to achieve its original objectives does not preclude its significance for the history of the U.S. women’s movement. Between 1946 and 1950 CAW leaders were able to build on the CP’s discussions of women from the 1930s and, using insights from Mary Inman’s work, to develop a sophisticated analysis of women’s oppression that recognized both the importance of women’s race and class differences and the need for women to unite

\(^4\)The sources on the Congress of American Women are, unfortunately, both sparse and scattered. The largest collection of CAW papers is housed at the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College as part of the Women’s International Democratic Federation papers in the Communism collection. These papers will be cited hereafter as WIDF papers. This chapter relies primarily on documents in that collection, on documents housed in the Mary Van Kleeck papers in the Sophia Smith Collection, and on the Report on the Congress of American Women prepared by the U.S. Congress’s House Committee on Un-American Activities and released in October of 1949. The chapter also makes use of documents in the Mary Inman papers at the Schlesinger Library and photocopies of CAW documents from the personal collection of historian Katherine Campbell in Acton, MA.
on the basis of gender to fight for their own emancipation. Armed with this broad understanding of the factors that limited women in American society, CAW activists also created a program for women’s liberation that valued women’s roles as housewives and mothers, criticized the social and cultural structures that excluded them from work and politics, and insisted that women could be different from but still equal to men.

By the time the CAW disbanded in 1950 the organization had not only "resurrected from the dead an earlier movement and [taken] it forward to something that was very current," but had raised the consciousnesses of hundreds of Communist women who subsequently used their newfound knowledge and confidence to demand that the Party take their problems and its own male supremacy more seriously.⁵ Although the Communist Party never intended it to do so, the Congress of American Women moved the Party’s program for women’s liberation far beyond the one it endorsed in the 1930s. Ultimately, the CAW defined the terms for Communists’ discussions about women’s issues over the next decade and, by making women’s liberation a more legitimate focus for Communist women’s activism, mobilized the activities that would sustain the radical segment of the U.S. women’s movement during the hostile years from 1945 to 1960.

⁵Interview with Harriet Magil, 12 January 1993, New York City.
For women active in the Communist movement, the World War II years, like the 1930s, were simultaneously progressive and regressive. As the wartime mobilization of men into the armed forces created labor shortages in traditionally male-dominated industries, progressive women accompanied their more mainstream counterparts into the industrial workforce. 6 Similarly, Communists and other progressive women also moved into the leadership of many Left organizations, including state and local Communist Party clubs, as thousands of their male comrades left to join the war effort overseas. 7 At the same time that women gained more influence in the CP leadership, however, national Communist Party leaders instructed their supporters to work within the mainstream political system to assist the U.S. in its fight against fascism. This strong belief in

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the need for a united American front led the Party as a whole to abandon temporarily many of its radical demands and to support such wartime policies as the no-strike pledge for American labor. In 1944 CP National Chairman Earl Browder decided that an oppositional political party was no longer necessary, dissolved the Communist Party U.S.A., and replaced it with the explicitly reformist Communist Political Association. Although Communists maintained a theoretical commitment to gender equality in this period, women leaders emphasized the issues of women’s oppression and women’s liberation far less between 1940 and 1945 than

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9 Following the example of the Soviet Union, which dissolved the Comintern in 1943, Browder dissolved the CP and created the Communist Political Association in 1944 with the hope that the newly structured organization could work within the two-party system and ally with mainstream liberals and the labor movement to support Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal policies and his friendly relationship with Joseph Stalin. At least a few Communists disagreed with Browder’s strategy, but after William Z. Foster was disciplined by the former head of the Comintern for his criticism of the new structure, most kept quiet. When French Communist Jacques Duclos denounced Browder’s liquidation of the American CP in a French Communist journal in April of 1945 Browder’s opponents took it as a sign from Moscow and began to orchestrate Browder’s downfall. In June of 1945 the CPA national committee revoked executive power from Browder and transferred it to a group headed by Foster. In July the delegates at an emergency national convention dissolved the CPA, reconstituted the Communist Party USA, and made Foster the new Chairman. For a more thorough discussion of this period of CP history see Joseph Starobin, American Communism in Crisis, 1943-1957 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972); Isserman, Which Side Were You On; and Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes, The American Communist Movement: Storming Heaven Itself (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992).
they had during the 1930s.\textsuperscript{9} Even those Communist women who had been most dedicated to women's issues in the 1930s put their efforts on hold. Instead of working to broaden women's roles in the progressive movement and in society at large, Communist women focused on fighting fascism by organizing neighborhood scrap-metal drives, volunteering for the Red Cross, working in munitions plants, and demanding federally-funded nurseries for children of working mothers.\textsuperscript{10}

In late 1945, following the Allied powers' victory in Europe and Asia, the context for Communist and progressive activism began to shift dramatically once again. In the immediate postwar period national liberation struggles erupted in Africa and Asia, Communists and other leftists gained political influence all over Europe, American workers sparked an unprecedented strike-wave, and U.S. president Harry Truman proposed a program of reforms that included

\textsuperscript{9}Evidence for Communists continuing commitment to women's equality can be found in such publications as Elizabeth Gurley Flynn's \textit{Women in the War} (New York: Workers' Library Publishers, 1942), Flynn's \textit{Daughters of America: Ella Reeve Bloor and Anita Whitney} (New York: International Publishers, 1942), and in scores of articles published on the subject in the \textit{Daily Worker} between 1941 and 1945.

national health insurance and civil rights for African-Americans. In February of 1946 the Communist National Committee unseated Earl Browder and reconstituted both the American Communist Party and its National Women's Commission. The potential for real radical change in the U.S. and internationally seemed great. Inspired by these developments, and by the granting of women's suffrage in countries such as Italy, France, Hungary and Greece in 1945, many women inside and outside the American Communist Party believed that the time had come for them to push for solutions to their own special problems.\textsuperscript{11} Citing women's vital contributions to the Allied victory and mothers' particular interest in maintaining world peace, progressive women began organizing to take advantage of the widespread political upheaval and to resume the gender-based struggles they had set aside in 1940.

\textsuperscript{11}This shift toward encouraging women to resume their struggles for equality is first evident in 1944 with the publication of Elizabeth Gurley Flynn's pamphlet, \textit{Women Have a Date with Destiny} (New York: Workers' Library) which was intended to encourage women to push a "women's program" in the elections of that year. The CP also prepared to convince Communist men to think about women's rights in the postwar period. In a mimeographed document entitled "Do You Want Your Wife to Work After the War," dated 1945 (in the Dorothy Healey Collection, Special Collections, California State University-Long Beach Library, box 125) an unidentified Communist author informed men that "From the beginning, women have worked," that women work in order to "....satisfy the natural, human desire to 'be somebody in the world,'" and that "....women are equal to men in intelligence....and they are not only made for having babies."
The Congress of American Women held its founding convention on International Women's Day, March 8th, 1946.\textsuperscript{12} After months of preparations, the CAW's founders established the group as the official American branch of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), an international Communist women's organization founded by French Communists and Resistance leaders Eugenie Cotton and Marie-Claude Vaillant-Couturier in Paris in November 1945.\textsuperscript{13} Following the lead of their European counterparts the American women organized their group around three major concerns: international peace, child welfare, and the status of women. They created three corresponding national committees, the Commission for Action on Peace and Democracy, the Commission on Child Care and Education, and the Commission on the Status of Women, each one responsible for planning and coordinating activities related to its own area of concern.\textsuperscript{14} In addition to these three committees the original members of the CAW also appointed a slate of


\textsuperscript{14}"Women of America Organize Own PAC," New York Times 5/26/46.
officers to oversee the organization's national activities as a whole. In 1946 the group's national leadership consisted of long-time progressives Dr. Gene Weltfish, an anthropologist on the faculty at Columbia University; Muriel Draper of the Committee for American-Soviet Friendship; Mary Van Kleeck of the Russell Sage Foundation; journalist Susan B. Anthony II; and a number of well-known Communists including CP National Committee member Elizabeth Gurley Flynn.\textsuperscript{15}

Communist leaders hoped to profit from women's activism after WWII and because of the CAW's ties to the international Communist movement, its cross-class and multi-ethnic orientation, and its emphasis on peace and child-welfare, the American CP not only endorsed the fledgling women's organization, but gave it substantial support in the months that followed.\textsuperscript{16} Especially during the organization's first two years, Communist Party publications including the \textit{Worker}, the \textit{Daily Worker}, and \textit{New Masses} devoted many column-inches to articles that discussed and publicized the CAW's goals, analyses, and activities.

\textsuperscript{15}“What is the Congress of American Women,” informational pamphlet from 1946 in WIDF papers, box 2, folder 20a.

\textsuperscript{16}Gerald Zahavi, in his unpublished paper entitled, "Passionate Commitments: Race, Sex, and Communism at Schenectady General Electric, 1932-1954," has argued that the Communist Party U.S.A. turned to women's and African-Americans' issues in the post-WWII period in part because workers and the labor movement were, after 1945, becoming increasingly conservative.
Between 1940 and 1945 women’s issues had taken a backseat to the war effort and the problems of post-war recovery and many did not take them seriously, but when the CAW’s discussions of women’s problems began to appear in the Communist press in 1946 they made quite a splash.\textsuperscript{17} Even some Communists who might have dismissed such ideas as inimical to the class struggle between 1930 and 1945 accepted them in 1946 and 1947 as part of an important new analysis of the vastly changed post-war world.\textsuperscript{18} The publication of the CAW’s ideas sparked a new awareness of women’s problems among Communists but neither the organization’s analysis of women’s oppression nor its strategies for women’s liberation were entirely new. The ideas that formed the basis for the CAW’s program to liberate women originated in the late 1930s and, ironically, many of them came from Mary Inman’s work.

In 1945-1946 Mary Inman’s fight with the Communist Party was already five years old. Although she was aware of


\textsuperscript{18}The Communist press and the letters that rank-and-file Communists wrote to the \textit{Worker} and \textit{Daily Worker} in 1946 and 1947 show much more popular support for women’s issues than was visible in the 1930s and during the war years. I discuss this issue at much greater length in chapter IV.
progressive women's attempt to revive the U.S. women's movement with the CAW she was extremely critical of their efforts precisely because the Communist Party supported them. Despite all evidence to the contrary, Inman insisted that as far as Communist women were concerned, "Browder revisionism" remained the order of the day.19 Furthermore, Inman could not acknowledge that the progressive women's movement was proceeding without her. She attended the first two meetings of the CAW in Los Angeles in 1946, but when she found out that the group's structure and leadership were already in place, she dismissed it as an organization controlled by "a machine" that publicized meetings only among a "small, select list, carefully screened to eliminate anyone critical of the leadership." Using the strange and contradictory logic that characterized much of her later work Inman concluded that the Communist Party decided to promote the CAW in 1946 in order to appear as if it were organizing masses of women, but that because it had been "liquidating" women's work since 1940, the Party also

19Inman describes her impressions of the newly formed CAW in a letter to Harrison George written on 1/20/47 in the Inman papers, box 1. According to that letter Inman attended the first meeting of the CAW in Los Angeles on December 2, 1946 but refused to join and "merely paid [the] ten dollar registration fee required of all attending." Inman details her criticisms of the "Browder revisionism" evident in the CAW in her "Thirteen Years of CPUSA Misleadership on the Woman Question" pp. 7-8.
repressed the organization and kept it secret from the very women to whom it was supposed to appeal.\textsuperscript{20}

Inman refused to recognize it, but she actually played a crucial role in inspiring the Congress of American Women and developing the major points of its program. Her book, \textit{In Woman's Defense}, suggested that women's emancipation could come only after mainstream middle- and working-class women joined with progressives to fight for it.\textsuperscript{21} Between December of 1940 and February of 1942 she corresponded extensively with Susan B. Anthony II and together the two women expanded and developed her ideas for a cross-class women's congress through which progressives could lead the fight against women's exploitation.\textsuperscript{22} When Anthony joined Mary Van Kleeck to organize the CAW in 1945 she implemented many of the ideas that she and Inman developed together four years earlier; as the driving force behind the organization's Commission on the Status of Women in 1946 she presented Inman's analysis of women's status as her own.

Mary Inman and the Communist Party were arch enemies after

\textsuperscript{20}See Inman's letter to Harrison George dated 1/20/47, Inman papers, box 1; and "Thirteen Years of CPUSA Misleadership on the Woman Question," pp. 6-11, Inman papers, box 3.

\textsuperscript{21}\textit{In Woman's Defense}, pp. 166-74.

\textsuperscript{22}The correspondence that took place between Mary Inman and Susan B. Anthony II--including both letters from Anthony to Inman and copies of the letters from Inman to Anthony from the period December 1940 to February 1942--are housed in the Inman papers, box 1.
1941, but through Susan B. Anthony II, Inman's ideas became the cornerstone for the CAW's work, indirectly transformed Communists' analysis of women's position in capitalist society, and sparked a new phase of women's struggles to free themselves from the bonds of oppression inside and outside the Communist movement.

Susan B. Anthony II became active in the progressive movement when she was in her early twenties, but before she read *In Woman's Defense* at the age 24 she was not involved in any activities that were devoted exclusively to women or women's equality.23 Although dedicated to a number of other causes before 1940, Anthony did not realize that her problems balancing personal and political activities also troubled most women who shared her political commitments.24

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23 According to the article "Another Susan B. Anthony Now Speaks Her Mind" *New York Times* 9/21/71, p. 32, Susan B. Anthony II was born in 1916. She became active in Progressive circles sometime during the 1930s.

24 Anthony was active in a variety of Progressive organizations with close ties to the CP including the Committee for a Democratic Far Eastern Policy, the Voice of Freedom Committee, and the American Peace Mobilization as well as the Congress of American Women. The full nature of Anthony's relationship with the Communist Party is somewhat unclear. Her husband at the time, Clifford McAvoy, was an open Communist but she never publicly identified as a member of the Party. If she were an official member of the Party she probably would have kept it quiet in order to protect her reputation as a journalist who wrote for mainstream publications such as the *Saturday Evening Post*. In the bizarre manner typical ofHUAC, its *Report on the Congress of American Women* states that the Committee was in possession of four affidavits that "show[ed] that in 1937 and 1938 Susan B. Anthony decorated the walls of her apartment at 1742 P Street NW, Washington, D.C. with hammers and sickles," (p. 102) as evidence to prove her close ties
Only after reading Mary Inman's work did she begin to understand the impact of male supremacy. She readily accepted Inman's ideas about the economic origins of women's oppression and its cultural and psychological manifestations in the 20th century United States. Soon after reading *In Woman's Defense* she wrote to Inman about how the book changed her life:

> Your book came at an auspicious time. I had been married only a few months and was getting restive under the role that even my very progressive husband expected of women—that of the docile servant of detail, whose main thoughts should be concentrated on buying a new chair cover and fascinating menus....[Y]our book crystallized the vague ideas that had been wandering around in my brain....[It] has made clear to me the necessity of working for the economic and political and moral emancipation of women.  

Anthony's new awareness made her see that "[e]ven most of the progressives are partially blind on the subject [of women's oppression]." In order to remedy this problem Anthony informed Inman that, from then on, she intended to "devote most of [her] time and effort to the woman movement." Anxious to expand her knowledge Anthony wrote, "I thought that I should have the benefit of your further thinking on this so that we might start action on

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25 Anthony to Inman, 12/20/40, Inman papers, box 1.

26 Ibid.
bringing American women into the economic and political life of the nation," and asked Inman for her "advice on method and plans for a new down-to-earth woman’s organization with a solid platform that can be backed by all working people." Mary Inman, thrilled that she was personally responsible for bringing the original Susan B. Anthony’s grand-niece into the movement, replied to Anthony’s letter very promptly. She communicated her pleasure to Anthony in glowing terms: "Your clear grasp of basic issues, your enthusiasm for the organizational tasks that lie ahead, and your great and beautiful name with all that name stands for in the minds of oppressed women—and men—you offer to throw into the struggle on woman’s side." Inman ended her letter by declaring, "Susan, we accept your offer with love and admiration."

In the months that followed the two women wrote to one another frequently and in the summer of 1941 the Inmans visited Anthony and her husband in Washington. As their personal relationship developed so did their political partnership. After Anthony wrote:

I am eager to hear your plans for organizing women for action—the more I think about and discuss

\[27\] Ibid.

\[28\] Inman to Anthony, 12/31/40, Inman papers, box 1.

\[29\] Ibid.

\[30\] Ibid.
this problem the more I feel that I want to get started doing some active work on the question.\footnote{31}

Inman replied:

I believe we must have three things as a minimum of tools with which to construct a women’s movement in this country: a Woman’s Congress, a national nursery movement, and a woman’s newspaper with national circulation....\footnote{32} [A Woman’s Congress] would serve the same purpose as the Negro Congress now serves in relation to the Negro People’s struggle....It would be a powerful force for peace and would weld together existing women’s organizations, trade union auxiliaries, the most progressive of the women’s social clubs, etc.

By January of 1941 Susan Anthony was pushing Mary Inman to put these ideas into practice; she wanted Inman’s help launching a progressive woman’s congress that could combat the Equal Rights Amendment proposed by the National Woman’s Party, which they saw as a threat to protective legislation for working women, and facilitate alliances between progressives and moderate groups such as the General Federation of Women’s Clubs and the League of Women Voters.\footnote{33} Tempting Inman with the suggestion that she could enlist her friends Pearl Buck and Mary Beard to help with the effort once she had "definite ideas as to the program," Anthony asked her to "jot down a few ideas for a program around which to rally women for a woman’s congress." and

\footnote{31}{Anthony to Inman, 1/3/41, Inman papers, box 1.}

\footnote{32}{Inman to Anthony, 1/11/41, Inman papers, box 1.}

\footnote{33}{See letter from Anthony to Inman, 1/30/41, Inman papers, box 1.}
promised "I will do likewise."34 One month later Inman and Anthony put their ideas together, creating a basic platform for their proposed congress that outlined the causes of women’s oppression and, building on ideas from In Woman’s Defense, presented various suggestions for eradicating them.

In creating their plan for the congress, Inman and Anthony had several unstated goals. They wanted to try to bridge the gap between the progressive/labor tradition of women’s activism and the equal rights tradition that came out of the 19th century woman movement. They also wanted to popularize Inman’s ideas about the social and economic importance of women’s labor in the home and her analysis of the role of culture in perpetuating women’s oppression. The result of their efforts was a program that incorporated many by-this-time standard proposals for women’s emancipation and presented bold new thinking on the question. They saw no contradiction in accepting special treatment for women in some cases and rejecting it in others, and promised that the woman’s congress would fight to maintain protective legislation and maternal/infant welfare programs and to reverse discrimination against women in the labor force, politics, and the legal and educational systems.35 Although

34Ibid.

35Mary Inman’s notes from her discussion of the Woman’s Congress with Susan B. Anthony, n.d. (but the context makes it clear that they are from February, 1941) in Inman papers,
they anticipated that the congress could win greater respect for housekeeping and motherhood and give housewives' more political credibility, Inman and Anthony also argued that publicly funded 24-hour nurseries, communal kitchens and laundries, and socialized housecleaning services were necessary to liberate women from confinement in the home. In order to guarantee women's equality they proposed an alternative to the Equal Rights Amendment—an improved version of the Woman's Charter of the mid-1930s—that would abolish discrimination against women without invalidating legislation that protected women workers from long hours and unhealthy conditions. Such an amendment, they suggested, would allow the congress to fight the National Woman's Party effectively by appropriating the good parts of the ERA and doing away with the bad.

These ideas were not particularly original; they integrated the diverse perspectives of women such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the first Susan B. Anthony, Florence Kelley, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Mary Van Kleek and showed that Inman and Anthony were well-versed in the history of American feminism. But although they relied heavily on contributions from women's struggles past and present to form their program, Inman and Anthony also

box 1.

36Susan B. Anthony II to Mary Inman, 8/7/41, Inman papers, box 1.
developed two demands that were radically new. First, they built on Inman’s ideas about the ideological elements of women’s oppression and resolved that the congress would oppose the slander and degradation of women and resist society’s efforts to make them feel inferior and submissive. Second, they acknowledged that all women were not oppressed alike and determined that the congress would protect minority women by fighting discrimination based on race, religion and political affiliation. These additions made Inman’s and Anthony’s program substantially different from any articulated by progressives or feminists since the turn of the century. Their concern with race and their interest in the cultural sources of women’s oppression gave their proposed Congress the potential to transform women’s struggles and to carry the U.S. women’s movement into the post-WWII world.

Unfortunately, Inman and Anthony’s joint project never got beyond the planning phase. By the spring of 1941 progressives were increasingly engrossed in issues and activities related to the war in Europe, and Mary Inman was beginning her long battle with the CP National Commission over the productive nature of domestic work. When Inman left the Party in October of 1941, Anthony told her not to get discouraged and continued to push their ideas for a woman’s congress at events such as the National Conference

37Ibid.
of CIO Auxiliaries.\textsuperscript{38} But when Mary Inman wrote to Anthony in January 1942 asking her to become co-editor of her new newsletter "Facts for Women," Anthony refused, stating that although a women's paper was needed "such a newspaper must be at least approved by the most progressive forces in the nation, or else it will be ineffective."\textsuperscript{39} Inman apparently regarded Anthony's refusal as evidence that she had sided with the Communist Party and joined its "conspiracy" to repress the woman question. Probably feeling hurt and betrayed Inman wrote to Anthony one last time on February 3, 1942 to explain, "with apologies to no one," that her paper would avoid the "platitudinous, narrowed-down, choked-to-death approach which now passes for Marxism." After February 1942 there was no more correspondence between them; in "13 Years of CPUSA Misleadership on the Woman Question," Inman referred to Susan B. Anthony's "Woman's Status Amendment" as "confused and inadequate" and dismissed her as bourgeois and deceitful.\textsuperscript{40} Although it was clear that Anthony continued to support Inman's theories, her refusal to join Inman's fight against the Communist movement brought

\textsuperscript{38}See letters from Anthony to Inman dated 9/3/41, 9/29/41, 11/10/41 and 12/1/41, Inman papers, box 1.

\textsuperscript{39}Inman to Anthony, 1/12/42 and Anthony to Inman, 1/15/42, Inman papers, box 1.

\textsuperscript{40}Mary Inman, "13 Years of CPUSA Misleadership on the Woman Question," mimeographed paper dated 1949, p. 6, Inman papers box 3.
their friendship and collaboration to a sudden and bitter end.

Susan Anthony probably regretted losing Mary Inman as a friend and mentor, but she must have realized that by dissociating herself from Inman, she was also preserving her credibility in Communist circles. With her reputation intact Susan Anthony was able to take what she had learned from Mary Inman between 1940-1942 and to keep working to implement their joint ideas even though they were estranged from one another. In 1943 and 1944 when Communists were absorbed in various wartime activities Anthony worked to maintain some public awareness of women’s problems. Her 1943 book, Out of the Kitchen--Into the War: Woman’s Winning Role in the Nation’s Drama, borrowed heavily from Inman’s program as it made a case for nationalizing nurseries and cafeterias in order to free women for work in war industries.\(^4\) At the end of WWII Anthony’s long struggle to garner support for a national woman’s congress began to pay off. When the Congress of American Women finally got off the ground in the spring of 1946 it was due in large part to her efforts.

Susan Anthony played an indispensable role in the planning and organizational phases of the CAW in 1945 and

1946. With Mary Van Kleeck she co-chaired the committee that gathered the data the American delegation presented to the founding convention of the Women's International Democratic Federation in Paris in November, 1945.\textsuperscript{42} Although Anthony did not attend the Paris convention herself, she co-authored with Van Kleeck and Elinor Gimbel the "Report on the Problems and Status of Women in the U.S." that the American delegation presented at the convention, and she continued to lead the CAW's organizational efforts between December 1945, when the delegates returned home from Paris, and March 1946, when the group was officially launched in the U.S.\textsuperscript{43} At the first working conference of

\textsuperscript{42}Anthony and Van Kleeck gathered reports about women's contributions to American life from women in a variety of organizations in order put together the delegation's report about American women. According to material in the Mary Van Kleeck papers, box 80, folder 1265, the Communist Party contributed information about women's contributions to the war against fascism, Mary McLeod Bethune wrote the report about the role of Negro women in American society, Gene Weltfish wrote about women in the sciences, Mrs. Frederic March on women in U.S. cultural life, and Rose Schneiderman of the Women's Trade Union League on the activities of that organization. Bethune's "Negro Women in American Life," dated November 11, 1945 is in Van Kleeck's papers, box 80, folder 1266.

\textsuperscript{43}The "Report on the Problems and Status of Women in the United States," by Elinor Gimbel, Mary Van Kleeck, and Susan B. Anthony II summarized the findings of the Committee on the U.S. Delegates' Reports. It is located in the Van Kleeck papers, box 80, folder 1266. According to the Report on the Congress of American Women, U.S. Congress House Committee on Un-American Activities, Washington, D.C., 1949, pp. 79-82, the American delegates to the First Congress of the Women's International Democratic Federation were: Ann Bradford; Charlotte Hawkins Brown of the National Negro Congress; Henrietta Buckmaster who had affiliations with numerous Communist/Progressive
the Congress of American Women, held at the Essex House in New York City on May 25, 1946 the group of 600 delegates heard and approved the report of the Paris conference and rewarded the chief organizers of the CAW with official leadership positions: they elected Gene Weltfish as Chairman [sic], Muriel Draper as Vice Chairman, and Susan Anthony as head of the group's Commission on the Status of Women.44

In her work as an officer for the CAW in 1946 and 1947 Anthony helped to formulate the group's structure and agenda, and in doing so she drew very heavily on the conversations she had had with Mary Inman between 1940 and 1942. As Inman and Anthony had planned for their woman's groups including the Jefferson School for Social Science, American Youth for Democracy, and the Civil Rights Congress; Thelma Dale of the National Negro Congress; Muriel Draper of the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship; Vivian Carter Mason; Dr. Beryl Parker; Cornelia Royce Pinchot, the wife of the former governor of Pennsylvania; Eleanor Vaughan; Gene Weltfish, an anthropologist at Columbia University; and Communists Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Jeannette Stern Turner, and Ruth Young. According to the New York Times article, "Congress of Women Opens in Paris Today," 11/25/45, Elinor Gimbel of the National Association for Child Welfare was supposed to participate as part of the American delegation, but was forced to cancel her trip because she could not obtain return passage from Paris in time to be present for the start of the New York Political Action Committee Community drive on December 16th.

44See "Women of America Organize Own PAC," New York Times, 5/26/46. During the first year of the organization's existence, CAW officers called themselves "chairmen" of the commissions they led. For the sake of historical accuracy I have retain their terminology, despite the contemporary preference for gender-neutral titles. It is interesting to note that by 1948 the CAW began to refer to its officers as "president," "vice president," etc. Perhaps they were also expressing a preference for gender-neutrality.
congress to continue the struggles of earlier generations of American feminists, Anthony and the other founders of the CAW consciously presented themselves as the bearers of the 19th century woman's rights tradition and even called the group "the first women’s political-action organization [in the U.S.] since the suffrage movement." In keeping with that tradition—and with Inman’s desire to "recognize the social value of the work performed in the home"—the CAW embraced a program for women’s activism that celebrated women’s roles as housekeepers and mothers at the same time that it sought to change them. The group’s Peace and Child-Care Commissions asserted that because women bear and rear children, they are the best, most committed fighters for peace. The CAW, like the Communist Party in the Popular Front period, proposed that women needed a stronger voice in American politics so that they could be more effective in their efforts to improve their homes and their cities’ schools and playgrounds. Mothers’ efforts to defend their families against nuclear weapons, high prices, and urban crime, they suggested, were the struggles that could deliver

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46 Mary Inman’s notes for her discussion with Susan B. Anthony II about a woman’s congress, Inman papers, box 1.
the world from the looming threats of poverty, destruction and moral decay.\footnote{47}

At the same time that the Congress of American Women's approach to the issues of peace and child-welfare tended to reinforce traditional assumptions about women's "natural" roles, however, its desire to lead the struggle to raise women's status economically, politically, and socially also required the organization to challenge assumptions that women were fit only to keep house and bear children.\footnote{48} From its earliest days the organization tried to convince women that they could be political actors and, if they joined together nationally and internationally, wield considerable political power. As the chairman of the Commission on the Status of Women and the author of the "Report of the


\footnote{48These challenges to arguments about women's nature are evident in documents presented to the WIDF founding congress in November 1945 as well as in later documents prepared by the Commission on the Status of Women. See, for example: "Report on the Problems and Status of Women in the United States," by Elinor Gimbel, Mary Van Kleeck and Susan B. Anthony II in Mary Van Kleeck papers, box 80, folder 1266; "The Position of the American Woman Today," no author listed, n.d., WIDF papers, box 2, folder 20a; "Congress of American Women Report of the Commission of the Status of Women," by Susan B. Anthony II, May 25, 1946, WIDF papers, box 2, folder 20a.}
Commission on the Status of Women," Susan Anthony documented the ways that discrimination, not personal preference or biology, kept American women from participating fully in the workforce, politics and social life, and formulated the CAW's strategies stopping it. 49 It was in this capacity that Anthony really brought her collaboration with Mary Inman to bear on the CAW. Although she could not include In Woman's Defense in the bibliography of the "Report of the Commission on the Status of Women" for pragmatic reasons, Anthony adopted many features of Inman's analysis within it. 50 Ultimately, In Woman's Defense and Anthony's 1940-42 correspondence with Inman served as the foundation for the CAW's analysis of women's oppression and its strategies for women's liberation.

Anthony began her "Report on the Commission on the Status of Women" by analyzing the economic status of women in the U.S. Still influenced by Inman's focus on the importance of housework, Anthony not only outlined the often-described problem of sex-discrimination in the


50 The Report's bibliography is three pages long and although it includes books that Inman drew upon, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Women and Economics (Boston: Small, Maynard & Co., 1900) and The Home (New York: McClure, Phillips & Co., 1903), and Lewis Morgan's Ancient Society (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Co., 1909), Inman's In Woman's Defense is conspicuously absent.
workforce, but she also described the problems of women who endured the burden of a "double job" if they worked outside the home, and of housewives who performed outmoded work without pay in the isolated environment of their homes.\(^{51}\) In order to remedy the problems of working women Anthony drew on the progressive tradition and suggested that the CAW support the same kinds of struggles that Communists and other radical activists had been recommending for years. Based on Anthony’s suggestions, the CAW argued for equal pay for similar work, the addition of the word "sex" to the Fair Employment Practices Bill, the extension of the Fair Labor Standards Act and the Social Security Act to agricultural and domestic workers, equal access to education for women, the admission of both white and black women to the professions, and the entrance of all unorganized women workers into democratic trade unions. What made Anthony’s report particularly interesting were the remedies she suggested for the "double-job" and the difficulties of housewives and paid domestic workers, problems that Communists were only just beginning to recognize. Just as Inman suggested that, "Large, new, well-built apartment houses," with "centrally arranged housecleaning units....central places for dining, [and] centrally situated nurseries for children" would solve the problems of both

working women and housewives, Susan Anthony argued that "[t]o free women from housekeeping, America must have a vast network of Government, community and commercial services" including "Government housing projects [with] community facilities such as laundries, child care centers, infirmaries and cafeterias....[and] large-scale housekeeping services [with] specialized chambermaids, window washers, and housecleaners, operating from a central agency, to which families would pay their share of the cost."52 Consequently, the CAW endorsed the notion that for women to achieve equal economic status with men they needed relief from their domestic and maternal burdens and resolved to push for a national housing program, government funded 24-hour child care, and socialized cooking and housekeeping arrangements.

The second focus of the Commission on the Status of Women was U.S. women's relationship to the political system. Anthony's discussion of American women's political status, like her analysis of their economic status, suggested that they had a lot to gain. She argued that although the suffrage movement achieved "the 19th Amendment to the Constitution, which finally raised women to the status of white men, Negro men and foreign born men," after 1920 women

were diverted away from party politics and excluded from state- and national-level political offices.53 Even in 1946, she asserted, women in some states remained legally subordinated to men by old laws that prevented them from making contracts, owning property, or sitting on juries.54 In order to improve women’s participation in the political system, Anthony suggested that year-round electoral activity was necessary to win the support of the masses of women. In response the CAW promoted a political action campaign organized around Anthony’s slogan "Forty-eight Congresswomen in 1948" with the hope that women could eventually achieve gender parity not only in the U.S. Congress, but in the Cabinet and the Supreme Court as well.55

Anthony’s recommendations for improving women’s subjected legal status came directly out of the plans she made with Mary Inman before the war. Like Inman and the supporters of the Woman’s Charter of the 1930s, she argued that the elimination of anti-woman laws could be most easily achieved with an amendment to the U.S. Constitution that would read:

There shall be no discrimination against women because of sex or marital status, economically, legally, politically or socially in

55 Ibid., p. 13.
the United States of America and in the territories subject to its jurisdiction.

Nothing in this article shall be so construed to invalidate or prevent the passage of legislation improving the condition of women in their work or in their family status. 56

Such an amendment, Anthony suggested, would guarantee women's equality without threatening protective labor legislation and maternity benefits and, by creating common ground for all true supporters of women's equality, make the CAW the dominant women's organization in the U.S. in the post-WWII period. The ratification of this amendment, which came to be known as Anthony's "Woman's Status Amendment," quickly became one of the CAW's primary objectives.

Anthony's last task as the head of the Commission on the Status of Women was to examine the inferior social status of U.S. women and to suggest ways to improve it. This was relatively uncharted territory among progressives, and although she made no mention of it in the text of the report, Anthony relied almost exclusively on In Woman's Defense for the analysis of women's social subordination she put forth in the document. As Mary Inman described the ways that "Jim Crowing women along sex lines" isolated them from men, made men and women "unnaturally sex conscious just as Negroes and whites are made unnaturally race and color conscious," and built "walls of strangeness between them,"

56 Ibid.
Anthony’s discussion of "Jim Crow Customs and Laws Against Women" concluded that women’s:

second-class status is manifested on bans on women in public places, bans against their admission to certain all-male inner sanctums, curfews on their public unescorted appearances and of course in the double standard of morals which duplicates socially the double standard in wages.⁵⁷

And as Inman analyzed the "manufacturing of femininity" in the home and the perpetuation of a "culture of women’s subjugation" through literature and movies, women’s clothing styles, language and stereotypes, Anthony argued that women are raised to feel inferior to men, that the differences between the sexes are further exaggerated by women’s "curves, high heels and elaborate clothes," and that the process of minimizing all women is "nurtured by textbooks, movies, radio and theater" that belittle women’s work, intelligence, appearances and interests.⁵⁸ Anthony’s analysis left little doubt in CAW leaders’ minds that women were subordinated socially and culturally as well as economically and politically, and as a result of her arguments, the CAW resolved to "collect and analyze the main Jim Crow customs and laws against women and recommend concerted action to remove them," to act as "watchdogs" against misrepresentations of women and take proper action


against them, and to "establish a permanent sub-committee of the Commission on the Status of Women to coordinate this work."  

By the summer of 1946, the CAW's agenda had been set forth by people such as Van Kleeck and Anthony and the group was ready to move forward and to recruit members, set up chapters around the country, and begin working toward its goals. Using two informational pamphlets, one entitled "What is the Congress of American Women," and the other "Ten Women Anywhere Can Do Anything," the group explained its brief history, laid out its program, listed its officers, and invited "all women who wish to act together with other women for a secure future and a better world for all of us," to join. The CAW's first chapters, composed largely of Communists and other progressive women, were founded in New York City and Los Angeles and within a year the group also had branches in Chicago, Detroit, Milwaukee, Seattle, Kansas City, Washington, D.C., Portland, Cleveland and Pittsburgh. More than any other women's organization that existed in this period, the CAW made a strong effort to recruit women from a variety of racial and ethnic groups.


60 Both pamphlets are housed in the WIDF papers, box 2, folder 20a.

In addition to forming strong working relationships with groups such as the Croatian Women's Council, the American-Serbian Democratic Women's Committee, and the Emma Lazarus Division of the Jewish People's Fraternal Order, the CAW also established affiliations with the National Association of Colored Women and the Illinois Association for Colored Women. 62 In keeping with their goal of fighting all forms of discrimination in the U.S., the founders of the CAW worked especially hard to recruit African-American women and to promote them into leadership positions. Harriet Magil, national treasurer of the organization in 1947, stressed that the CAW had trouble organizing black women because they "weren't ready for it....they were too busy making ends meet." 63 Nevertheless, in its early years the organization successfully organized a Harlem chapter and claimed at least five African-American women leaders including progressives Dr. Charlotte Hawkins Brown, Thelma Dale, Vivian Carter Mason, Halois Morehead and Ada B. Jackson. 64

During its first year, things looked promising for the CAW. The organization grew fairly rapidly and, in order to


63 Interview with Harriet Magil by Kate Weigand, New York City, January 12, 1993.

64 I identified black women leaders through photographs in various publications by or about the CAW. See, for example, "CAW Bulletin" v. 1, n. 5, (October, 1946) p. 4; HUAC's Report on the Congress of American Women, pp. 6 and 61.
facilitate organizational unity, the national office appointed an editorial board and began to publish a national newsletter, *The CAW Bulletin* (later renamed *Around the World*) in 1946. As the national organization became stronger so did its local chapters. Both the L.A. and Chicago chapters published their own newsletters, and those and other chapters organized neighborhood activities and babysitting cooperatives and orchestrated successful political actions including a city-wide consumer protest against high meat prices in Detroit, a campaign to save wartime childcare centers in Chicago, and a drive to support striking packing-house workers in Kansas City. The CAW was also able to stir up a lot of support for civil rights in the immediate post-war period. Various CAW chapters around the country worked for such causes as the integration of public swimming pools. In September of 1946 the group co-sponsored a nationwide campaign to end lynching in the South, participated in a march on Washington to oppose lynching, established its own national anti-lynching committee and circulated a list of recent lynchings in the U.S. and the actions women should take against them.

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66An incomplete collection of the CAW’s newsletters is housed in the WIDF papers at Smith College.

67Ibid.


Beginning in the spring of 1948 the CAW also led a campaign to defend Rosa Lee Ingram, "a poor Negro-sharecropper of Ellaville, GA" who became the group's symbol of the oppression of black women in the South after she and her two teenaged sons were sentenced to death for accidentally killing the white farmer who tried to rape her.69

The CAW never gained as much ground on women's rights issues as it did on peace and community issues, but it was not for lack of trying. Once she established the CAW's agenda for improving women's status Susan Anthony worked hard to keep women's liberation a central part of the group's mission and to organize broad-based campaigns to fight against discrimination in employment, politics, legal codes, and social customs. Although she did manage to win broad support for her Women's Status Amendment as an alternative to the E.R.A. Anthony had less success with the other areas of her program.70 Despite her revelations about the social and cultural sources of women's oppression in the Report of the Commission on the Status of Women, Anthony was

69Around the World v. 1, n. 3 (March-April 1948) p. 4. in WIDF papers, box 2, folder 20a. The group not only argued for Ingram's innocence, but collected money for her defense and funds and clothing to help support her other 11 children, circulated a petition to gain her freedom, and visited her and her family in Georgia.

70According to the "Officers' Report" (WIDF papers, box 2, folder 20a) from the 1st National Constitutional Convention held on May 6-8, 1949 in NYC, the proposed amendment was "supported by most unions and women's and consumer organizations."
never able to mobilize any mass opposition to misrepresentations of women in the media or sexist social customs that kept women down.\textsuperscript{71} Left to her own devices, Anthony's attempt to wage war against the cultural oppression of women and to redefine women's images of themselves consisted of a series of small efforts, such as commissioning a cantata called "Women are Dangerous" to be performed on International Women's Day at the Hotel Capitol in New York.\textsuperscript{72}

When Susan Anthony resigned her position with the CAW in order to become the WIDF representative at the United Nations in the spring of 1948, Betty Millard, a Communist and former editor of New Masses replaced her as the head of the Commission on the Status of Women.\textsuperscript{73} Millard, educated at Barnard College, the Geneva School of Industrial Studies,

\textsuperscript{71}In my discussion with Harriet Magil, she said that the CAW regarded the three commissions--Peace, Child Care, and Women's Status--as equally important, but that the rank and file members of the organization gravitated more towards the issues of peace and child welfare than towards women's emancipation.

\textsuperscript{72}Around the World, v. 1, n. 2 (February, 1948) p. 4.

\textsuperscript{73}"Around the World," (March/April 1948), p. 4, WIDF papers, box 2, folder 20a, reports the change in the leadership of the Commission on the Status of Women. Campbell's "Congress of American Women" describes Anthony's reasons for leaving her post (she did remain active as a regular member of the group). The WIDF had Consultative Status "B" to the Economic and Social Council of the UN. It had great hopes of achieving Status "A" and thereby gaining the right to speak, the right to suggest items for the agenda, and the right to access the Council's documents, but never achieved that status.
and the University of London, was clearly influenced by Anthony's assessment of women's inferior status in the U.S. and she took up Anthony's campaign to promote the importance of women's rights within the CAW with renewed energy. Millard's first column in Around the World reminded readers to "watch all state and national legislation concerning women very carefully and to have CAW reps at all hearings in your state," and urged them for the first time since Anthony's report appeared in 1946 to "protest to editors all magazines articles and stories slandering women." Aware that the knowledge of women's past struggles had the potential to mobilize them in the present, Millard also sent educational material on the Seneca Falls convention of 1848 to all CAW chapters and planned a rally to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the convention to take place at Elizabeth Cady Stanton's grave in Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx on July 19, 1948. Among the 50 participants at the rally were Stanton's granddaughter Nora Stanton Barney, Frederick Douglass's nephew Haley Douglass, and Susan B. Anthony's grandniece Susan B. Anthony II. Barney, herself a new member of the CAW, reminded the assembled audience that her grandmother had "wanted far more for women than the right to vote" and reaffirmed Stanton's 1898 declaration

\(^{74}\text{Ibid.}\)

that "[i]t is time for agitation on the broader question of philosophical socialism." In the wake of the rally Millard continued to tie the CAW's women's rights platform to the history of women's suffrage and labor struggles with the hope that she could convince the masses of American women of the need to fight for their emancipation. Millard's efforts inspired the Los Angeles chapter of the CAW (of which Gerda Lerner was a member) to organize and teach two classes on the American women's history and status, but because of the increasingly conservative political context of the late 1940s her desire to recruit average housewives to the movement went unfulfilled.

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77 According to The Worker, 6/19/49, p. 2, Gerda Lerner was one of the California delegates who attended the CAW national convention in New York in 1949. A photo of the Resolutions Committee of the convention in that article includes Lerner along with Pearl Lawes, Frances Smith and Helen Wortis from New York, Joan Leib from Ohio, and Anne Jones from Milwaukee. According to the CAW's publication, "American Women in Pictures: Souvenir Journal," (1949) p. 4, Lerner was one of the CAW's delegates to the WIDF convention in Budapest in 1949.

It is also interesting to note that another pioneering women's historian, Eleanor Flexner, the author of Century of Struggle (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959) was also involved in the Congress of American Women. According to Around the World v. 1, n. 4 (May-June, 1948) p. 1, Flexner was one of the members of the CAW's new Editorial Board. Around the World v. 1, n. 5 (July-August, 1948) pp. 1-2, Betty Millard replaced Flexner on the Board in July 1948, probably at the time that the CAW was listed by the Attorney General as a subversive organization. Although Flexner was apparently a very visible member of the CAW, at least briefly, she somehow escaped inclusion in HUAC's Report on the Congress of American Women in 1949.
Anthony, Millard and the other CAW leaders were no doubt disappointed when American women failed to heed their call for a grassroots struggle to raise women’s status in the U.S and internationally. But despite their failure to mobilize a mass base for work on women’s liberation, neither Anthony’s nor Millard’s efforts went completely unrewarded. At least some women who were active in and around the Communist Party, unlike their more mainstream counterparts, were ripe for conversion to the CAW’s position on the need for women’s emancipation. In 1946, when the Worker serialized Susan Anthony’s Report of the Commission on the Status of Women on its newly revived women’s pages, her "new" ideas, adopted from Mary Inman’s work, made many progressive women aware that they formed an oppressed group and aroused their interest in fighting male supremacy along with racism and capitalism. According to one woman, "It heightened my awareness and changed my way of seeing my own life, my own relationships, and so on."78 In the weeks and months after Anthony’s work appeared in the paper, numerous women and a few men began writing to the women’s page and, using Anthony’s analysis, reinforcing the importance of the woman question, criticizing male supremacist practices in Communist circles, describing their desire to work on the issue at the local level, and calling for more support for

78Interview with Harriet Magil, 12 January 1993, New York City.
women’s liberation from the Party’s national leaders. In 1948, the publication of Betty Millard’s "Woman Against Myth" in *New Masses* sparked a new and even more intense round of debate and activity on women’s issues in Communist circles all around the country. By this time, the CP national leadership was forced to take a strong stand in support of Communist women’s demands; to condemn male supremacist thinking and behavior inside and outside Communist settings; and to initiate new policies and activities that aimed to combat sexist practices in laws and workplaces, in mainstream politics and social customs, and in the Party’s own theory, activity and culture.

In the volatile political context of the immediate post-WWII period the CAW, with the support of the Communist Party, might have had the potential to spark the resurgence of a mass women’s movement in the U.S. But by the time the Communist Party fully embraced the CAW’s arguments about the need for women’s liberation in 1948, the domestic policies that accompanied the Cold War put both organizations on the defensive. Whereas in 1946 and 1947 the CAW supported a

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broad range of women's issues, by late 1948 the group was expending most of its limited resources on only two causes: its foreign policy emphasized opposition to the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan, and its domestic policy criticized anti-communist deportation proceedings and supported American Communist Party leaders who were under attack by the U.S. government.\textsuperscript{80} As a result of these activities, and the frequent trips made by CAW members to WIDP meetings in Communist countries, Truman's Justice Department investigated the group and, in May 1948, added the CAW to its list of subversive organizations. This tactic served its intended purpose: the subversive label scared many of the group's supporters, drastically reduced the CAW's membership, and exacerbated the group's existing financial difficulties.\textsuperscript{81} In May of 1949 the remaining CAW


\textsuperscript{81} The Congress of American Women had no large financial backers and had never been economically secure. As early as 1947 the group had been forced to borrow money from its wealthier members in order to survive, and by 1949, its financial problems threatened to become overwhelming. In a letter dated 4/25/47 from CAW member Zelma Brandt to member Thyra Edwards (WIDP papers, box 2, folder 21) Brandt writes, "...As to the Congress [of American Women], we are coming into very hard times. The financial situation has not straightened out any more than it had been when you were here..." In another letter (also in box 2, folder 21) dated 9/11/47 Virginia Shull, Acting Executive Secretary of the CAW thanks Zelma Brandt for a "loan of $750 to meet our summer nightmare caused by the New Era Letter Company." In the "Officers' Report" for the CAW's 1st National
leaders organized the group’s first Constitutional Convention in order to analyze and assess the organization’s problems and to begin anew, but the damage had already been done and only 300 members attended. By this time it seemed clear that the CAW’s days were numbered.

The U.S. government dealt the final blow to the Congress of American Women in October 1949 when the House Un-American Activities Commission published its scathing Report on the Congress of American Women. HUAC’s report concluded that the purpose of the organization was:

....not to deal primarily with women’s problems, as such, but rather to serve as a specialized arm of Soviet political warfare in the current ‘peace’ campaign to disarm and demobilize the United States and democratic nations generally, in order to render them helpless in the face of the Communist drive for world conquest.

Constitutional Conventional held on May 6-8, 1949, Gene Weltfish stated that lack of funds was one of the chief causes of the group’s crisis.

Gene Weltfish et al., "Officers’ Report," passim; Campbell, p. 11.

In her interview with Katherine Campbell in New York in February 1980, Stella Allen, former Executive Secretary of the CAW described the final days of the CAW as follows: "So CAW became beset with reflections of what was happening on an international level. At the same time things were pretty much closing in nationally, and everything left wing or radical was beginning to be looked into and frowned upon, viewed with suspicion of being under red leadership and guidance. So gradually, the base became narrower and narrower, and we found ourselves near the end with some stalwarts who would stay because they were so much for peace, maybe--or people who were pretty much committed...from a leftist point of view."

In a last ditch effort to survive the CAW disaffiliated with the WIDF in December of 1949 in order to counter HUAC's charge that the group was a tool of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, in January of 1950 the Justice Department demanded that CAW officers and board members register under the Foreign Agents Registration Act. Muriel Draper and other CAW leaders sought legal advice from sympathetic attorneys John Abt and O. John Rogge with the hope that they could find a way to keep the organization alive, but when it became clear that a legal battle would be very expensive and that the Communist Party was already too burdened by its own defense to assist the group financially, they decided to disband rather than risk imprisonment.

The Congress of American Women, which had begun with such great promise in 1946, looked like a failure when its members voted to disband in 1950. The group started out with the goal of mobilizing the masses of American women for political activity in alliance with their sisters overseas, but although it had sometimes claimed as many as 250,000 members, it had probably never recruited more than a few

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85"D of J Housing of CAW Called Attack on Peace," Daily Worker, 1/10/50, p. 5.

86Katherine Campbell interview with Stella Allen, Betty Millard, and Harriet and Abe Magil, New York City, 2/17/81; Kate Weigand interview with Harriet Magil, New York City, 1/10/93.
thousand women, many of whom already had ties to the left. It sponsored a grand plan for improving the status of American women and had only managed to convince a minority of its members to embrace the cause of women's emancipation. In light of that evidence Katherine Campbell has argued that the organization is little more than "an intriguing 'might have been'" and Amy Swerdlow has suggested that with the CAW's demise "went the connection between the suffrage generation, the Old Left, and women's peace activism." But although the CAW never achieved a mass base for any of its work, much less its women's rights agenda, neither the group's principles nor its influence died along with it in 1950. And whereas some have suggested that the CAW's close ties to the Communist Party between 1946 and 1950 prevented it from developing Anthony's program for women's rights, in fact, those ties actually provided the constituency that embraced Anthony's ideas and put them into action. The CAW's program for women's rights, embodied in Susan Anthony's Report of the Commission on the Status of

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87 The pamphlet "American Women in Pictures: Souvenir Journal," (New York: CAW, 1949) p. 4 claimed that the group had 250,000 individual and affiliate members at that time, but that figure was clearly exaggerated.


89 Ibid; Swerdlow, Women Strike for Peace.
Women and Betty Millard's "Woman Against Myth" served as the basis for the American Communist Party's analysis of women's oppression and its work for women's liberation during the decade from 1946-1956. By exposing Communist women and men to its radical analysis of women's oppression and motivating them to work for women's liberation, Anthony and the CAW effectively revived many of Mary Inman's ideas and ushered in a new era of Communist organizing on the woman question. It was that work, sometimes very advanced and sometimes quite flawed, that sustained the radical wing of the U.S. women's movement into the 1960s.
CHAPTER IV

WOMEN’S WORK IS NEVER DONE:
THE EVOLUTION OF COMMUNIST PARTY THEORY AND PRACTICE
ON THE WOMAN QUESTION, 1945-1956

In June of 1946 a group of four women from San Francisco wrote to the editor of the newly established women’s page of the Communist Party’s Sunday newspaper, The Worker. In response to an earlier letter from a woman who asked for advice about how she and her husband could combine marriage and parenthood with political activity Hodee Richards, Helen Linia, Jane Renaker and Anne Taylor criticized the Party for ignoring the fact that "the rights and duties of women members are complicated by the fact that women are oppressed as a sex under class societies."¹ After charging the Party with "losing" women in the revisionism of the Browder years, the California women reported that it had "set up a Commission on Work among Women in San Francisco county." The group closed their letter the with following advice to the Party leadership:

So here’s for the solution of our problem: an end to the separation of ‘personal’ and ‘party’ life. Special help to women because of their double oppression under capitalism!

¹Hodee Richards, Helen Linia, Jane Renaker, Anne Taylor, "The Personal Life of the Communist," The Worker, 6/16/46, p. 11.

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This letter, along with a handful of others published in the Party press in 1946, was among the first signs that at least some rank-and-file Communist women (and a few men) were no longer willing to sit back and allow CP national leaders to dictate the Party’s position on the woman question. Over the next two years as Communist women took Susan Anthony’s and Betty Millard’s advice to protest against all forms of sex discrimination, this trickle of dissatisfaction became a torrent and the CP—ordinarily a fairly rigid, top-down organization that suppressed dissent—was forced to respond. Communist leaders, anxious to maintain and even build the CP’s female constituency, began to adapt the CP’s position on the woman question to fit the changing circumstances women faced in the post-WWII U.S. By 1948 the Communist Party abandoned its strictly economic theory of women’s oppression in favor of the more complex analysis offered by the Congress of American Women’s Commission on the Status of Women. In order to satisfy the demands made by rank-and-file Communists such as the women from San Francisco, the Party also explored political solutions for women’s so-called personal problems and worked harder than ever before to insure that Party practice followed Party theory. Communists ultimately recognized that women’s oppression was social and cultural as well as economic, and emphasized the need to fight women’s oppression AND male supremacist ideology and behavior. This
innovative analysis put Communists far ahead of other leftists who endorsed women’s rights before the 1960s; it also made the gender politics of the Communist Party more radical and, by present-day standards, more feminist than those of other feminist organizations of the time, including the National Woman’s Party.

At the end of World War II, the American Communist Party’s official analysis of women’s oppression was little different than the one it had endorsed more than a decade earlier.² Between 1922, when the CP established its first Women’s Bureau, and 1945, when it re-established its National Women’s Commission, the Communist Party received most of its guidance on the question of women’s oppression from the Marxist classics: Karl Marx’s The Communist Manifesto, Engels’s Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State, August Bebel’s Women and Socialism, and

Lenin's *Women and Society.* These works, although they sometimes recognized that there could be a cultural component to women's oppression, explained women's inferior status as an economic phenomenon stemming from the development of private property which isolated women in monogamous families, and the exclusion of women from the paid workforce which intensified their subjection to men economically, politically, and socially.

In the 1920s and early 1930s, when it was still a very small and sectarian organization, the Communist Party used the classical Marxist formulation as the basis for its limited "women's work" that included sporadic efforts to organize women workers but virtually ignored family and community issues. During the period of the Popular Front the Party expanded its women's work significantly. From 1935 to 1939 Communist women fought for equal pay, maternity

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4Gosse, "'To Organize in Every Neighborhood, in Every Home.'" According to Rosalyn Baxandall's "The Question Seldom Asked," p. 145, "The Theses of the Communist Women's Movement, a document of the Comintern advocated a dual approach to women's oppression: the full incorporation of women in public life and work and in politics, and the reorganization of the private sphere through the socialization of household tasks. In North America the second point was gradually abandoned in favor of a single focus on industrial struggles."
insurance, the Woman's Charter and birth control, and openly debated questions about women's role in the class struggle and the nature of bourgeois women's oppression. But although the American CP made great strides in organizing women by the late 1930s and, as a result, some women began to insist that discrimination existed inside the Party as well as outside it, Communist leaders never formally expanded the classical Marxist analysis of women's oppression to explain or deal with the variety of problems women faced daily. During the WWII years when gender issues took a backseat to wartime issues, the CP's position on women also remained essentially unchanged. Despite their recognition of the need for propaganda to convince men and women that women could be industrial workers, Communist leaders still failed to accept the notion that working-class men could contribute to the oppression of working-class women. At the war's end, many Communists still dismissed male supremacy as a divisive concept imported to the working-class by bourgeois feminists, and as a serious symptom of the false consciousness exhibited by a few

5Shaffer, "Women and the Communist Party USA," pp. 79-89.

misguided progressive women who did not understand that class, not sex, was the fundamental contradiction in capitalist society.

In 1944 and 1945, once it became clear that the Allies would defeat fascism in Europe and Asia, American Communists began making plans for the Party's work in the post-WWII world. After the dismissal of national chairman Earl Browder, the leaders of the newly reconstituted American Communist Party expected that they would be able to resume the struggles from which they had retreated in 1940, including the fight to improve women's status in the United States. In order to recruit women more effectively and fulfill their longtime pledge of support for women's rights Communist leaders renewed their commitment to family and community issues, demanded an end to the idea that women's place is in the home, and promised to lead the fight to protect women's jobs and wartime child care centers.⁷ Although Communists resumed their hard work to protect women's rights in labor unions and in the workforce they also devoted considerable attention to the idea that women had made tremendous progress since 1940 and suggested that, because of their contributions to the war effort, American

women were "on the threshold of [their] political maturity."⁸ Leaders like Flynn and others argued that whereas most women had been somewhat "backward" before World War II they were finally ready to play an equal role with men in progressive politics in the postwar period.⁹ Communist leaders hoped that their efforts, combined with those of the Congress of American Women, would inspire traditional housewives and mothers, angry working women, and experienced peace and women's rights activists to join with men in the struggle to build a peaceful, just, and democratic U.S.

Communist leaders made several major miscalculations in the immediate postwar period. Their decision to comply with the Soviet leaders' demand that they dissolve the Communist Political Association and reconstitute the American Party came in part from their naive glorification of the Soviet Union and in part from the mistaken belief that the political atmosphere of the post-WWII U.S. would be even more conducive to radical political change than that of the 1930s. Similarly, leading Communists' assumption that wartime opportunities prepared the way for women's equality

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⁸Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, "Women Have a Date With Destiny" (New York: International Publishers, 1944).

inside and outside the Party came from their belief that women's oppression was primarily economic and their failure to recognize that male supremacist ideology also limited women in a multitude of ways. But although it took them more than ten years to accept that the Soviet Union had major problems, and four years to concede that conservatives and not radicals would dominate the post-war political agenda, Communists figured out relatively quickly that the opportunities women won during WWII had not solved their problems. As early as 1946 and 1947 the Communist Party began to explore the notion that women's oppression included cultural and ideological components as well as economic ones, and to alter its day-to-day operations so that more women could take part. By 1948 the CP recognized that although male supremacist ideology had economic origins, it operated independently from class exploitation and therefore warranted its own struggle, separate from the fight for women's equality in the workforce and politics. The Party's relatively quick realignment on this issue occurred not because Communists were somehow smarter about women than about other matters, but because Communist women insisted on it. In the absence of a comprehensive Soviet policy on the woman question in this period the American Party was able to deal with the issue in its own way and, in doing so, to embrace women's demands rather than repressing them.
Rank-and-file Communist women had long been aware that their position in the Communist Party, like their position in U.S. society at large, was a disadvantaged one. Women wrote to the editors of Worker, the Daily Worker and other CP publications sporadically throughout the 1930s to call attention to the Party’s failure to practice what it preached on the woman question. In 1940 the CP’s much revered woman leader Ella Reeve Bloor wrote in her autobiography:

I have often felt, earlier indeed, more than today, that there has been some hesitancy in giving women full equal responsibility with men [in the Communist Party]."10

After the inequities of the 1930s and the WWII years, Communist women must have been pleased to hear that the CP’s leaders intended to take them more seriously in 1945. But if they had ever really believed that Party leaders’ declaration of women’s equality in Communist circles was enough to make them equal (and whether women believed this is certainly questionable), they were soon disappointed. Once the post-war baby boom got underway many young Communist women began to realize that as wives and especially as mothers their ability to participate in the political and social life of their Party was actually more restricted than before. In her letter to the editor of the

10Shaffer discusses these letters in "Women in the CPUSA," pp. 94-95; Ella Reeve Bloor, We Are Many (New York: International Publishers, 1940) p. 308.
women's page of *The Worker* in April 1946 Joan Garson reported that, as a local Party leader who was also a housewife and the mother of a new baby, she was much less active in CP activities than she wanted to be. Garson's letter articulated the ways that even leading Communist women's "personal" circumstances interfered with their political equality, and sparked a wave of rank-and-file protest among Communists that, unlike the dissension of the 1930s, did not go unheard.

The publication of Joan Garson's letter in the pages of *The Worker* coincided with an increase in the quantity and quality of coverage of women's issues in the Party press. Garson's letter appeared on April 21st, just four days before Elizabeth Gurley Flynn called women "the most decisive group politically in all advanced countries" and invited "every woman, in the trade unions, in the ranks of the Negro people, as well as the wives and mothers on the farms and in the homes and cities" to join the CP. Only a few weeks later the *Daily Worker* published a series of articles that generously praised the newly organized Congress of American Women for its pledge to fight "discrimination against women because of sex or marital

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"Letter to women's page editor from Joan Garson, "Can a Housewife Be Politically Active," *The Worker*, 4/21/46, p. 11."
status, economically, legally, politically or socially."\(^{12}\)
The hypocrisy evident in the Party's simultaneous defense of
gens' equality and disregard for the problems of women
Garson's position did not escape other readers' notice. In
the wake of Garson's letter several Communists wrote to The
Worker to affirm that they experienced similar difficulties
and to admonish the Party for its inadequate understanding
of women's predicaments. Nora Brent wrote to say: "It seems
to me that our whole approach to housewives is slightly
antiquated and a little sectarian."\(^{13}\) S.T. from New York
City articulated the serious consequences that lack of
support for women could have on Party membership:

Joan Garson's letter...touched on the very real
problem of the housekeeper-mother who still wants
to be politically active and yet not deny her
family any of her time....It takes an almost
superhuman effort on the part of the wife to
overcome the scorn and ridicule of the type of
husband who feels his wife's place is in the home.
This leads to real strife and discord, and if not
solved in some manner, sometimes leads to a really
sincere comrade having to drop out of party work
entirely.\(^{14}\)

Hodee Richards, Helen Linia, Jane Renaker and Anne Taylor
also confirmed that they were "in the same boat with Mrs.

\(^{12}\)Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, "Why Women Belong in the
Communist Party," Daily Worker 4/25/46, p. 7; "Congress of
American Women Asks Equality in All Fields," Daily Worker
5/27/46, p. 4.

\(^{13}\)Nora Brent, "Housewives Can Be Active," The Worker
5/19/46, p. 11.

\(^{14}\)Letter from S.T. of NYC to the editor of the women's
page, The Worker, 6/23/46, p. 11.
Garson" and that Garson’s problem was "so general, so agitating, and so in need of a solution," but they were particularly interested in making CP leaders and members aware that "if a branch elects a woman to a position, it is petty-bourgeois to allow her to sink or swim with that responsibility." Leaving women no option but to hire babysitters so that they could continue with their activity, the group submitted, was "nothing more nor less than a tax by the Party on its women members as the price for being of use to the Party." "This is intolerable," they declared: "We believe that the problem is the party’s problem. The Party is responsible to help work out a feasible solution."

In the remaining months of 1946 the exchange of ideas in response to Joan Garson’s letter proliferated in the pages of The Worker. In July, just two weeks after the paper published excerpts from Susan Anthony’s discussion of the inferior political status of American women, yet another local Party leader, A.E. Hudson, wrote to the editor of the women’s page to report the problems he saw in his district and to add his suggestions to the small but growing rank-

15Letter from Hodee Richards, Helen Linia, Jane Renaker, Anne Taylor to the editor of the women’s page, The Worker 6/16/46, p. 11.

16Ibid.

17Ibid.
and-file campaign to improve the CP's approach to women.  
Although he acknowledged that "our problem is an outcrop of the general condition of women in the advanced capitalism of the USA," Hudson proposed that Communists could address "the special aspects that confront us within the party, and in the day-to-day work of the district membership department." He reported that he had visited "scores of comrades" in his own district and discovered that "3/4 of our women comrades were among the inactive." When he asked women why they were not participating in Party activities they told him:

[They] could not leave babies alone and had no one to babysit. Women with jobs have to do housework in the evenings and are too tired to go to meetings. Husbands didn’t really want them to come. Talk in clubs is over their heads. No other women at the meetings; if there are other women they are often very young. No friendly spirit in the clubs.

Hudson realized that rank-and-file women were not the only members of the CP held back by sexism; he pointed out that even politically savvy women who were groomed for leadership positions ultimately suffered similar problems. "What happens to them as time goes on?" he asked rhetorically:

18A.E. Hudson, "Problems of Women in CP Activity," The Worker 7/28/46, p. 11. I am assuming that A.E. Hudson is a man because, according to his letter, he held a powerful position in the leadership of his district, which was not named, and because he talks about women as "they" and "them" and not as "we" and "us." Nevertheless, because A.E. Hudson is identified only by initials, it is possible that she is actually a female.
Some of them marry, and not later than the first baby their 'fate' catches up with them. They submerge in the 'reserve' and become the forgotten generation... This is not their fault. They try hard, sometimes desperately to keep up without help from the rest of us. They occasionally manage to come to a meeting, but they aren't called upon to do work because they cannot devote as much time as they previously did.... Some do not marry, or marry a party functionary, do not raise families, and become the handy-maids in the party offices who carry so much of the dirty work and get so little of the glory. They become isolated, their lives do not resemble those of other women in the community.... Their weakness is not their own--it is ours. We made them.

But women's problems did not stop there. Hudson went on to describe how, in CP settings, "political responsibility... has all too often been a man's privilege, and [clerical] work has been woman's burden." Furthermore, he suggested, "women have little or no mass organization experience, and less political experience than the men in the section."

A.E. Hudson was too conscientious a radical just to complain about the CP's errors in dealing with women; like any good organizer he wanted to propose solutions. Hudson conceded that he did not "know the answers to these problems," and stated that "[m]any of us will have to think, observe, analyze and discuss before we can even hope for a partial solution." Despite his modesty, however, he was willing to suggest some possible steps toward improving Communist women's lot. If women were to achieve equality with men in the Party, he argued, membership personnel needed to:
Tend to every member of the party as a gardner tends to his favorite tree. [They] should receive training...they should know the membership, their potentialities and personal problems, and should help... in the correct utilization of every member within his or her limitations.

In order to make such a change possible he suggested that the CP needed to create a system that allowed housewives and mothers to participate in political activity, and to combat sexist assumptions and practices that were so prevalent within the Party itself:

Clubs should use their ingenuity to enable mothers to attend at least one meeting a month. Teenage clubs should be involved in [baby]sitting and that should be considered political work on the part of youth....We must learn to use the limited time of women comrades....we must stop the mechanical division between political and organizational work, between political and organizational comrades generally as well as along sex lines....We should develop a real cadre policy in regard to women. We should bring the young ones to the fore but not fall into the capitalist misconception that a person is of no use after the age of 35 or 40.

Hudson concluded his letter by reinforcing that "[t]horough thought should be given to the special education of women for party leadership, with full recognition of their particular problems.

If Communist leaders had been unwilling to acknowledge the personal and cultural aspects of women's oppression in 1945, the CAW's work combined with letters such as those from Joan Garson, the San Francisco women, A.E. Hudson and others called attention to their mistake and obliged them to recognize that women's problems were more complicated than
they had previously thought. Throughout the second half of 1946 the Communist press published increasing numbers of articles that focused on women’s problems. From Katrina Mauley’s insistence that "women shouldn’t be forced back into their homes to do the tedious and unstimulating work of the household" and David Platt’s censure of the film "Without Reservations" for its attacks on women’s "right to participate in public affairs [and] their right to do anything but eat, sleep, love and laugh," to Lenore Garrett’s complaints about the restrictions placed on her as a woman sportswriter and Martha Bridger’s critique of women’s magazines for "poisoning women’s minds," Communist authors exposed the ways that cultural assumptions and institutions propagated the myth that women were fit only to marry, keep house, and bear children. At the same time the Worker and Daily Worker carried many more articles explaining the reasons for women’s difficulties, such as excerpts from Susan Anthony’s "Report of the Commission on the Status of Women" about their inferior economic, legal and social status, and advice about ways that Communist women and men could help to reverse such inequalities by participating in women’s rights struggles and supporting the

Congress of American Women. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn's 1947 pamphlet, "Woman's Place in the Fight for a Better World," sought to convince American women that although they had made great progress through the suffrage and labor movements they still had much to achieve. The solutions to their problems, she proposed, could be found in the Communist Party which, by that time, supported the very same list of demands promoted by Susan B. Anthony II and the Congress of American Women:

(1) Equality of women in the political, economic, legal, professional, cultural and social life of our country.
(2) Adequate legislation for maternity and child care to safeguard the health of mother and child.
(3) The right of all women to work; equal pay for equal work; equal training; upgrading and seniority with men in all occupations; legal safeguards for health; minimum wage laws including for domestic workers; old age benefits for working women and workers' wives at age 60; defeat of the misnamed 'equal rights amendment' which would destroy indispensable labor legislation.


(4) Removal of legal disabilities on women citizens.
(5) Full equality for Negro women from segregation, discrimination, poll tax, downgrading in employment.
(6) Adequate childcare facilities with federal and state support for nurseries, recreation centers and schools with hot lunches.
(7) Basic 5 day week of 40 hours especially because women workers have double duty of job and care of home.
(8) No discrimination or quota system against women in [education] or the professions.
(9) Equal appointment of capable women to posts in federal, state, and city governments and in diplomatic service.
(10) Election to office in legislative bodies, labor unions and all public organizations or capable women, Negro and white.
(11) Adequate funds for the Women's Bureau, Children's Bureau, and other governmental agencies concerned especially with the needs of women and children.

In 1947, in addition to improved coverage of women's issues, there was also considerable evidence that the national leadership was starting to take women more seriously. At least some local Party clubs began in that year to plan special events and programs to make it easier for more housewives and mothers to participate in a range of Communist activities. In February the Party put the National Women's Commission to work for the first time since its revival in 1945. Furthermore, over the course of the year the Party also established twelve lower-level women's commissions in Ohio, Michigan, New York, Chicago, Eastern Pennsylvania, Western Pennsylvania, San Francisco, Los

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Ibid.
Angeles, Seattle, New Jersey and Houston to "assess [women's] needs, concrete problems and ties in the community," and "raise party sensitivity as a whole to the needs of women in general."23 Echoing A.E. Hudson's suggestions, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn declared that:

In our Party it is our duty to fully utilize the capabilities of our women members in every capacity and to assist them in solving problems which develop during pregnancy and after childbirth so that they will not become isolated and embittered by enforced political activity.24

In January the Bronxville section of the CP organized a special women's dinner meeting at which men cooked and served food, minded children and washed dishes while their wives heard Margaret Cowl speak about "the role of women today," discussed "other problems affecting women," and pledged to sell 100 subscriptions to The Worker.25 In April the New York State Board of the Party announced that it had approved county wide women-only meetings "to spur recruiting of feminine forces for the Party" and to counteract the fact that men were three times more likely to join the CP than


25Family Teamwork--Subs for the Worker," The Worker 1/5/47.
women. By the end of 1947 many local Party clubs, such as the Kings Highway section in New York City, introduced special women's classes to train women for leadership positions. These cadre training schools provided childcare so that mothers as well as women without children could participate and transportation so that women and their children could get to the meetings with minimal hassle. Because some Party leaders finally began to recognize that women could be essentially equal to men and still confront special problems due to their oppression, rank-and-file women who benefitted from new programs such as the training schools could report that "they have learned concentration in study, have achieved a greater degree of self-confidence, and have become more articulate in their club meetings," and the CP could boast that the number of women in local leadership positions was approaching 50 percent. One woman, a CP member for ten years, summed up the success of the program when she said, "This is the most wonderful experience I have had in the Party."

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27 Jones's "For New Approaches to Our Work Among Women," says on page 742 that daytime classes for women comrades were held in "practically all major districts."


29 Ibid.
1946 and 1947 were important years for women in the Communist Party because they were able to use the organization's own rhetoric about women's equality to convince at least some of the state- and national-level leaders that their "personal" problems were actually political problems that deserved recognition and attention. The Party's efforts to make it easier for housewives and mothers to take part in political activities by planning women's classes and providing childcare were commendable and in some ways forward-looking, but such efforts also accepted women's roles in the nuclear family and reinforced the traditional sexual division of labor. Documents from the CP National Women's Commission from 1947 make it clear that Communist leaders still hoped to recruit more women primarily so that the Party could counteract the right's influence on them and organize and lead "women's work" around the traditionally female issues of housing, high prices, child-welfare and peace instead.\textsuperscript{30} Furthermore, despite the Party's endorsement of Susan Anthony's "Report of the Commission on the Status of Women" and its accommodation to housewives' insistence that it recognize their "personal" problems, official CP theory continued to

\textsuperscript{30}See, for example, memos from National Women's Commission Chairman Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and Secretary Claudia Jones to all CP districts and local women's commissions from 3/24/47 and 8/27/47 in the Federal Bureau of Investigation's collection of "Women Matters" (Bureau file 100-3-78, n.p., section 1.
emphasize the notion that women's oppression was economic; that working-class men did not oppress women; and that class struggle, not the "battle of the sexes" approach of feminism, was the only path to women's liberation. The CP, then, took several steps forward in 1946-47 but it still had a long way to go.

1948 was the real turning point for Communists' analysis of women's oppression and their commitment to freeing women from it. In January of that year Betty Millard, an editor of the Communist journal *New Masses* and a CAW member who would soon replace Susan Anthony as the head of the group's Commission on the Status of Women, published "Woman Against Myth," a two-part article (later reissued as an International Publishers pamphlet) that ultimately became the basis for Communists' new and more complex understanding of women's subordination under capitalism.31 Published to appease Communist women's demands for more work on the woman question and to mark the centennial of the American women's rights movement, "Woman Against Myth" reiterated much of what Communists in the U.S. and Europe had been saying about women's oppression for decades. Borrowing from Engels, Millard argued that women's inferiority was not biological,

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31 Millard's "Woman Against Myth" appeared in *New Masses* on December 30, 1947 pp. 7-10 and January 6, 1948 pp. 7-10. It was reissued in pamphlet form by International Publishers in 1948.
but rather a historical phenomenon that originated with the evolution of private property and the resultant developments of monogamy and prostitution which made women "vassals of vassals....confined to household drudgery....excluded from public life."\(^{32}\) Taking her cue from Marx, Millard also suggested that the industrial revolution "cracked the old prison walls around women" by "undermining the rigid traditions of feudalism....substituting the concept of free contract for that of inherited right," and "[laying] the groundwork for their freedom." Although she recognized that large-scale industry had the potential to free women, however, Millard was clear that "emancipation by no means took place automatically." She deftly illustrated the ways that women acted as agents in their own emancipation by describing Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony's struggles for women's rights and women's suffrage, and the Lowell mill girls' fight for higher wages and shorter hours. She also made it very clear that although women in 1948 had rights they lacked a century earlier, their fight for equality was still extremely necessary.

It was Betty Millard's discussion of the problems that women faced in the contemporary U.S. that would ultimately help to revise Communists' official theoretical position on the woman question. Millard was not the first person to question the CP's standard assumptions about the extent of

\(^{32}\) "Woman Against Myth II," p. 7.
women's subordination under capitalism--Mary Inman is her most notable predecessor--but she was the first who succeeded in inducing the Party to take her blended analysis of Marxism and feminism seriously. Although her arguments bear remarkable similarity to those in Inman's *In Woman's Defense*, the fact that she has no recollection of encountering Inman's work directly indicates that her analysis probably reflects her involvement with the Congress of American Women's Commission on the Status of Women and her familiarity with the writings of Susan B. Anthony II.  

Millard successfully challenged the Party line on women in several important ways. First, she expanded on Anthony's analysis and countered the notion that class exploitation was the sole cause of women's oppression by detailing the ways that religious doctrine, Freudian psychology, laws, customs, and language as well as "day-to-day attacks in books, films, radio shows, and magazine articles" together comprised a hegemonic ruling-class ideology that subordinated all women by belittling their achievements, sapping their confidence and convincing them that they were really inferior to men.  

Furthermore, she ventured to suggest that women's oppression affected every woman--

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33 Betty Millard indicated in a conversation with Linn Shapiro of American University that she had no recollection of Mary Inman's work. Linn Shapiro conveyed this information to me in personal correspondence in August 1993.

34 "Woman Against Myth I" and "Woman Against Myth II," passim.
regardless of class—when she daringly proposed that

although:

Women are not lynched....or killed by the millions
in death camps--as women....it might be
interesting....to consider the question of rape as
a form of violence practiced against women....Rape
is a violent expression of a pattern of male
supremacy, an outgrowth of age-old economic,
political and cultural exploitation of women by
men.  

Millard anticipated the potential reactions of orthodox
Marxists and countered them in advance by linking male
supremacy and class exploitation symbiotically: the cultural
and ideological bases for women's oppression, she argued,
convinced both sexes that women were truly inferior to men;
helped to justify and perpetuate discrimination against
women in the workforce, politics and social life; and, by
dividing working amongst themselves, furthered the
exploitation of the working-class as a whole.  

Millard's second goal in "Woman Against Myth" was to
reverse Communists' idea that women's equality was the
natural and inevitable outgrowth of progressive struggle and
to demonstrate that women's oppression was not precisely
comparable to racial, religious or economic oppressions.
"Women's attempt to achieve equality with men," she
explained, "involves an especially difficult, concealed and
subtle struggle because women are not isolated in ghettos,


\[^{36}\] Ibid.
but live in intimate daily relationships with the 'superior' sex, a relationship infinitely complex and entangled with biological, economic and social factors." The result?

Millard suggested that even in radical circles:

Many otherwise progressive men cling to their vested interest in male superiority and many women are so committed to the seeming security of their inferior yet 'protected' position that they echo the voteless, propertyless, completely dependent women of a century ago who declared to Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony that they already had 'all the rights they wanted.'

In other words, "Woman Against Myth" implied, contrary to many Communists' opinion, that even the best of working-class and progressive men could be guilty of contributing to the oppression of the women in their lives.

In order to combat all these elements of women's oppression and to make women truly equal inside and outside of progressive organizations Betty Millard emphasized that Communists needed not only to struggle against class exploitation and for women's rights, but to wage a "serious attack on male chauvinism" in the U.S.'s social and economic structures, in political organizations like the CP, and in individual relationships between men and women. This was an extremely radical suggestion, both for the time and for the context. But although one reviewer criticized "Woman Against Myth" for being "too feminist," another argued that

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38 Ibid, p. 10.
it gave "the correct Marxian approach" to the woman question and others thought that Millard had "done a terrific job." The pamphlet's publication by International Publishers, the official CP publishing house, indicates that the CP leadership was not too critical of its content. In the end, Millard's careful arguments about the insidious prevalence of male supremacist ideology, her discussion of its damaging impact on women and men, and her insistence on its potential to hinder the success of the progressive movement convinced many Communists that fighting male chauvinism should be an important component of the struggle for women's liberation inside and outside the Communist movement. Once "Woman Against Myth" successfully convinced a critical mass of rank and file women and men that male supremacy was a serious problem it was only a matter of time before Millard's ideas became a key part of the Party's larger strategy for ending oppression in all its forms.

At the beginning of 1948, even though they were aware of Millard's work, Communist Party leaders apparently had no plan to change the Party's orientation towards women significantly. The CP as a whole was still paying much more

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39 Milton Howard's "Male Superiority Debunked in 'Woman Against Myth,'" Daily Worker 6/20/48, p. 11 suggests that some of Millard's work is "too feminist." Margaret Krumbein's "How to Fight for Women's Rights," The Worker 8/8/48, p. 9 argues that she "gives the correct Marxian approach." Harriet Magil, in my interview with her on 1/14/93, suggested that many women in the CAW and the CP thought Millard had "done a terrific job."
attention to women's issues than it had before WWII and, because they had come a long way toward recognizing women's "special" problems combining motherhood and politics and compensating for them, Communist leaders probably thought they were already doing enough. In the first months of 1948 most CP women's work continued in the direction it had taken in 1947. Party publications printed regular articles to counter right-wing propaganda, such as Elizabeth Gurley Flynn's review that dismissed Ferdinand Lundberg's and Marynia Farnham's popular book *The Modern Woman--The Lost Sex* as a "rahash" of Hitler's "kinder, kueche, kirche" arguments. At the same time CP recruitment campaigns continued to appeal to women in traditional female terms by urging them to "protect their families" and to "fight against monopoly prices and the rising cost of living, in defense of democratic liberties, for peoples' health and education programs, and for peace." Women's branches and cadre training schools proliferated, but they continued to

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The Party leadership's recruiting campaign for women is summed up in the "Draft Resolution for the National Convention, CPUSA" submitted by the National Committee and reprinted in *Political Affairs*, v. 27, n. 6 (March, 1948): 483-513, p. 497.
focus on adapting to the problems caused by the traditional sexual division of labor instead of opposing it wholesale.

Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and Claudia Jones, heads of the Party's National Women's Commission, were only somewhat more advanced on women's issues than the CP's more powerful male leaders. They saw 1948 as an inspiring year for women and they hoped to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Seneca Falls women's rights convention by intensifying the CP's existing efforts to recruit, educate, and promote women into leadership positions. Flynn's and Jones's January 28th memo to all CP districts suggested that the month of March should be used by all branches to discuss the woman question, to "train women for their role in rent, housing and other struggles," and to educate "men comrades....as to the special oppressed position of women, and comradely assistance in the solution of practical problems of the home so that the women comrades can play a full role in Party and mass work." In an article written to celebrate International Women's Day Flynn declared:

This is a year of destiny....We must be bold to reach the women--in the shops and factories, on the farms, in the homes--to make them part of a

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peoples' movement for peace, democracy, security, here and the world over.\footnote{Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, '1948--A Year of Inspiring Anniversaries for Women,' \textit{Political Affairs} v. 27, n. 3 (March, 1948): 259-265, quote from p. 265.}

By the time International Women's Day actually arrived, however, the Communist Party's appeals to women suddenly became considerably more urgent. As CP leaders began to realize that its primarily constituency—the labor movement—was becoming increasingly hostile to Communism, they gradually began to pin the Party's hopes on other groups, including women and African-Americans, instead.\footnote{Gerald Zahavi, "Passionate Commitments: Race, Sex and Communism at Schenectady General Electric, 1932-1954," unpublished manuscript in possession of the author.} In February 1948, after Claudia Jones, CP General Secretary Eugene Dennis, and other leading Communists were arrested for violating the Smith Act, the Party decided that fascism was threatening American democracy and determined that women, because of their natural interests in peace, would be some of the best fighters against it. Both Jones (who was out on bail) and Flynn took advantage of International Women's Day to push the existing campaign to politicize and recruit women even further. Jones proposed that women could "decide the outcome in '48" and resist the rising tide of fascism by joining the Communist Party and voting for

\textit{Political Affairs} v. 27, n. 3
Progressive Party candidates in the upcoming elections. Flynn, arguing that "Fascists everywhere struck cruelly at women," urged them to participate in a "women's campaign for the prompt release of Claudia Jones, to really stir and arouse the women of our city and nation for her liberation." Once CP leaders began to view women's participation in Communist activities as especially crucial for the Party's survival, their recognition of the real need to fight against male chauvinism in CP policies and settings also grew. By the spring of 1948 Elizabeth Gurley Flynn's widely read "Life of the Party" column announced that changes were in the works:

45 Claudia Jones, "Women Can Decide the Outcome in '48," The Worker 3/7/48, p. 3. Throughout 1948, in articles such as Arnold Sroog's "Women Lead as Two More States Set Up 3rd Parties," The Worker 4/11/48, p. 3, the CP emphasized that the Progressive Party had a firm commitment to women's equality and traditional women's issues. Sroog argued, for example, that "One of the outstanding features of the rapid development of the 3rd party movement behind Henry Wallace has been the prominent role played by women in all phases of its organization....[Women's] activity at the meetings, both as leaders and as participants in discussions from the floor was commensurate with their numbers...First and foremost is the peace plank of the Progressive Party platform, which plays the biggest part in winning women not only to support Wallace, but to actively campaign for him....The second part of the Wallace campaign that holds special attractions for women is its economic programs, especially for price control to end the inflationary situation at the corner grocers. As the people most concerned with the family budget this national problem is also a personal one for women and thousands of them are looking for the right answer on a political level."

Many of our new members are not aware, and many old members have forgotten, that there is a Communist position on the woman question and that historically Communists are in the vanguard to fight against everything that exploits and oppresses women....A general misconception is that work among women is 'woman's work.' We do not take that attitude any longer towards either work among Negro people or youth. But our Women's Commission is expected to be the conscience of the party, absolving all others from this important field of work. A few women comrades can't swing this assignment alone unaided by the entire party. There are prejudices to overcome, family problems, the double burden of our trade union women of a home and a job—all of which need collective efforts to resolve. There are 'blind spots' on many of these subjects, even among otherwise good trade unionists and Communists....Women are going places in 1948. Let's help make it towards us, not into the death grip of reaction. Let's recheck our plans in every club. To paraphrase Lenin's famous remark: Scratch every district in this 'sensitive spot'—their mentality as regards women.47

There was never unanimous agreement among CP leaders in early 1948 that supporting a fight against male chauvinist ideology and behavior should be a high priority for the CP. In the end, top Party leaders began to concede that such a struggle might be necessary only because women leaders such as Jones and Flynn suggested that addressing the problem of male supremacy might bring more women into the organization and into the fight against the domestic policies of the Cold War. Almost as soon as the term "male chauvinism" began to appear in the Party press, however, Communist women embraced it. For them the issue was important in and of itself; they

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regarded the Party’s identification of the problem as an invitation to point out manifestations of male chauvinism in a wide variety of settings. By mid-1948 the Communist Party had an internal rebellion on its hands. The organization had a well-deserved reputation for quashing internal dissent, but because of its much promoted post-war commitment to women’s equality and its vulnerability to accusations of authoritarianism in the wake of anti-communist arrests and attacks, top CP leaders must have felt that they not only had to allow rank-and-file criticism of CP practices, but had to respond to it. By the end of the year the Party’s theoretical position on women’s oppression and its practical commitment to women’s liberation had undergone a revolution: Communists no longer regarded male supremacy as a dangerous bourgeois concept, but as a legitimate problem that hindered every segment of the Communist movement and demanded opposition.

Before 1948, complaints about male supremacy in the Communist Party appeared only occasionally in The Worker and The Daily Worker. In the 1930s when Communists were first discussing women’s rights, rank-and-file women sometimes wrote to The Worker magazine to complain about the limitations they faced as they tried to be politically
active.\textsuperscript{48} And in November of 1946, for example, one woman wrote to \textit{The Worker} to complain that although her "husband could given an excellent lecture on the necessity to emancipate women" he refused to think about how he colluded in women's oppression by mistreating her.\textsuperscript{49} But although these letter-writers were discussing a difficulty that most Communist women probably shared, few people took their concerns very seriously. The paper printed their letters, but they received little or no response.

It was only after the publication of "Woman Against Myth" in early January of 1948 that Communist women began to rally around the issue of male supremacy and to insist that their Party begin to address the problems of male supremacist ideology and behavior. As early as January 28, 1948 one angry woman acted on Millard's directive to fight male chauvinism as well as class exploitation and demanded:

\begin{quote}
We women would like to see some study of male chauvinism in the United States. And we would like a weekly or bi-weekly column in the \textit{Sunday Worker} which would discuss concrete examples of male chauvinism and the Marxist solutions to them—a column which would point out how this attitude of superiority exists even among men in the Communist Party, and how it affects their personal relations and what can be done about it. And don't put it on the 'Woman's Page.' Print it where men will read it too.\textsuperscript{50}
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{49}Letter to \textit{The Worker} from W.O., 11/10/46, p. 11.

\textsuperscript{50}Letter to \textit{The Daily Worker} from "A Communist Woman from NYC," 1/28/48.
In the months that followed, as leaders such as Elizabeth Gurley Flynn began to reinforce the idea that male supremacy was a legitimate concern, many other women and men took up Millard’s call and began to point out manifestations of male supremacist attitudes and behavior in various aspects of Communist Party life. On April 13, 1948 a Brooklyn woman named Diane Naroff wrote to the editor of the Daily Worker to say that she was "shocked at male superiority talk."\(^{51}\) Aware that the Communist Party had recently begun to present itself as the place in which women could "get to the core of their oppression and destroy its seeds," Naroff wrote that she was appalled to hear a Communist man declare that "men are superior to women in every respect."\(^{52}\) This concrete example of the ways in which male supremacy was men’s problem as well as women’s provoked a spate of responses that called attention to other incidences of male chauvinist behavior among supposedly progressive Communist men. When Margaret Brill wrote to The Worker in June to ask what she should do about a husband who believed that it was Communist women’s "duty to stay home with the children at night" and to "take care of her husband so he can go to meetings while she protects the family," and who accused her of "nagging" when she argued with him about these questions, dozens of

\(^{51}\)Letter to Editor from Diane Naroff Daily Worker 4/13/48, p. 8.

\(^{52}\)Ibid.
irate readers responded.\textsuperscript{53} M.L. from the Bronx argued that "By his attitude [Brill's husband] has created in his home conditions which are similar to conditions in an open shop and placed himself in the position of the union busting boss."\textsuperscript{54} E.E. from Long Island City blamed Mr. Brill's attitude on the CP and blasted the Party for too often neglecting male chauvinism. "If, after the problem has been explained the comrade insists upon his right to consider women inferior," E.E. wrote, "I consider him as guilty as one who is white chauvinist and I feel he must be expelled."\textsuperscript{55} William Holzka charitably assumed that Mr. Brill simply lacked education on the matter. He demonstrated the success of Betty Millard's efforts to explain the dangers of male supremacist ideology when he challenged:

\begin{quote}
I would ask Mr. Brill 'the great' to read Betty Millard's wonderful pamphlet 'Woman Against Myth' and on completion to look Comrade Flynn in the eye and still maintain his chauvinistic attitude.\textsuperscript{56}
\end{quote}

If William Holzka's letter showed that some men had been convinced by Millard's arguments, other responses to Margaret Brill's made it very clear to everyone who read The Worker that not all men were quite so easy to persuade.

\textsuperscript{53}Brill’s letter appeared under the headline "Can You Help This Wife?" in The Worker 6/6/48, p. 9.

\textsuperscript{54}Letter from M.L. to The Worker 6/13/48.

\textsuperscript{55}Letter from E.E. to The Worker 6/20/48, p. 9.

\textsuperscript{56}William Holzka to The Worker 6/20/48, p. 9.
A.G. from Elizabeth, NJ wrote in to say that although "a woman has a right to make a contribution....kids should come first." Similarly, J. Gerard contended that:

A woman married to a progressive worker must realize that her first responsibility is to manage the home and the children and her husband's first responsibility is to provide and struggle for an increase in the level of provision toward socialism.  

Defensive but still sure of his position Gerard justified his point of view by declaring:

If this is interpreted as a position supporting the married woman's place in the home, then you're right. A progressive worker has to have a feeling of security about his marriage....he has to know that his wife is fighting alongside him by taking care of the rear just as the front line soldier needs the worker in the factory....The home is the most valuable possession of the family....I charge that the wife who fails to do her job as a good home manager for the progressive worker is being bourgeois in her understanding and is showing contempt for the progressive movement.

Another reader, G.P. also wrote to challenge Margaret Brill's interpretation of her situation:

What about Mr. Brill's side of the question? Could it be that Mrs. Brill was exaggerating her husband's faults? My wife called me a chauvinist because I wanted her to go away for the summer with the kids!

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57 A.G. to The Worker 6/20/48, p. 9.
59 Ibid.
Using a tactic that Communist men often employed when they wanted to dismiss their wives complaints about male chauvinism G.P. concluded his challenge by asking his comrades, "Is that or is that not feminism?"  

Many readers were angry enough about the opinions expressed by men like Mr. Brill, A.G., J. Gerard, and G.P. that they, in turn, wrote letters to correct them. J. Gingold argued:

"Woman's place is in the home.' Where have I heard that before? Didn't the words spout from the mustached mouth of the notorious paper hanger of Germany?....Let us fight for equality beginning in the home, and remove the excessive filth of ruling over women. Keeping a wife enslaved keeps her husband enslaved much longer."

An anonymous reader from Rochester echoed J. Gingold's words when he or she wrote:

Mrs. Brill's problem is an 'occupational disease' among the wives of Communist men, unfortunately ....It seems to me that the very first prerequisite for being a Communist is an interest in and love of humanity and a willingness to make life work better for mankind. It seems such an easy thing to start in one's home. And while this may be news to some of our male Party members--their wives are human beings.

Lucille Gold reminded women and CP leaders that the male chauvinist tendencies of some Communist men could not be blamed solely on the men themselves, and that Communist

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61 Ibid.


women and the Party as a whole needed to take more responsibility for solving the problem:

For too long the problem that faced Margaret and other mothers in our party has been shoved off on the woman's page and then thrown out to the readers for suggestions and help. It is more than a personal affair. Its answer determines the morale and the activity of our party, and mainly the development of women's concentration work. Therefore I cannot understand the problem remaining in the discussion stage. It indicates that the party has not given the leadership and the direction. It is not for the women alone to find the answers but the responsibility of every branch, section and county. Women's Commissions must be set up to politicalize and elevate the discussion of women's role in our party. To lead the way in finding new forms to make women's work feasible....Then watch the women solve their personal problems. 

Gold's complaints were echoed by a group of Los Angeles women who argued that:

"In the past....women's relationship to the struggle around such issues [as peace, welfare, children, and high prices] has been oversimplified and progressive appeals to them have been flavored by the bourgeois concept of their adjunct role to the men of their family." 

Furthermore, they continued:

....Our recognition of the [woman question] has tended to be vague and mechanical, largely composed of formal nods in general reports and tributes in our press on March 8th to women's

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65 "Overcome Our Weakness in our Work Among Women," signed by "A Group of Los Angeles Women," in Pre-Convention Discussion Bulletin #4 issued by the California Communist Party, July 27, 1948. This document is also reprinted under the headline "Our Work Among Women" in The Worker 8/1/48, p. 4; and discussed in the FBI's "Women's Matters" collection, San Francisco Bureau file 100-11889.
historical struggles. In theoretical work we have popularized no more of Engels and Lenin than their classic formulations concerning the 'socially unnecessary and barbariously unproductive character of housework' and the solution to be found under socialism.\(^\text{66}\)

In order to improve the Party's work on the woman question in theory and in practice, they argued, the CP needed to remove women from the margins and to make them central to every aspect of Party life:

Commisions to deal specifically with the work among women should be established on county and state levels. The sections and clubs should approach this question in the light of its concrete manifestation within their areas. In industrial clubs, for example, the problems of women workers and their relation to the unions provides the basis for the work. In organizing housewives around childcare and other aspects mentioned above. In theoretical work the Marxist classics on the subject should be restudied and analysis made of the changing status of women and the family under imperialism. Educational material should be prepared and integrated into all aspects of our Party's education. Our press should regularly feature news and comment which reflect the realities of the problem rather than, as at present, limiting itself to household hints. Through every available means we must expose the slanders and distortions about women that issue daily from the mass information and cultural mediums. Within the party attention should be directed constantly toward eliminating the deeply ingrained attitudes of male superiority which reflect themselves in the family as well as party life.\(^\text{67}\)

Like Gold and others they declared: "This is a political problem, a collective responsibility."\(^\text{68}\)

\(^{66}\)Ibid.

\(^{67}\)Ibid.

\(^{68}\)Ibid.
The number of letters like these that appeared in The Worker and other sources in 1948 made it abundantly clear that there was great disagreement among Communists about the nature of women's oppression and the role male supremacy played in perpetuating it. In response to this confusion, to the evidence that male chauvinist attitudes were hindering Communists' political development, and to demands such as those made by Lucille Gold and the L.A. women, CP leaders acknowledged that the Party still "tended to look upon woman as just a sort of female man," and that it was "literally starved theoretically" on the issue of women's oppression. In order to establish more agreement on the woman question the CP National Board appointed the Subcommittee on Theoretical Aspects of Work Among Women to evaluate and revise the Party's analysis of women's oppression, to rethink its presentation of the issues, and to oversee the publication of a new book to instruct Communists about the correct approach to women's liberation.

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69Unsigned, undated letter to National Women's Commission Secretary Claudia Jones from the microfilmed collection of Betty Gannett's papers (published by the State Historical Society of Wisconsin), reel #13; William Z. Foster, "On Improving the Party's Work Among Women," Political Affairs, 27, 10 (October 1948): 984-990, p. 985.

70All the information available about the Subcommittee on the Theoretical Aspects of Work Among Women comes from two sources: the undated, unsigned letter I discovered in the microfilmed collection of CP Educational Director Betty Gannett's papers, reel 13, and Foster's Political Affairs article "On Improving the Party's Work Among Women" (both
Unfortunately the Subcommittee On Theoretical Aspects of Work Among Women never issued a book of new Communist theory about women. The rising tide of anti-communism and the arrests of major Communist leaders beginning in the late 1940s must have made it difficult for any national CP committee to carry out its long-term goals and projects; it is possible that given the hostile political environment the
cited above). Although the letter is undated, it is clear from the text that it comes from 1948 when the Subcommittee for Theoretical Work Among Women was formed, and that it was written by some member of the Subcommittee. It outlines the tasks that lay before the Subcommittee, arguing that "our fight is for the complete freedom and equality of woman. We must direct our fire against every form of her subjugation--economic, political, social and sexual..." and suggesting ways that Communists could remedy the theoretical deficiencies that had made the fight for women's liberation so difficult in the past. The question of the letter's authorship is an interesting puzzle. The processor's note on the first page indicates that it was "probably by Betty Gannett, although the exact authorship is unclear." In fact, I doubt very much that Betty Gannett wrote the letter. Although she was a woman who worked her way up in the CP national leadership, there is no indication that she ever worked on women's issues: the only other document in her massive collection of papers that concerns women's work is a letter from a group of women in New York City in 1955 and none of her published work deals specifically with women's oppression or women's liberation. This document's recognition that new theory was needed to address issues such as "specific samenesses and....differences" between men and women, and the role of sexuality in women's oppression indicates to me that it was probably written by someone who dealt with and thought about women's issues on a much more regular basis. I wonder if perhaps it might have been written by Betty Millard and sent to Claudia Jones who then sent a copy to Betty Gannett, but I have no concrete evidence to support that suspicion. It is also quite possible that some other member of the Subcommittee was responsible for writing the letter. Unfortunately, because of the dearth of sources about this Subcommittee, there is no record of who its members were.
Subcommittee decided to rely upon "Woman Against Myth," which the Party reissued as a pamphlet in the spring of 1948, instead of issuing something new.\textsuperscript{71} Despite the difficulties it faced, however, the Subcommittee did manage to define the position that all Communists were expected to take regarding women's oppression. In November 1948 the group published "On Improving the Party's Work Among Women" in the Party's chief theoretical journal Political Affairs, and did so under National Party Chairman William Z. Foster's byline so that even the most skeptical and male chauvinist CP members would be forced to take it seriously.\textsuperscript{72} That


\textsuperscript{72}Foster's article, which is adapted from his 8/9/48 report to Subcommittee, is clearly based on the suggestions put forth in the unsigned letter from the Gannett collection. Foster cites the same theoretical deficiencies and makes the same suggestions forremedying those deficiencies, often in the same or very similar language as the letter. For example, the letter says about women's intellectual capacities: "The intellect is one sphere in which the woman and man are not only equal, but almost, if not entirely identical....And here too is one of the major fields where male superiority theories have to be vigorously combatted. There are a host of stubborn and dangerous male chauvinist ideas here, among them being contentions that because of woman's smaller, on the average, brain than man's, therefore she is inferior intellectually to him, that she thinks 'intuitively,' and does not reason objectively as man is supposed to do." Foster's article says: "Male supremacists boldly claim that woman is, by her very make-up, intellectually inferior to man. Her brain is said to average somewhat less in weight than the man's and, therefore, the reactionaries argue that she cannot think as well as he does. They put woman's thinking capacity somewhere between the animal's and man's. That is, the animal is guided by its instincts, the woman thinks 'intuitively,' while the man reasons objectively. Such false arguments, contrary to science and experience but
short article summarized the Subcommittee's new thinking by defending women's "age long fight for equality as workers, citizens, home-builders, and in marital relations"; exposing "pseudoscientific" arguments about women's physical, intellectual, social, psychological and sexual inferiority; declaring that while "women are different from men they are fully their equals"; and officially endorsing Betty Millard's suggestion that a struggle against the hegemonic ideology of male supremacy had to be a vital component of Communists larger battle against women's oppression. By the

widely current, have done and continue to do grave damage not only to woman's fight for equality, but to society as a whole." Similarly, the letter says: "We have to pay special attention to the urgent matter of sexual education. Our Party should have very much to say on this crucial question. So far, we have said nothing in our puritanical, hands-off attitude towards sex....Of all the roots of male chauvinism (and these are many) perhaps the most important is the aggressive role played by the man in the sexual act with the woman. It runs like a red thread through the domineering attitude of men towards women in every field of activity." The article says: "A second weakness is to be found in a pronounced reticence in dealing with questions of sex.....Reactionaries contend by inference if not frankly that since man plays the more positive and aggressive role sexually, he also should dominate the woman in her social life....Indeed, in our propaganda and agitational material we hardly deal with the subject at all....Without this it is impossible for us to combat the male supremacy 'theory' and to discuss fundamentally the relationship of woman to man in society." It is not surprising that Foster was not the sole author of this article--he was not known in general for his original thinking on the woman question. Rebecca Hill in "Nothing Personal?" suggested perhaps Claudia Jones was the real voice behind the article, but since the letter was originally sent to her, it is also clear that she was not the originator of the ideas the article contained, even if she put it together for Foster in the end. The ideas within the article must have been attributed to Foster in order to insure that they would not be dismissed by sexist CP members as the feminist rantings of misguided CP women.
end of 1948, in other words, the American Communist Party resolved that "[women’s] economic, political and social....demands and struggles, vital as they may be, are in themselves not enough," and that "an ideological attack must be made against the whole system of male superiority ideas which continue to play such an important part in woman’s subjugation."  

Leading Communists’ belated acknowledgement that a struggle against male supremacy was an important and necessary part of their work represented a great step forward for the CP and its record on women’s issues. Leaders such as Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Claudia Jones, and William Z. Foster who finally accepted the idea that American Communists needed to expand the classical Marxist analysis of women’s oppression ultimately probably did so not only because they wanted to win a "wider mass following" among working women, but because they hoped to quell arguments over the issue of male supremacy and to promote Party unity in the face of hostile attacks from the outside. What CP leaders did not realize is that by officially condemning all manifestations of male chauvinism they were actually making the Party vulnerable to still more criticism from within its own ranks. In the wake of Foster’s article, gender-conscious Communist women and men began to use the CP’s official rejection of male supremacy to demand that the

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73Ibid, p. 988.
Party practice what it preached in all aspects of its work. 1948 was a watershed for the CP’s work on the woman question, but in 1949 and later Communist leaders were repeatedly forced to respond to internal criticism by extending the Party’s fight against all forms of women’s oppression and expanding its efforts to educate progressives about the need for women’s liberation.

The first and most striking example of rank-and-file Communists’ use of new CP theory about women to force further changes in the Party’s practices occurred almost immediately after the appearance of Foster’s "On Improving the Party’s Work Among Women." One of the major contributions of the article was its discussion of the male supremacist assumptions that lay behind accepted notions about sexuality. Foster broke American Communists’ silence on the issue of sex for the first time since the publication of In Woman’s Defense by repeating some of the points Mary Inman made in 1939. Arguing that "the reactionary contention that nature has made man essentially polygamous and woman monogamous....is the theory of the double standard of bourgeois morals which seeks to justify the sexual exploitation of woman," he insisted that "[Communists] must show both from science and experience how such standards
[do] incalculable harm to woman's happiness and her position in society."  

Although it appeared in the most esoteric of the CP's journals, Foster's points were not lost on rank-and-file Communists. Many women and men quickly recognized that this official opposition to the sexual exploitation of women conflicted with the Party press's practice of publishing pictures of scantily clad models, beauty contest winners and "bathing beauties" with captions that exclaimed "Most Beautiful Legs in the World," and "Mrs. New York--And She Can Cook Too."  

Beginning in January 1949 readers began a campaign to protest against such "cheesecake." Phyllis and Morty from Jamaica, New York wrote to say:

Our Daily Worker is the best newspaper in this country because it is the only paper that consistently fights for the interests of the working class and its allies. In way of criticism, we feel it is very important for the Daily to eliminate the cheesecake pictures. These pictures have no liberating effect for women and the workingclass, but on the contrary, are used to perpetuate male supremacy through the idea that sex is women's only attribute.  

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75Both The Worker and the Daily Worker are filled with such photographs before 1949. For examples see: Daily Worker 9/9/48, p. 9; Daily Worker 8/18/48, p. 4; Daily Worker 11/17/48, p. 11.

A. Kutzik from the Bronx wrote to support Phyllis’s and Morty’s arguments by comparing "cheesecake" to racist stereotypes:

What would we think if 90% of the pictures of Negroes in our paper were to show them in ‘zoot suits?’ The constant exhibition of women in bathing suits, or worse, of show girls and ‘actresses’ is morally and politically just as inadmissible. It is a most flagrant manifestation of the male supremacy theories which have poisoned the minds of nearly every man and woman in America, including progressives and Communists.77

Similarly, A.J.M. wrote to the editor of the West coast paper, the People’s World:

I have a large and growing file of bathing beauties, stage and screen queens, and other bare and buxom lovelies whose likenesses appear frequently in the PW. Now I declare that this custom is at odds with our paper’s practice. The historical and social significance of woman’s physical charm as a commodity is so well known that I need not labor the point. The pictures--to say nothing of the coy bourgeois captions--are evidence that there are those on the PW’s staff who do not know about, or worse, who are cynical regarding the woman question. Every PW reader and every progressive group would rise in fury if the bourgeois characterization of the Negro ‘song and dance man’ or the ‘lazy’ Mexican were chronic in the paper. Why then is the cheesecake stuff permitted?78

Mary from Oakland concurred:

The women today who are aware of the necessity for social change are demanding recognition and encouragement of their efforts to take their


rightful place in this major undertaking. For these women, 'cheesecake' is a slap in the face, expressing as it does an emphasis on the physical gifts of nature and a total lack of appreciation of the mentality and training necessary to institute any change....I have seen many requests from readers for articles and items on the role of women in this social struggle. Surely you cannot continue to present artistic views of the female body as an answer to this demand.79

The controversy over cheesecake in CP publications continued to unfold in the newspapers over the next several months. Most people opposed it, and the few who wrote to defend it only succeeded in proving that male supremacy was indeed still a problem within the CP's ranks.80 By the spring of 1949 readers' letters began to indicate that "sufficient protest on your policy of displaying women....has been registered" and to suggest that the space currently being used for cheesecake in CP newspapers should instead be used "for the purpose of eliminating and exposing the special forms of oppression of women" and for


80 For example, Mike and Neil from NYC wrote to the editor of the Daily Worker "In Defense of the Body Beautiful": "We have just read Phyllis and Morty's letter....in which they object to cheesecake....We are two members of the progressive-thinking section of the male population of America. We are for socialism and participate in the struggle to make it possible in our own small way. And yet we still like pictures of the body beautiful (female). Besides the pictures of girls appearing in DW not only show us pretty legs, but those girls look darned intelligent! So, dear editor, take our thanks and encouragement. Keep up the good work, although perhaps for Phyllis's sake (and other females) you should print some shots of the body beautiful (male)."
photographs of "women active in labor unions and progressive political work." Because of the Party’s new policy of opposing male chauvinist ideology, the editors of The Worker and the Daily Worker had little choice but to respond to readers’ demands. As early as February 1949 the number of pin-ups in the Party’s papers decreased markedly; by June cheesecake disappeared entirely from the pages of The Worker and the Daily Worker.

Incidents such as the cheesecake controversy made CP leaders aware that the work they had already done to improve the Party’s theory and work on women was not sufficient to solve a problem as widespread and deeply-rooted as male superiority. As it became clear that simply calling attention to the existence of male supremacy was not enough to eliminate it CP leaders tried various new strategies for opposing it. The Party’s weapon of choice in its war against the ideology of male superiority was education. Beginning in 1949 the Women’s Commission and the National Committee began to issue educational materials to supplement the existing literature on the woman question and to promote a broader understanding of the complex nature of women’s oppression among the Party’s rank-and-file members. In March of 1950, for example, the CP National Committee issued a Speakers’ Guide for International Women’s Day instructing

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81See letters to People’s World from E.C. and S.F., 5/10/49 and from group of six, 5/23/49, both in Inman’s "Thirteen Years of CPUSA Misleadership," pp. 30-31.
local leaders to use the month of March "to raise the theoretical and ideological understanding of the Marxist-Leninist position on the woman question of the entire Party....and to boldly develop and promote woman cadres."\textsuperscript{82}

In March and April 1950, in response to readers' demands, the Party overhauled the women's section of *The Worker* so that it too could educate male and female readers about the growing importance of women's work.\textsuperscript{83} The old women's page, distinguished by a masthead that read "It's On the House" and the silhouette of a high-heeled woman dusting, was replaced by a new page called "Woman Today" and a graphic of two women's smiling faces, one black and one white. Claudia Jones and Peggy Dennis, the editors of "Woman Today," stopped publishing dress patterns and household hints and instead filled the pages with articles about women's history, their role in the peace movement, and their contributions to political struggles around the world. Furthermore, frequent "Woman Today" articles criticized persistent male supremacist practices such as Americans' tendencies to call adult women "girls," to belittle them,

\textsuperscript{82}Communist Party National Committee, "Speakers Guide on International Women's Day for Club and Group Discussions, Forums, Lectures, Mass Meetings," February 1950, p. 9 in Dorothy Healey Collection, Special Collections, California State University-Long Beach Library, box 125B, item #54.

\textsuperscript{83}See for example, letter from J.K. "Suggestions on the Woman's Page." *The Worker* 2/12/50; letter from L.H. "Another Protest on Fashion Story," *The Worker* 2/12/50; letter from E.S., "Wants Different Slant on Cartoons," *The Worker* 2/19/50.
and to make them the objects of "false humor." Most readers loved the new women's pages and wrote to The Worker to praise the changes. Ethel S. from Philadelphia wrote, "I am greatly pleased to see the start of a real woman's page. Please no household hints, cooking and what to do when baby pukes." E.L. agreed:

I am extremely happy to see this type of page. I had felt before that a so-called women's page devoted only to care of children and home was to some extent an acceptance of 'woman's place is in the home' thinking.

And E.R. from Los Angeles rejoined:

It's such a pleasure to read about women...and about organizational activities such as the drive for peace. It's such a relief to be no longer affronted by the (unintentional!) male chauvinist line that our problems were primarily our inefficiency as housekeepers.

In addition to praise, many readers also wrote to the women's page to offer additional suggestions for improvement thereby applying continuous pressure on CP leaders to take their concerns ever more seriously. Even in the hardest

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85Ethel S. to women's page, The Worker 5/7/50.

86E.L. to women's page, The Worker 7/9/50, p. 4.

87E.R. to the women's page, The Worker 5/7/50. Many more letters like these appeared in 1950 and 1951 especially, including some by men.

88See, for example, letter to woman's page from Randolph C., "Urges All Out Fight on Male Supremacy," The Worker 6/18/50, p. 7; letter to woman's page from Helen R., The Worker 9/17/50, p. 4; letter to woman's page from "A Woman
times of the 1950s when the women’s pages appeared only sporadically in the beleaguered paper, readers continued to demand "Give us more about women. Tear into the male supremacy that is holding back the movement almost as much as white supremacy." The paper complied by publishing increasingly radical material after 1951 including, for example, Betty Feldman’s critique of women’s exclusion from sports in 1952, Sylvia Jarrico’s attack on "The Campaign in Hollywood Films to Keep Women in Subjection" in 1953, Elizabeth Lawson’s lengthy and laudatory review of Simone DeBeauvoir’s The Second Sex in 1954, and Florence S.’s condemnation of sexual harassment in CP settings in 1956.

At the same time that the CP began to expand its written work on the woman question, it also instituted formal classes and seminars to educate large numbers of people about women’s oppression and women’s liberation. In the spring of 1949 the CP National Committee organized nine Conferences on Work Among Women to bring regional districts up to speed on the woman question and two regional schools

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to train additional women cadres.91 In June the Party sponsored an all-day conference called "Marxism and the Woman Question" at the Jefferson School of Social Science in New York City--the largest of its many Marxist education schools around the country--to discuss the theoretical progress the organization made on the woman question in the preceding year and to educate CP members about its importance.92 600 men and women attended that first conference to hear speakers Claudia Jones, Betty Millard, Eve Merriam and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and to discuss "the family, women in industry and the professions, attitudes of


92"To Hold Parley on Woman Question," Daily Worker 5/27/49, p. 5. The Jefferson School was just one of many schools of Marxist studies that the CP sponsored to recruit new members and to educate old ones. According to Shannon’s Decline of American Communism (p. 86) other such schools included the George Washington Carver School in Harlem, the Walt Whitman School of Social Science in Newark, the Tom Paine Schools in Westchester and Philadelphia, the Sam Adams School in Boston, the Ohio School of Social Science in Cleveland, the Abraham Lincoln School in Chicago, the Joseph Weydemeyer School of Social Science in St. Louis, the Michigan School in Detroit, the Pacific Northwest Labor School in Seattle and the California Labor School in San Francisco. In addition to teaching lengthy classes in Marxist theory such schools also offered courses in art and music appreciation, literature, health, American history, and philosophy. Children’s dancing, theatre, music, art, and poetry classes were offered as well. In the 1940s the Jefferson School’s faculty included such well-known Marxist scholars as Annette Rubinstein, Philip Foner, and Herbert Aptheker as well as others less well-known. The Party’s other Marxist schools, like the Jefferson School, made the humanities, social sciences and intellectual debate available to many urban, working-class women and men who did not have access to higher education.
male superiority, and the special problems of Negro women."93 After that conference was so successful the Jefferson School instituted a regular class on the woman question later that year.94 The first class, taught by novelist and union organizer Myra Page, emphasized topics such as the "origins of women's oppression, the changing character of the family, and the main roots and problems of male superiority," and stressed the new idea that men, as the "carriers" of male supremacy, had a special responsibility to learn about and fight against it.95 In 1953 the Jefferson School published Questions and Answers on the Woman Question, a 20-page document by Irene Epstein and Doxey Wilkerson that condensed the theory and substance from the classes into an accessible question and answer format.96 Despite financial troubles, declining enrollments and anticommuunist harassment, the Jefferson School continued to offer regular courses on the woman question (taught by


95Ibid. See also the discussion of male supremacy in Questions and Answers on the Woman Question (New York: Jefferson School of Social Sciences, 1953) mimeographed document in the Dorothy Healey Collection, box 125b, item #53, and in the Bertha Reynolds Collection, box 12, folder 151.

96Irene Epstein and Doxey Wilkerson, Questions and Answers on the Woman Question.
various people), and evening forums on topics such as women in music and women in literature every term until 1956 when it finally closed permanently.97

Communist leaders made education the most important component of their campaign to improve the Party's work on women, but they also realized that education might not always be sufficient. In 1949, along with their expanded plans for instructing the rank-and-file about the dangers of male chauvinism, Party leaders also began to formulate a policy to deal with those Communists who were not willing to take male supremacy seriously. In September 1949 Claudia Jones published "We Seek Full Equality for Women" in The Worker, the most widely read of all the CP's publications.98 The article outlined the Party's new position on women's oppression and women's liberation by praising and paraphrasing Foster's "On Improving the Party's Work Among Women" and announced that Communists' fight against male supremacist ideology was about to become even more intense.


After reminding her readers that "the inequality of women stems from exploitation of the working-class by the capitalist class but the exploitation of women cuts across class lines and affects all women," Jones stated unequivocally that "any underestimation of the need for a persistent ideological struggle against all manifestations of masculine superiority [would] be rooted out" in the future.\(^9\) Essentially, Jones explained, those Communists who failed to acknowledge the seriousness of male supremacy would henceforth be subject to Party discipline.

The Communist Party's campaign to root out male supremacy in its ranks never reached the level of intensity that characterized its simultaneous crusade to eliminate white chauvinism among its members. Although hundreds of Communists were disciplined and sometimes expelled from the CP between 1949 and 1953 for minor infractions such as using phrases such as "whitewash" or "black sheep," or for more major offenses such as ignoring their African-American comrades, there is no indication in the available sources that the CP ever expelled anyone, male or female, for refusing to resist male supremacy.\(^{10}\) Nevertheless, sources

\(^9\)Ibid.

do show that after 1949 the Party made some effort to discipline those who ignored its policy of opposing male supremacist ideology wherever it appeared.

The most widely publicized case in which a well-known Communist was disciplined for neglecting to take male supremacy seriously occurred in 1950, only a few months after the publication of Jones’s article. The incident began after Walter Lowenfels, a frequent contributor to The Worker wrote a story entitled "Santa Claus or Comrade X?" which appeared in the paper on Christmas day, 1949.¹⁰¹ Lowenfels’s story was supposed to be an amusing one about the trials of a man who lived in a house full of women--his wife and four daughters--who spent much of their time sewing, washing, ironing, and worrying about their fancy clothes. But although several people wrote to the editor to praise the story, not everyone was amused. Beginning in January The Worker printed numerous letters from people who were critical of Lowenfels’s stance and angry that the editors published the story. C. and G. Lang from New York wrote to point out that:

The humor in this story is derived entirely from the ever so funny notion that women are exclusively interested in clothes and their own adornment...As must be obvious to everyone, the

¹⁰¹Walter Lowenfels, "Santa Claus or Comrade X?" The Worker 12/25/49.
pitiful female members of the author's family are distinctly inferior creatures. 102

In order to correct the situation, the Langs proposed, "the editors and the author owe the readers an apology and themselves a critical evaluation of their understanding of the woman question." 103 On the day the Langs' letter appeared, Lowenfels tried to make up for his errors:

I am shocked that there were not more objections...I believe our readers have a responsibility and that we should hear from them beginning with (1) our editors; (2) our staff, particularly our women writers; (3) and especially those men and women who praised this piece! Is it possible that we have all become so hardened to male supremacy attitudes that we no longer even object? As for me, you will hear from me shortly with another piece. I am reexamining the question of men and women. It's time somebody did something about it. 104

Lowenfels meant for his response to be redemptive, but in the eyes of some readers, it only led him into deeper trouble. Citing the latest thinking on the fight against male chauvinism, Rhoda Ashe castigated Lowenfels for suggesting that women writers should have pointed out his errors:

In the effort to rid ourselves of white supremacist thinking white men and women must put up the greatest fight, not Negro people. So it seems to me that in the struggle against male supremacist thinking--while I myself am a vigorous

102 Letter to Worker editor from C. and G. Lang, "No Understanding of Woman Question," The Worker 1/15/50, p. 9.

103 Ibid.

fighter against it—it is not the oppressed who must make the greatest effort, but in this case, the men. I would therefore amend Mr. Lowenfels's point to read 'our staff, particularly the men writers.'

Lowenfels's new story, "Our Dirty Wash," intended to atone for his previous mistakes, also made the situation much worse. An irate woman named Ruth responded:

First Walter Lowenfels does a stupid article about 'his women' and their clothes. That was criticized but the criticism was answered by a flippant, unselfcritical note by Lowenfels. Then Lowenfels 'atones' in his article 'Our Dirty Wash.' His whole attitude boils down to the fact that the wash in his house is 'my wife's dirty wash' not 'ours.'...His flippancy toward the woman question is all too typical of the reaction of many progressive and Communist men. The phrases 'male supremacist,' 'male superiority,' and 'woman question' are all too often laughed about.

Another comrade, Wendell Addington, concurred:

Lowenfels has clearly shown that he considers the oppressed position of women under capitalism a big joke....An even bigger joke, in his opinion, is the idea of self-criticism on the woman question. And most ludicrous of all to Lowenfels are the women who challenge manifestations of male supremacy. In an article expanding on his previous attacks on the intelligence of women there is no hint of genuine self-criticism. His main regret seems to be that he has 'put his foot into it.'... The Worker readers are due a serious explanation from Lowenfels.

A man identified only as "Friend Husband" also wrote to support Ruth's earlier letter: "In appreciation of your

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105 Rhoda Ashe to Worker editor, "Lowenfels's Point Not Pointed Enough," The Worker 2/5/50.


107 Wendell Addington to the Worker editor, "Criticizes Article on Women," 3/12/50.
crack at Walter Lowenfels on 'his women' and their clothes washing," he commended, "I just wanted to say that I think he had it coming to him."\textsuperscript{108}

In the wake of all this strife, local Party leaders in Philadelphia decided that something had to be done. A group of women met with Lowenfels to discuss his errors with him and to insure that he planned to do better in the future. In the interview, Lowenfels admitted his guilt and issued an apology which was printed in \textit{The Worker} on April 16, 1950:

\begin{quote}
I am in the process of re-examining those three recent articles of mine in \textit{The Worker}. I agree with you that they smuggled into our pages, wrapped in a package of false humor, an incorrect, offensive, belittling attitude about women. The total impact of these pieces was essentially an attack on women, a mockery of their problems, and a caricature of Marxism....When readers objected, my flippant and arrogant note in the letter column evaded the central question. My third piece about the purchase of a washing machine was put forth as 'self criticism' and 'corrective' but it only carried the original error still further.\textsuperscript{109}
\end{quote}

When his accusers asked him why he wrote the articles and how he planned to improve his attitude Lowenfels replied:

\begin{quote}
I am still trying to get to the root of the matter. Some reasons were underestimation of the woman question, a failure to give any serious consideration to the complex questions involved. So what's to be done now? I would say that self-correction from now on is not a question of words.\textsuperscript{110}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{108}"Friend Husband" to \textit{Worker} editor, \textit{The Worker} 3/19/50, p. 9.

\textsuperscript{109}"Lowenfels Interviewed," \textit{The Worker} 4/16/50, p. 11.

\textsuperscript{110}Ibid.
On his last point Lowenfels was correct. His public apology alone was not, in the eyes of his accusers, enough to repair his standing in the movement. He, like other men who were charged with perpetuating male supremacy, was sentenced to participate in "the struggle for a correct position and understanding of the specific problems of women and the road to their solution" so that he might avoid similar male chauvinist errors down the road.

Communists continued to discipline recalcitrant male supremacists throughout 1950 and beyond. In September 1950, for example, the Minnesota State Women's Commission confronted a group of men who laughed and joked upon the introduction of the woman question in public meetings and chastised an individual male leader who joked with a woman Party member when she tried to discuss with him an assignment given her husband that involved serious changes for their whole family. The Commission criticized all these men publicly and ordered them to complete "control tasks involving study on the woman question" so that they might change their ideas about women.iii Similarly, in 1954 the Los Angeles Party disciplined men for "designating mailings and phonecalls and so forth as 'women's work in mass organizations'... hogging discussion at club meetings, bypassing women comrades in leadership [and] making sex

jokes degrading to women."\textsuperscript{112} In 1955 the CP connected male supremacy to anti-communism, calling it "a characteristic of every single male ‘stool pigeon’ who has yet betrayed the Party," and strengthened its commitment to "assist the great majority of women who resent and struggle against male supremacy."\textsuperscript{113} Even in the late 1950s, when the CP was only a shadow of its former self, it did not give up the fight to reform male chauvinists in its ranks. When Communists accused the CP of male supremacy during the re-evaluation period that followed Kruschev’s revelations about Stalin in 1956 they were not, as Rosalyn Baxandall has suggested, debating the issue for the first time, but continuing discussions that had begun in 1946 and persisted for an entire decade.\textsuperscript{114}

The Communist Party did much to enhance American progressives’ understanding of the problem of women’s oppression and to equalize the treatment of women in Party publications and activities between 1946 and 1956, but it was never able to make as much headway in the struggle for women’s liberation as Communist women wished. Despite the

\textsuperscript{112}Document from FBI’s "Women’s Matters" collection, Bureau file 100-3-78, Los Angeles 100-1763, November 1, 1955.

\textsuperscript{113}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{114}In "The Question Seldom Asked" Baxandall says, "Organizing or discussing women’s special oppression proved too threatening for the party to handle. Women would have to wait until 1956 to debate the issues of female liberation."
Party's efforts to promote understanding about women's oppression and to "root out" all manifestations of male supremacy in its ranks, women continued to voice their dissatisfaction with the CP's penchant for glorifying the roles of housewife and mother and its tendency to neglect the obstacles those roles placed in the way of women's political development.15 Complaints about male supremacist ideology and behavior at all levels of the CP persisted throughout the 1950s. To be fair, Communists' fight against sexism was definitely hampered by McCarthyism, by the imprisonment of Party leaders such as Claudia Jones and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn in 1954, and by Jones's deportation to England in 1955. To its credit, the CP continued to address women's problems even as it fought for its own survival. Nevertheless, women's discontent with the Communist Party was far from groundless: although the group persevered in its efforts to support women's liberation struggles and undermine male supremacy inside and outside the Party, men continued to dominate Party leadership at the state and national levels, and women's issues remained secondary to "Negro" issues and class struggle. The Communist Party did a lot to explain women's oppression and

15 See, for example, document "Some New Thoughts on the Woman Question," submitted by five unidentified women to Party Voice, June 1955, in Betty Gannett Papers, reel 2, and letters in the "Speak Your Piece" column of the Daily Worker after the Kruschchev revelations of 1956.
to promote women’s liberation but, in the decade after World War II it also could have done a lot more.

That the Communist Party’s theory and practice on the woman question had some weaknesses is indisputable but, despite its flaws, Communists’ work also made several important contributions to the U.S. women’s movement between 1946 and 1956. First, by defining women’s oppression as an extremely complex phenomenon that operated through a mutually reinforcing system of male supremacist theories and assumptions and economic, social, political and legal discrimination against women, Communists created an important new body of terminology and theory that emphasized women’s common interests, linked their so-called "personal" problems with politics, and provided a foundation from which a struggle for women’s liberation could potentially grow. Second, by demanding that the Party take their concerns seriously and combat male chauvinism with the same passion it devoted to white chauvinism, Communist women exposed the role that even otherwise progressive men played in oppressing women and won considerable respect and legitimacy for women’s struggles within the progressive movement even as anti-feminism increasingly dominated mainstream politics. Third, by responding to women’s demands and lending considerable support and resources to their efforts to win economic, political, social and cultural equality inside and outside the progressive milieu, the Communist Party helped
to raise the gender consciousnesses of many more women and men who came to see themselves as vanguards in the struggle for women’s liberation as well as in the larger struggle for a peaceful, just and democratic world.

All of this work represented a dramatic advance in the way that the American Communist Party dealt with women, but Communists also pursued two more significant directions in their work on the woman question in the decade after World War II. First they explored the ways that women’s oppression varied according to race and class and worked tirelessly to understand and address the "special problems of Negro women."116 Second, they pushed themselves to build an alternative radical culture and family life that resisted the degenerate elements of capitalism—including male domination—and anticipated the society they hoped to create through class struggle and socialist revolution. These approaches, combined with the Party’s newly expanded theory about women’s oppression and its other efforts to improve women’s status, made critical contributions to the continuity of the U.S. women’s movement across the void of the hostile 1950s and prefigured the work of the later women’s liberation movement in numerous important ways.

CHAPTER V
DEALING WITH DIFFERENCE:
COMMUNISTS' INTEGRATION OF RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER,

The mainstream of the U.S. women's movement has historically had a troublesome relationship to working-class women, African-American women, and other women of color. Although the first wave of the woman's rights movement emerged out of the abolitionist movement in 1848 its adherents never concurred on questions of race and class and they ultimately split in 1869 after conflicts over the 14th amendment, which specified voters as "male" and the 15th Amendment, which protected black men's right to vote but did not mention women.¹ The dominant woman's rights organizations of the late 19th and early 20th centuries sought reforms that would benefit the white middle-class women who controlled them, often at the expense of their

black, immigrant and working-class sisters. Before the achievement of suffrage in 1920, for example, the National American Woman Suffrage Association exploited racist and nativist fears by arguing that white women needed the vote so that they could counteract the political influence of the illiterate and otherwise inferior "lower races."² During the four decades after the passage of the nineteenth amendment the self-proclaimed feminists of the National Woman’s Party continued to privilege gender over race and class. Feminists pushed continuously for the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment, despite working women’s fears that it would overturn protective legislation, and dismissed Southern black women’s repeated pleas for support on the basis that they were disfranchised and mistreated primarily as "Negroes" and not as women.³ All of these predominantly


white middle-class groups saw themselves exclusively as advocates for rights that were denied to women on the basis of their sex. Because they were led by women for whom gender was a primary source of oppression, these mainstream feminist organizations viewed race-and class-based problems as diversions from their larger struggle to improve woman's position in U.S. society.

Between 1946 and 1949 the American Communist Party gradually abandoned its position that only working-class women were oppressed and, like the explicitly feminist organizations of the time, embraced the idea that women's oppression affected all women, regardless of their class or color. But unlike other groups that were working for women's rights in the post-WWII period, Communists also recognized that gender was not the sole source of all women's problems. In the decades between the 1920s and the 1960s the Communist Party actively opposed the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment, because of the problems it would create for working-class women, and supported reforms that would benefit working women directly, such as higher wages, the creation of single seniority lists, and government sponsored child care centers. But what made the Communist Party particularly unusual among other multi-racial organizations working to improve women's status in this period before the civil rights movement burst on the scene.

was that it attempted to analyze and respond to the special problems that black women faced in addition to class and gender oppression. As early as the 1930s the Party coined the terms "triple burden" and "triple oppression" to describe the status of black women who were exploited due to their race, class and gender. Due in large part to the efforts of its leading black woman, Claudia Jones, the Party expanded its work in this area in the late 1940s and 1950s. At Jones’s urging the Party began to make black women central in many of its writings and activities around women’s issues and to extend its interpretations of differences among women to consider the experiences of Jewish, Puerto Rican, and Mexican-American women as well. Attention to women’s differences made Communists aware that although all women were subjugated in capitalist society, their oppression took many different forms and that

4 Other organizations, such as the United Auto Workers, the YWCA and the American Friends Service Committee, also had both black and white members and increasingly strong commitments to civil rights in the period after WWII. But although they were concerned to some degree with women’s rights on the one hand, and civil rights for African-Americans as a group on the other hand, none of these racially integrated organizations produced any detailed analysis of black women’s unique problems that stemmed from their location at the intersection of gender, race, and class. See Nancy Gabin, Feminism in the Labor Movement: Women and the United Auto Workers, 1935-1975 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990) and Susan Lynn, Progressive Women in Conservative Times: Racial Justice, Peace and Feminism, 1945-1960s (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

improving women's status was not, as many others believed, simply a matter of equal rights and equal pay. Communists' efforts to document the history of black women's struggles for freedom and their exploration of the connections between racism and sexism made it clear long before the 1960s that black women's concerns were not marginal to the women's movement and that, unless they opposed the systems of class and racial domination as well as male domination in the U.S., women's rights advocates in this country could not hope to realize their goals.

By the end of World War II, when race issues began to supersede class issues in national politics, the American Communist Party already had a long history of concern for and attention to the problems of African-Americans in both the South and in the North. In the 1920s, long before any other U.S. left group addressed racism, the Party worked to recruit new black members and to develop a theoretical approach to the "Negro question."\(^6\) In the 1930s, armed with a commitment to total racial equality and theory that defined African-Americans as an oppressed nation which had the right of self-determination in the "black belt" of the South, the Communist Party worked to unionize black agricultural and industrial workers, to provide relief for

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\(^6\)Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Great Depression* (New York: Grove Press, 1983).
black families suffering from the effects of the Depression, and to oppose white chauvinism, segregation, and lynching. After Earl Browder did away with the "black belt" thesis during WWII the CP continued to pay significant attention to civil rights and racism, and its recruitment drives among African-Americans were even more successful than they had been before the war. In 1943, for example, the Daily Worker reported that African-Americans were joining the Party in "growing numbers": forty-four out of ninety-four new recruits in Michigan, fourteen out of thirty-four in Maryland, eight out of fifty-two in Wisconsin, and eight out of sixty-four in New England. Later that year, after a recruiting competition between the Upper Harlem and the Chicago Southside sections of the Party, the Upper Harlem branch reported that it had recruited 500 members in the spring alone. In the late 1940s the Los Angeles branch of the CP led campaigns against housing discrimination and for

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equal employment opportunities and had between 400 and 500
black members amounting to 10% of its total membership.\textsuperscript{10}
Former Los Angeles CP leader Dorothy Healey recalls:

> We were justifiably proud of the fact that, almost alone among American political parties (or for that matter virtually any institution in American life at that time) we were a working model of racial integration.\textsuperscript{11}

Beginning in the 1930s the CP's strong emphasis on fighting racism became evident in its literature for and work among women. The Party recognized that black women faced special discriminations in the workforce because of their race and in the South because of the constant threat of rape by white men.\textsuperscript{12} Consequently Communists made a concerted effort to recruit black women into the Party in cities such as New York and Birmingham, Alabama, and attempted, wherever possible, to promote them into middle-level leadership positions.\textsuperscript{13} During World War II the CP pushed for permanent access for black women to industrial jobs and argued that they particularly needed the benefits provided by labor unions and protection against all forms of


\textsuperscript{11}Healey and Isserman, p. 125.

\textsuperscript{12}Shaffer, p. 101.

\textsuperscript{13}Kelley, pp. 21-22, 26.
discrimination. This trend continued in the immediate post-war period. The Congress of America Women tried hard in the period 1946 to 1949 to address black women’s concerns about the unique discrimination they faced in the workforce, politics, and in society at-large and incorporated them in its leadership. The Party’s 1947 platform for women’s rights included demands for the "full equality of Negro women from segregation, discrimination, intimidation, poll tax, and downgrading in employment" and "election to office in legislative bodies, labor unions, and all public organizations of capable women, Negro and white." In 1948 Communists in New York’s East Side participated in a successful campaign to win jobs for black women in five-and-dime stores throughout the city and ultimately worked to spread that campaign throughout the Northeast.

Although the Communist Party’s literature and rhetoric always made mention of black women’s special problems in the 1930s and 1940s, however, it usually did so in a way that implied that those problems were only a small part of the larger issue of women’s oppression. Communists recognized that black women’s problems were different from those

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16Jones, p. 65.
suffered by white women because of the added complication of racial oppression, but the differences remained for the most part unexplored and qualifications about "the special problems of Negro women" were usually tacked on to more general discussions of American women’s status. Even Betty Millard’s otherwise insightful and prescient "Woman Against Myth," published in 1948, failed to address African-American women’s condition in any meaningful way. 17 Although she compared the oppression of women to the oppression of Negroes several times in her work, she made only one reference to "doubly oppressed Negro women" in the penultimate paragraph of the pamphlet, and she neglected completely the question of how black women’s oppression differed qualitatively and quantitatively from that of white women. As Millard’s pamphlet became the stimulus for expanding the CP’s theoretical work on women because of its contributions to the debate on women’s oppression in the late 1940s, it also became the catalyst for expanding the group’s theoretical work on black women because of the questions it overlooked. In response to "Woman Against Myth," CP National Women’s Commission Secretary Claudia Jones wrote her landmark article "An End to the Neglect of

the Problems of the Negro Woman!" published in Political Affairs in June of 1949.¹⁸

Claudia Jones played a critical role in the CP's developed of a sophisticated analysis of the intersections of race and gender oppression in the late 1940s. Jones was born in Port of Spain, Trinidad in February 1915 and immigrated to the U.S. with her family in 1923.¹⁹ Like many working-class African-Americans living in Harlem during the Depression, she was drawn to the Communist Party by its anti-racism work and particularly by the International Labor Defense’s campaign to free the nine black men who had been sentenced to death for allegedly raping two white women in Scottsboro Alabama in 1931.²⁰ Jones joined the youth


²⁰Johnson, p. 9. According to Paul and Mari Jo Buhle’s Encyclopedia of the America Left (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992) the International Labor Defense, founded in 1925, was openly dominated by Communists until the late 1930s. The Scottsboro case was the most significant case in which the ILD participated. It vigorously defended the nine accused men in court while the CPUSA conducted an aggressive protest campaign to make the
section of the Communist Party in 1934 when she was 18- 
years-old.\textsuperscript{21} Within a few years she had become a leading 
member of the Young Communist League (YCL) and by 1940 she 
was the editor of the group’s newspaper and its National 
Chairman.\textsuperscript{22} During World War II Jones officially joined the 
Communist Party and quickly rose into upper-level leadership 
positions within it. In 1945 she was named Secretary of the 
newly restored National Woman’s Commission, and although she 
developed a reputation as one of the chief opponents of male 
chauvinism within the Party, she also continued to be 
extremely involved in black struggles in New York City and 
elsewhere.\textsuperscript{23} As a leader in the Congress of American Women 
and in the CP itself, Jones came to be seen as the Communist 
movement’s chief spokesperson for black women.

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case a symbol of Southern racism and to bring it international recognition. The ILD failed to win the 
defendants’ unconditional release in a 1936 trial and in 
1937 agreed to a plea bargain which released four defendants 
and subjected the remaining five to lengthy prison sentences. The Scottsboro campaign is most significant, 
however, because of its legal and political ramifications. 
As a result of the campaign the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 
1935 that the defendants’ constitutional rights were 
violated because blacks were systematically excluded from 
juries. This decision spurred a long struggle to include 
more African-Americans on jury rolls in the South. The case 
also exposed many African-Americans—like Claudia Jones—to 
Marxist theory and CP activities for the first time.

\textsuperscript{21}Johnson, p. 9.

\textsuperscript{22}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{23}Johnson, p. 18-19; Robin D.G. Kelley, "Claudia Jones" in the \textit{Encyclopedia of the American Left} pp. 394-5.
In the late 1940s two political developments spurred Claudia Jones to argue more forcefully about the importance of African-American women for progressive struggles. First, as the CP’s isolation from the labor movement grew more severe due to the effects of widespread prospects and anticommunism, Communist leaders began to set their sights on other groups, notably women and African-Americans, who had been left behind by the changes in the postwar economy. Second, as the increasingly conservative political atmosphere took hold in the late 1940s and 1950s, civil rights struggles took center stage as the most radical activities occurring anywhere in the country and black women, who frequently kindled those struggles, some of the U.S.’s most radical activists. Jones realized that if the Communist Party hoped to influence and recruit black women activists in this period it needed to recognize and address their specific problems. Neither the Communist Party’s existing efforts to confront black women’s problems nor those made by the Congress of American Women, Jones thought, were sufficient. At the same time that Party leaders Pettis Perry and Betty Gannett initiated the struggle against white chauvinism in the Party in 1949, Jones published "An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!" Jones intended the article to show writers on the woman question

such as Betty Millard their errors, and to outline a new approach to black women’s problems that would place them at the center of the Party’s work for both women’s liberation and black liberation.  

Claudia Jones’s first goal in "An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman" was to make white Communists aware of black women’s unique and contradictory "super-exploited" status. Using data from the Women’s Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor, Jones detailed the ways that black women suffered economically because of their exclusion from all but the most menial and poorly paid occupations such as domestic work, agricultural work, and employment in non-unionized textile and food processing plants. Because their wages were lower than those of men and those of white women, and because they were exempt from benefits such as social security and workers’ compensation, Jones pointed out, African-American families were often condemned to "ghetto living conditions" as well as higher maternity and infant mortality rates than those for poor and working-class whites. Due to the fact that black women had little choice but to work outside the home to support their families, she indicated, black women hardly needed to fight against the notion that woman’s place was in the home. And despite the U.S.’s rhetoric about its reverence for motherhood and the superior status of American women vis a vis a

25Healey and Isserman, p. 125.
vis women in other nations, black women were frequently subject to sexual attacks by white men and to the personal and economic suffering that resulted from the lynchings and other violence that was commonly perpetrated against black men. The crux of Jones’s position was that black women suffered many of the disadvantages of women’s oppression with none of the respect and protection that was offered to white women in white supremacist American society. These problems persisted not only in the South, she proposed, but all over the country as black women were pushed out of industrial jobs after World War II and portrayed in film and literature as "mammies" who were "backward," "inferior," and the "natural slaves of others." Jones tied black women’s problems to the Party’s new program for women’s liberation by concluding that "the superexploitation and oppression of Negro women tends to depress the standards of all women."

Although Jones purposely and carefully emphasized the super-exploited position of black women, she was also very clear about the fact that they were not simply victims of the conditions under which they lived. In fact, she went to great lengths to demonstrate that black women had always been leaders in their families and communities and that they had been prepared by their harsh circumstances to fight difficult individual battles against their exploiters and to lead mass struggles against oppression. Jones relied on black history to argue that in the West African tribes from
which many American slaves came, women’s status was much higher than in Europe. Despite the sexual and physical degradation of slavery, she explained, slaves’ persistent reliance on matrilineal practices from Africa and their inability to marry legally meant that black women continued to play a dominant role in their families even in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. That role, according to Jones, "schooled" black women "in self-reliance, in courageous and selfless action." As "the guardian, the protector of the Negro family," responsible for "militantly shielding it from the blows of Jim-Crow insults, for rearing children in an atmosphere of lynch terror, segregation and police brutality, and for fighting for an education for the children," Jones argued that even the individual black woman who did not participate in explicit political activity was making important contributions to larger struggles against sexism, racism and capitalism. Finally, Jones used the "lifting as we climb" perspective of black feminists such as Ida Wells Barnett and Mary McLeod Bethune to argue that black women’s participation in "mass organizations" such as

\[26\] For her discussion of black history Jones relied heavily on the work of Herbert Aptheker, the Communist historian of slavery and of black life and struggles in the U.S. Articles in journals such as Political Affairs did not usually make use of scholarly citations, and Jones was no exception to this trend. But it is very clear that Jones paraphrased her discussion of black women’s history (and indeed other parts of her argument as well) from Herbert Aptheker’s article "The Negro Woman" that appeared in the Communist intellectual journal Masses and Mainstream 2, 2 (January, 1949): 10-17.
the National Association of Negro Women, the National Council of Negro Women, and the National Federation of Women's Clubs was not "mere charity work" but rather their attempt to resist black oppression at the same time that they worked to improve their own status as women. In their families and communities, women's clubs, and efforts to organize unions for textile, tobacco and domestic workers, Jones concluded, black women demonstrated that they knew how to "undertake action" and that they could make a vital contribution to the "emerging anti-fascist, anti-imperialist coalition."

Because of her belief that no struggle for liberation could be effective without the efforts of black women, Claudia Jones devoted the remainder of "An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman" to explaining how white progressives' attitudes towards black women kept them from joining groups such as the Communist Party and proposing ways that Communists could bring more black women into the movement. Most important, she suggested, white Communists needed to guard against white chauvinism in all their interactions with black women. White women, she said, should befriend black women at social gatherings and white men should dismiss "white ruling-class standards of desirability for women (such as light skin)" and consider not only "social intercourse" but the possibility of "intermarriage." Furthermore, she suggested, white people
should not betray "paternalistic surprise when they learn that Negroes are professional people" or ask black women professionals whether "'someone in the family' would like to take a job as a domestic worker," and white Communists should never tell potential black members of the Party that they are "too backward" and "not ready to join." Jones even suggested that if white Communists needed to hire domestic workers they could acceptably hire black women only if they guarded against the "'madam-maid' relationship of white women to Negro women", treated their domestic workers as equals, and insisted on paying their new employees union wages for their labor.

Treating black women as equals was important, but Claudia Jones believed that white Communists also had a special responsibility to support and join black women's struggles because they inevitably resisted race, class and gender exploitation and thereby took aim against the whole capitalism system. She instructed Party clubs to "conduct intensive discussions" about the role of black women and to commence participation in their "key issues of struggle." Her primary concern was the case of Rosa Ingram--the widowed mother of fourteen imprisoned for life in Georgia for the "crime" of defending herself against the indecent advances of a "white supremacist"--because of its symbolic meaning for African-Americans and women everywhere. "The case
illustrates the landless, Jim Crow, oppressed status of the Negro family in America," Jones argued:

It illumines particularly the degradation of Negro women today under American bourgeois democracy moving to fascism and war. It reflects the daily insults to which Negro women are subjected in public places, no matter what their class, status, or position. It exposes the hypocritical alibi of the lynchers of Negro manhood who have historically hidden behind the skirts of white women when they try to cover up their foul crimes with the 'chivalry' of 'protecting white womanhood.' [It shows that] white womanhood today, no less than their sisters in the abolitionist and suffrage movements, must rise to challenge this lie and the whole system of Negro oppression.

In order to support black struggles against all these evils she urged all Communists to participate in the campaign to gather a million signatures on a petition to be sent to President Truman on behalf of Rosa Ingram, and to push for U.N. action on the case. Jones also advised Communists to fight for better jobs for black women in industry, in government agencies, and in other white collar occupations, and to mobilize black women into the fight for peace.

Jones closed "An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman" by emphasizing that when black women did begin to join the Party in larger numbers, older white members needed to avoid the tendency to view them "not as leaders but as people who have to 'get their feet wet organizationally,'" to refrain from "confronting them with the silent treatment" and "'blueprint[ing]' them into a pattern" of subordination, and instead to acknowledge their
"organizational talents" and "promote them into leadership."
Only after Communists recognized that "the Negro woman
....combines in her status the worker, the Negro, and the
woman," Jones argued, could they reach the "heightened
political consciousness" that would enable black women to
assume their "rightful place in the historical mission for
the achievement of a Socialist America." Only with black
women's input, she concluded, could the Communist Party
achieve "the final and full guarantee of women's
emancipation": a Communist society "in which contributions
are measured not by national origin or color" but in which
men and women contribute according to ability and
ultimately....receive according to their needs."

Claudia Jones overstated her case when she implied that
the Communist Party had been guilty of completely neglecting
black women. She failed to acknowledge that during and
after World War II, and particularly after 1948 when their
coverage of women's issues in general improved so much,
Communists paid considerable attention to minority women's
"triple exploitation," to their contributions to the war
effort, and to organizations such as the Congress of
American Women and the Progressive Party.27 As a result,

27See for example Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, "International
Women’s Day," Political Affairs 26, 3 (March, 1947): 216-
220; Clara Bodian, "How Will She Vote," The Worker 3/14/48,
p. 4; Consuelo Saez, "Puerto Rican Women Still Seek
Emancipation," The Worker 4/11/48; "On Work Among Women,"
The Worker 8/1/48, p. 4; Herbert Aptheker "The Negro Woman"
in Masses and Mainstream 2, 2 (January, 1949): 10-17; and
not everyone appreciated her point of view. Harriet Magil, for example, called her "really weird" and guilty of "the most awful reverse chauvinism" and Betty Millard felt as if Jones had misinterpreted "Woman Against Myth."²⁸ Despite such discord, however, in the extremely race-conscious atmosphere of the Communist Party in 1949 many people found Jones's arguments compelling. Those who sensed that civil rights would be the major mass struggle of the post-WWII era understood immediately that the black women who were a part of such struggles could be a major asset to the CP. After the publication of "An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman," leading Communist writers and policy-makers inaugurated a campaign to spread Jones's ideas about the centrality of black women to the progressive movement and launched a simultaneous effort to attract more of them into the Party. Despite these efforts Communists never succeeded in winning over masses of black women but in the racist and sexist environment of the U.S. in the 1950s the Communist Party became a center of writing and thought about the experiences of African-American women and a source of support for some of their efforts to "lift" as they "climbed".

²⁸Quotes from Harriet Magil come from my interview with her in New York City on January 12, 1993; Betty Millard discussed her feelings about Claudia Jones with Katherine Campbell in New York on February 17, 1981.
Almost as soon as Claudia Jones’s article hit the presses in June 1949 the Communist Party began to increase its emphasis on black women’s problems and their importance for the process of democratic social change. The Party’s strategy was twofold. First, leading Communists hoped to make white progressives more aware of the nature of black women’s status and their potential to make important contributions to the movement. Second, they hoped to show black women that the Communists admired them and their attempts to resist oppression and to demonstrate that the Communist Party was prepared to support them in their struggles against racism and male supremacy. One good indication of the intensity of the CP’s new commitment to discussing black women wherever possible was the testimony of national CP leader Gil Green in the anti-communist Foley Square trial in New York City in June 1949. Green, who was testifying about the Party’s work for women’s rights, tried repeatedly to address the problems of black women until the presiding judge, who thought he was repeating previous testimony about black liberation struggles, scolded him angrily. When an insistent Green tried to clarify that the problems of Negro women did not replicate testimony on the "Negro question" the judge cut him off saying, "when we get to that part about the Negro we’ll skip that. I think we
have had enough of that." Green's effort to publicize black women's problems in the trial was an interesting strategy, but the Communist Party carried out the bulk of its campaign to promote black women in the Party press and in educational forums that it sponsored at Marxist schools such as the Jefferson School of Social Science in New York City.

It was rare, after 1949, for an issue of The Worker or the Daily Worker not to include at least one article about black women's special "triply exploited" position in U.S. society. Such articles usually recapitulated Claudia Jones's points rather than making new contributions to the Party's understanding of black women's status yet they successfully demonstrated to everyone who read the newspapers that Communists took black women's problems seriously and that they regarded efforts on their behalf as a fundamental part of their women's work. Worker and Daily Worker writers such as Eugene Feldman, Jo Willard, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Dora Johnson and others apparently achieved some success in making Jones's somewhat esoteric arguments accessible to the general reader who did not regularly peruse Political Affairs, the Party's most theoretical

publication. By 1951 the editors of the women's pages of The Worker congratulated writers for educating readers with their "coverage of the problems of triply oppressed Negro women" and readers wrote in to confirm that they "learned much" from such coverage and to request more of it. In 1953 Irene Epstein and Doxey Wilkerson included a special section on "Negro Women" in their comprehensive educational booklet Questions and Answers on the Woman Question. Over the course of the same period Communists also began to expand their analysis of black women's triple oppression to other women of color. Between 1949 and the mid-1950s


31 Self-congratulatory writing by women's page editors includes "We're One Year Old," The Worker 3/25/51, p. 4 and "Your Page...Your Help Needed," The Worker 11/30/52. For examples of letters requesting more coverage of Negro women see letters from E.L. in The Worker 7/9/50, p. 4, and from Helen Alison Winter and "Local 65er," The Worker 4/8/51, p. 4.

32 Irene Epstein and Doxey A. Wilkerson, eds., Questions and Answers on the Woman Question (New York: Jefferson School of Social Science, 1953) pp. 4, 5, 8-9, 16-20, mimeographed publication available in Dorothy Healey Collection, Special Collections, California State University-Long Beach Library, box 125b, item #53 and in Bertha Reynolds, Sophia Smith Collection, box 12, folder 151.
numerous writers discussed the super-exploitation and super-militancy of Jewish women, Puerto Rican women, Asian women, and Mexican-American women.\(^{33}\)

In addition to their propagation of Jones’s arguments about the "triple exploitation" of Negro women, one of the most important elements of the Communist Party’s campaign to make black women more central to its program was a strong emphasis on black women’s history. In order to show whites that black women could be leaders and to provide historical role models to guide black women in their current battles against white chauvinism and male chauvinism, Communists explored black women’s problems and achievements from the time of slavery to the post-WWII era and presented them in Party literature and in CP-sponsored educational forums. Like Communists’ concern with African-American women’s triply oppressed status, their interest in women’s history was not entirely new in 1949, but went back at least several years. In 1943, for example, Communist Earl Conrad published a biography of Harriet Tubman that discussed her role in the suffrage movement and in January 1949--six months before the appearance of Claudia Jones’s article--

historian and Communist Herbert Aptheker published his essay, "The Negro Woman," in an attempt to begin to redress the "super-neglected" history of that group. But, once again, it was only after the appearance of Jones's "An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman" that Communists really devoted themselves to documenting the history of African-American women. Much of this new work appeared in the CP press. After June 1949 CP newspapers and journals such as The Worker, The Daily Worker, and Masses & Mainstream regularly published essays and articles about the achievements of heroic women such as Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Ida Wells Barnett, Moranda Smith, Mary Church Terrell, Mary McLeod Bethune, and others. In 1951,


35See, for example, "Mrs. Mary Church Terrell Dies," The Worker 4/3/55, p. 14; Clara Bodian, "Workers of Carolina Looked to Moranda Smith," The Worker 4/24/55, p. 12; "Words That Will Live," (no byline) The Worker 7/24/55, p. 10; Peggy Dennis, "World' Labor's Debt to American Women," Daily Worker 3/8/54, p. 4; Charlotte Williams, "Sojourner Truth Traveled the Land Fighting Slavery," Daily Worker 2/15/52, p. 7; Charlotte Williams, "Sojourner Truth--Michigan Heroine: She Travelled the Land and Fought Slavery," The Worker 2/10/52, p. 8; John Hudson Jones, "Negro Women--Vanguard Fighters," The Worker 2/12/50, p. 15; "Harriet Tubman," (no byline) The Worker 5/28/50, p. 11. At the beginning of February, then known as "Negro History Month," The Worker usually featured a lot of coverage of black women's contributions to U.S. history. In 1951, for example, The Worker women's pages included an article by Claudia Jones about black women's struggles that began with Harriet Tubman and ended with Rosa Ingram and Ada Jackson. That issue of the paper also included an article about Frederick Douglass's contributions to the woman's rights movement condensed from Philip Foner's book on Frederick
the progressive production company People’s Artists performed a musical revue by Eve Merriam and Gerda Lerner entitled "Singing of Women" that included a song called "Ballad for Sojourner Truth." In the song, which had alternating verses sung by various characters, a ballad singer sang about an un-named women’s rights convention:

Now all the women longed to speak
But none knew how to start
Till Sojourner Stood on the pulpit steps
And spoke out from her heart.

Then the Sojourner Truth character responded with the well-known "Ain’t I a Woman" speech, set to music. Questions and Answers on the Woman Question honored African-American "women leaders" such as Tubman, Truth, Wells-Barnett, Mary Church Terrell, Claudia Jones, Shirley Graham, and Moranda Smith of the Food and Tobacco Workers Union. Similarly, in 1955 Masses & Mainstream editor Samuel Sillen’s book Women Against Slavery also included chapters about black women abolitionists Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and Sarah P. Redmond.

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36 "Peace Festival Tonight to hear ‘Ballad for Sojourner Truth,’" Daily Worker 6/15/51, p. 11.

37 Epstein and Wilkerson, pp. 16-20.

In addition to publicizing the achievements of famous black women such as Truth and Tubman, Communists also made an effort to document both the political sophistication of the masses of black women and their contributions to a variety of social justice movements. In *Masses & Mainstream* in February 1951 for example, one author compiled a group of primary sources, "Letters from Negro Women: 1827-1950," that included, among other things, an 1827 letter from a woman named Matilda to *Freedom's Journal* protesting their neglect of black women, an 1859 letter from "a mass meeting of Negro women" to John Brown thanking him for his efforts at Harper's Ferry, and an 1872 letter from Mary Olney Brown to Frederick Douglass demanding that he work to include black women under the 14th and 15th amendments.\(^{39}\) In March 1954 Peggy Dennis's article "World Labor's Debt to American Women" discussed the contributions of the "Negro women workers in the laundry, domestic and food industries" who were among the "90,000 Negro members" in the Knights of Labor and the "300,000 Negro women" in the Colored Farmers Alliance of the 1880s.\(^{40}\) Articles such as these made it clear to white and black readers alike that far from being just passive victims of their triple oppression, black women

\(^{39}\) "Letters from Negro Women: 1827-1950" in *Masses & Mainstream* 4, 2 (February, 1951): 24-33. In a bibliography of sources on black women in ________, listed the editor of this anthology as Gerda Lerner.

had a long history of standing up for themselves and, in the process, actively resisting race, class and gender exploitation.

Communists' strategy of teaching progressives about African-American women's past and present conditions and activities through the Party press was a good way to reach many people simultaneously. But despite its efficiency, the Communist Party did not rely solely on such written material to educate its members and supporters about the crucial importance of black women to the movement. In addition to CP literature, Communists also organized numerous public classes and programs that sought to make people aware of black women's problems, achievements, and their potential to contribute to Communist struggles. It is not clear from the evidence exactly when the Party's Marxist schools began to include such courses in their curricula but by the early 1950s teachers such as Lorraine Hansberry, Claudia Jones, Charlotta Bass, Yvonne Gregory and Doxey Wilkerson offered lectures and courses that explored topics such as "Negro Women in the Struggle for Peace and Democracy," and "Negro Women in Political Life." In 1951 Irene Epstein of the Jefferson School compiled a comprehensive "Bibliography on

4See, for example, announcement for Claudia Jones's lecture on "Negro Women in the Struggle for Peace and Democracy," in Daily Worker 2/15/52, p. 8; "Jeff School Maps Active Week on Negro History," Daily Worker 2/6/53, p. 6; advertisement for Jefferson School, Daily Worker 10/13/53, p. 8.
the Negro Woman in the U.S."
that included more than fifty books and articles to support the classes.\textsuperscript{42} The bibliography could still stand as an excel- lent reference to sources on African-American women published before 1950. Under the categories Marxist writings, women under slavery, women since the Civil War, women workers, women's organizations, women leaders, and general reference, Epstein included works as diverse as Herbert Aptheker's \textit{History of the Negro People}, Carter Woodson's 1918 article "The Negro Slave Family" from \textit{The Journal of Negro History}, an 1891 article by Alexander Crummel called "The Black Woman of the South: Her Neglects and Needs," and Elizabeth Davis's \textit{Lifting as We Climb} published by the National Association of Colored Women in 1936.\textsuperscript{43} Her inclusion of books such as \textit{Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl} by escaped slave Harriet Jacobs and articles on women such as Maggie Lena Walker demonstrates that Communists were familiar with these

\textsuperscript{42}Irene Epstein, "A Bibliography on the Negro Woman in the U.S." This mimeographed document, self-published by the Jefferson School of Social Science in 1951, is located in the Bertha Reynolds papers, Sophia Smith Collection, box 12, folder 151.

current black feminist heroines long before second wave feminists rediscovered them in the 1970s and 1980s.44

All of these efforts the Communist Party conducted to empower black women and to make them more central to Communist politics were important. In the racist and sexist atmosphere of the 1950s Communists were probably the only white political activists who were thinking and writing so much about black women’s particular social, economic and political circumstances. Their analysis of the intersections of race, class and gender integrated Marxism with black women activists’ theories about their own position in society and was, in many ways, very forward-looking. But it is also important to note that Communists’ commitment to black women did not just exist on paper, in classrooms, and in lecture and performance halls. In the 1940s and especially in the 1950s Communist leaders pushed rank-and-fileers to act on their belief that all progressive people had a responsibility to support black women’s struggles firsthand and to welcome black women into the movement with open arms. Between 1949 and the mid-1950s

Communists worked for black women's rights through existing women's organizations, such as the Congress of American Women and American Women for Peace, and through labor unions and organizations such as the United Electrical Workers' Union, the Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union, and the National Trade Union Conference of Negro Rights. At the same time they also worked to organize and support a Domestic Workers' Union with the hope that it could improve wages and working conditions for African-American domestic workers around the country. In 1951 and 1952 Communists lent a great deal of leadership and support to Sojourners for Truth and Justice, a new organization of black women established to heed "the historic calls of Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth," to "stimulate united front activity among all Negro women's organizations....in every community.


of the nation," and to fight for "Negro liberation."\textsuperscript{47}

Throughout the 1950s the Communist Party also continued to work tirelessly for the release of Rosa Ingram and, by the later 1950s, the CP held up Rosa Parks, Atherine Lucy as well as Rosa Ingram as some of the finest examples of resistance to the interlocking systems of male supremacy and white supremacy.\textsuperscript{48}

In order to make black women feel more welcome in the Party Communists not only tried to combat their own white supremacist attitudes, but named local clubs in many cities after famous black women leaders such as Harriet Tubman,

\textsuperscript{47}Quotes come from "Call Negro Women to 'Sojourn for Justice,'" \textit{Daily Worker} 9/20/51, p. 5; Claudia Jones, "Sojourners for Truth and Justice," \textit{The Worker} 2/10/52, p. 8. This group could justifiably be called a Communist front organization. The leadership of the group consisted entirely of Communist women and progressive allies of the Party. In the fall of 1951 when the group formed the leaders were Beulah Richardson, Charlotta Bass, Alice Childress, Shirley Graham, Josephine Grayson, Dorothy Hunton, Sonora Lawson, Amy Mallard, Rosalie Mcgee, Bessie Mitchell, Louise Patterson, Eslanda Robeson, Pauline Taylor and Frances Williams. Grayson, Hunton, and Mallard were the wives of lynch victims or political prisoners. The others were all women whose names were associated with other Communist-influenced organizations such as the Congress of American Women and American Women for Peace. In October 1951 Sojourner for Truth and Justice traveled as a group to Washington and held a picket line and prayer meeting in front of the White House to protest segregation, lynching, and the Smith Act and to present flowers to Mary Church Terrell, Emma Richards and Sally Peek. See also "Negro Women Bring Story of Persecution to U.S. Officials," \textit{Daily Worker} 10/3/51, p. 8; "Sojourners for Our Rights," \textit{The Worker} 10/14/51, p. 8; and "Sojourners for Truth Hold Brooklyn Meeting," \textit{Daily Worker} 6/29/52, p. 8.

\textsuperscript{48}See numerous articles about the Ingram case in CP publications in the late 1940s and 1950s and Clara Bodian, "Women's Groups Alert to Issues," \textit{The Worker} 3/11/56.
Sojourner Truth and Moranda Smith. They also made a real attempt to promote black women and other women of color into leadership at all levels of the Party. In addition to Claudia Jones, who was Secretary of the National Women's Commission, women of color such as Johnnie Lumpkin, Mary Adams, Geraldyne Lightfoot and Mercedes Arroyo also held state and local leadership positions. These efforts never inspired African-American women to join the Communist Party en masse, as Communist leaders hoped they would, but they did convince at least some black women that the CP had their best interests at heart. By 1956 the Communist Party had made much progress toward ending the neglect of the problems of Negro women in its own ranks and contributed more than any other radical organization in the U.S. to black women's own attempts to better the status of their race as they improved the conditions of their own lives.

The CP's attention to race and class issues as they intersected with women's oppression also made it unique among racially integrated organizations working for women's rights between 1945 and the 1960s. Unlike NWP feminists, many of whom saw race issues as divisive, and women's rights advocates in the labor movement who debated the wisdom of challenging race and sex discrimination simultaneously, Communists understood that race and gender issues were

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inseparable—that there could be no women’s rights unless black women and other women of color were freed from racial discrimination. It is no coincidence that while the NWP clung to 19th century terminology referring to the "woman movement" and "woman’s rights," the Communist Party shifted in the 1940s to the plural women’s movement and women’s liberation. For Communists this distinction had more than rhetorical significance: in their minds race and class were not differences that drove women apart, diverting them from a universal "woman’s" cause, but attributes that could bring women together to fight against gender, race and class oppression and, in that way, to achieve real liberation for women and men alike. By "ending the neglect of the problems of Negro women," writing and restoring black women’s history, appointing Communist women of color to local leadership positions and lending support to their campaigns to improve conditions for themselves and their families the Communist Party helped to nurture early civil rights activism and became the first predominantly white, non-religious organization to promote what we now call the black feminist perspective.
CHAPTER VI

COMMUNIST PARTY CULTURE
AND THE POLITICIZATION OF PERSONAL LIFE

From its beginnings in 1919 the American Communist Party subscribed to a materialist analysis of capitalist society and emphasized class exploitation as the primary cause of all oppression in the modern world. In the 1940s and 1950s, as in the two preceding decades, the CP directed much of its political activity toward aiding the class struggle with the expectation that by doing so it was striking at the root of all inequality. In keeping with this strategy Communist activists devoted most of their energy to empowering the working-class by organizing the unorganized, supporting strikes and meat boycotts, opposing unemployment, and advocating equal rights for doubly oppressed African-Americans, Mexican-Americans, and women.

Although Communists devoted a great deal of effort to aiding workers’ material struggles against their exploiters, however, they were also very much aware that capitalist domination extended beyond the formal economic, social and

After years of focusing exclusively on the American Communist Party's relationship with the Soviet Union and the strong influence of that relationship on the Party's leaders and official policies and directives, in the late 1970s the historiography on American Communism began to include studies that examined the social and cultural history of the CP in the U.S. These studies, because they often examine the CP experience at the state, local, and individual levels, avoid the anti-communist assumptions and perspectives that influenced the older historiography so strongly and, in my view, present a much more balanced and realistic view of both Communists and the American CP. The best examples of this new post-Cold War historiography are: Peggy Dennis, The Autobiography of an American Communist: A Personal View of a Political Life, 1925-1975 (Westport, CT: Lawrence Hill & Co., 1977); Vivian Gornick, The Romance of American Communism (New York: Basic Books, 1977); Jessica Mitford, A Fine Old Conflict (New York: Knopf, 1977); Maurice Isserman, Which Side Were You On? (Wesleyan, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1982); Paul Lyons, Philadelphia Communists, 1936-1956 (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982); Mark Naison, Communists in Harlem During the Great Depression (New York: Grove Press, 1984); Isserman, If I Had a Hammer: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left (New York: Basic Books, 1987); Paul C. Mishler, "The Littlest Proletariat: American Communists and Their Children, 1920-1950," (Ph.D. dissertation, Boston
about cultural hegemony reached the United States in the 1950s American Communists argued that because "bourgeois culture" and "bourgeois morality" were instrumental in perpetuating the oppressive class system, the creation of an alternative "peoples" culture and set of values was necessary to achieve a classless society. In the late


Fraser Ottanelli’s The Communist Party of the United States: From the Depression to World War II attempts to achieve a middle-ground between the two other approaches.


Marvin Gettleman’s essay "The New York Workers School, 1923-1944: Communist Education in American Society," in Brown et al., New Studies in the Politics and Culture of American Communism argues that the American CP’s recognition of the importance of workers’ education shows that the Party was aware of the importance of cultural hegemony even before
1940s and 1950s when the political context of the United States was decidedly unrevolutionary and Communists were barred from participating in both C.I.O. unions and reformist organizations such as the NAACP, cultural and personal politics became more important than ever before. Although they continued to remain active in the labor movement, the early civil rights movement, and other struggles whenever possible, many Communists turned their revolutionary impulses inward. As it became increasingly difficult for them to influence social and cultural institutions in mainstream society Communists concentrated on creating an alternative culture and lifestyle that reflected their deeply held political principles and beliefs. By the 1950s Communists and their allies were devoting considerable energy to developing for themselves the cultural institutions and artifacts they wanted to see in the future, and modeling the egalitarian interpersonal relationships they hoped every American would be able to adopt when socialism finally triumphed in the U.S.³

³Even the F.B.I. was aware of the Communist Party's efforts to create an alternative culture and way of life. In 1958, in "Communist Propaganda in the U.S., Part VII, Art, Entertainment, and Misc. Vehicles," (in The Communist Party and Radical Organizations, 1953-1960 reel #2) the F.B.I. observed that "Communists have always attempted to combine propaganda with art and entertainment. As a
American Communists' commitment to the creation of a prefigurative political culture was not new in the McCarthy period but in the late 1940s and 1950s their attention to culture and individual relationships was substan- tially different from before.4 Because of the new emphasis that Communists placed on combatting male supremacist ideology and the cultural, psychological and personal elements of women's oppression in the post-WWII period, their efforts to create an oppositional subculture in those years naturally included attempts to counterbalance the sexism so prevalent in mainstream culture and society. After progressive women began to criticize the way they were represented (and not represented) in books, magazines, newspapers and movies Communists made a conscious effort to create new cultural artifacts that portrayed women as strong and intelligent. At the same time, after Communist women began to argue that male supremacist ideology influenced individuals and the

consequence, various forms of art and entertainment have been used extensively, persistently and effectively as a media of communist propaganda and agitation in the U.S. These include paintings, cartoons, songs, dances, motion pictures, plays, radio, television and phonograph records. Other channels which have been widely and successfully employed to serve communist propaganda ends are schools, camps, visual aids, awards, prizes, flags, emblems, and sports."

4This term, "prefigurative politics," was coined by the sociologist Wini Breines in her book Community and Organization in the New Left, 1962-1968: The Great Refusal (New York: Praeger, 1982) to discuss S.D.S.'s attempts to practice the "participatory democracy" it hoped to establish at all levels of American society.
family as well as society at-large, the Party began to insist that progressive men guard against male chauvinist attitudes and behavior in their roles as husbands and fathers as well as in political settings, and that female/male and even parent/child relationships should be respectful, egalitarian and mutually satisfying. Even as their influence in U.S. society was declining rapidly after World War II Communists' attempts to create an alternative way of life for themselves made them vanguards of a new era of American political activism. Their efforts not only prefigured the classless society they ultimately hoped to create, but anticipated the "personal politics" that the participants in the new movements of the 1960s thought they invented.

At the end of World War II Communists had long been engaged in efforts to develop an alternative culture and lifestyle that included art, literature, music, and theater that represented "the people" and had the potential to empower them. In the 1920s, for example, a group of Communists who were primarily Jewish garment workers formed the United Workers Co-Operative Association and built two apartment houses--the Allerton Avenue Co-Operative Houses, also known as "the Coops"--in the Bronx. The Coops not only housed the 3000 people who lived there at any one time but, from the 1920s to the 1950s, supported a self-contained
radical community that included clubrooms, meeting halls, a library, a nursery school, a community center and an auditorium and allowed Communist residents to live out their politics on a daily basis.\textsuperscript{5} Progressive summer camps and children's programs at CP-influenced Marxist schools served a similar purpose for those who lived outside of communities like The Coops. Communist parents sent their children to Camp Woodland, Camp Kinderland, and Camp Calumet so they could spend time with other "red diaper babies" and absorb progressive politics and values through sing-alongs, art projects, and story-telling.\textsuperscript{6} In the 1930s and early 1940s, as the Party grew in size and influence, it attracted numerous writers and musicians whose artistic labors reflected their political commitments and helped to build Communist culture.\textsuperscript{7} Throughout this period Communist authors wrote novels and plays with revolutionary themes and strong working-class heroes and heroines, singers Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie held "hootenannies" at which Communists and their supporters gathered to sing politicized folk songs, and the CP leadership demanded that whites

\textsuperscript{5}Gornick, pp. 53-59.

\textsuperscript{6}Mishler, "The Littlest Proletariat."

interact with blacks as equals. At the same time Communist scholars also began to research and write about labor history in order to provide activist role models for the working-class and create a usable past for themselves. Despite their Party's longstanding emphasis on the importance of workplace and neighborhood issues, American Communists were also always aware that cultural activities were important components of the fight to build a better world.

The Communist movement's efforts to develop a counter-hegemonic "peoples" culture between 1919 and 1945 were, by-and-large, extremely progressive. As American mass culture in this period accepted and promoted racism, nationalism, competition and consumption, Communist-influenced art, music, literature, theater and daily life emphasized racial equality, international peace, and cooperation, celebrated the proud heritage of the working class, and praised progressives' efforts to resist the decadent, bourgeois values that increasingly dominated the nation. But although Communists' culture and way of life was remarkably advanced

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because of the way they incorporated race and class issues, especially in the period between 1936 and 1945, their record on gender was considerably less impressive. Because they tried to appeal to the workers by demonstrating that they were in many ways just like them, before 1945 Communists actually adopted sexist ideas and practices from mainstream culture more often than they opposed them. Consequently, despite their rhetoric about sex equality, the pages of Communist newspapers were littered with "cheesecake" and many Communist men expected their wives to act in traditional subservient roles in the family and in political activities. And when Mary Inman and others dared to propose in the late 1930s that women's oppression existed at the cultural and individual levels of capitalist society as well as in economic, political and social structures many could still dismiss them as "feminists."

Not suprisingly, as Communists began to expand their theory on the woman question at the end of World War II and to acknowledge that male supremacist ideology AND class oppression subordinated women, all of this began to change. In the fall of 1946 after a published excerpt from Susan

Anthony's "Report of the Commission on the Status of Women" criticized "the press, periodicals, films, radio and theater" for "minimizing all women" by presenting them as "frivolous, superficial, flighty, catty, stupid and weak," and suggested that such stereotypes convinced women that they "d[i]d not deserve and therefore should not ask for a better place in the world," many Communists began to consider the effects of cultural messages on women more seriously. And in 1948, when Betty Millard refined and expanded Anthony's points and explained the ways that even progressive men often manifested sexist attitudes and behaviors, Communists and progressives also began to think about how male supremacy operated at the individual as well as the group level. Once Party leaders realized that sexist stereotypes and male supremacist behavior on the part of individual men compromised the organization's ability to recruit more women the CP was motivated to take a stand against such oppressive attitudes and customs. In the late 1940s, after the CP no longer had any power to influence those outside progressive circles, leading Communists expanded their efforts to replace the male supremacist images of women in their publications with more empowering ones and strove to eliminate the male chauvinist attitudes and behavior that restricted the activities of girls and

10Susan B. Anthony II, "Jimcrow Against Women," The Worker 10/20/46, p. 11.
women in so many rank-and-file Communist families and relationships. By the 1950s, although sexism certainly persisted at all levels of Communist Party life, Communists publicly condemned male supremacist attitudes and behavior in the family and personal life and disdained sexist images almost as loudly as they repudiated white chauvinism, Aunt Jemima, and minstrel shows.

The Communist Party’s attack on male supremacy in bourgeois culture began almost immediately after The Worker published Susan Anthony’s analysis of the cultural oppression of women in October, 1946.11 Once Anthony articulated the ways that constant misrepresentations of women effectively saddled them with a "sex inferiority complex," other Communist writers followed her lead and initiated what was to become a lengthy process of exposing and condemning the cultural messages that both shaped and limited women’s lives. The first critiques of sexism in mainstream culture that appeared in The Worker and the Daily Worker simply tended to repeat Anthony’s points about the damaging effects of stereotypes using specific examples from movies and magazines. David Platt, for example, denounced the movie "It Happened One Night" as "an insult to every woman who ever contributed to social progress" and Martha Bridger called women’s true romance magazines "one of the

11Ibid.
most formidable types of propaganda....this nation possesses." It was not until after 1948, when Betty Millard explained concretely the variety of ways that language, customs and stereotypes helped to perpetuate women's inferior status, that other authors began to develop their ideas further. Once Communists began to identify new cultural sources of women's oppression, it seemed, no element of American life went unscrutinized.

In the late 1940s and 1950s articles criticizing portrayals of women in popular culture proliferated in Communist Party publications. Instead of limiting themselves to the subjects of movies and magazines Communists branched out and began to address every variety of chauvinistic language, denouncing not only anti-black, anti-Asian, anti-Gypsy, anti-Irish and anti-Canadian terms but misogynist expressions as well. Discussions about misrepresentations of women in literature were common, and as soon as television became an important element in

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12 David Platt, "Film 'Comedy' Attacks Right of Women to Enter Public Life," Daily Worker 8/3/46, p. 11; Martha Bridger, "Arsenic and Young Lace," The Worker 9/8/46, p. 11.

13 See, for example, Lloyd L. Brown "Words and White Chauvinism," Masses and Mainstream 3, 2 (February, 1950): 3-11; "When do 'Girls' Grow Up?" The Worker 8/20/50, p. 4 and Claudia Jones's response to the letter printed on the same page; Harry Lee to the Editor, "Chauvinist Term," Daily Worker 1/31/51; Detroit Auto Worker to the Editor, "Condemns Use of Word 'Yellow'" Daily Worker 1/26/51, p. 6; Marvin S. in Brooklyn to Editor, "Critical of Chauvinist Word," Daily Worker 1/11/51, p. 6; Claudia Jones, "Beware of Lady Nicotine," The Worker 1/19/54, p. 12.
American culture Communists began to argue against the way TV shows depicted women and girls.14 N.E. of New York City, for example, wrote to the Daily Worker to warn fellow progressives against "a most disgusting program," the "Horn and Hardart Children's Hour" on which "male supremacist songs are twittered forth by precocious little girls," and Vic Miller's article "Looking at TV Shows Featuring Women" argued that most series portrayed women as "zany scatterbrains with long-suffering menfolk."15 Sexist advertising became a target of Communists' attacks in this period, as Ted Tinsley and W. Greer of Brooklyn each condemned the use of scantily clad women for purposes such as selling cars and justifying phone rate increases, and Communists also began to write in this period about the

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evils of women's fashion, comparing the expectation that American women wear high heels to the practice of binding women's feet in China. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn even criticized conventional standards for women's attractiveness in her regular column "Life of the Party," arguing that "the idea that women must be beautiful at all costs is a slave idea, as is the whole concept that they must be gentle, sweet, low-voiced and pliable." By the early 1950s Communists simply accepted the notion that one of the explicit purposes of bourgeois culture was to keep women down. David Carpenter effectively summarized the Party's new position on the role of culture in women's oppression in 1951 when he wrote:

One of the worst crimes of American monopoly capitalism against humanity in this period when it dominates the whole capitalist world is its debasement and degradation of women. At the very time when the productive forces and creativeness of humanity makes possible the liberation of women after long centuries of super-exploitation, the capitalist overlords of U.S. imperialism increasingly defile women. The entire cultural power of the capitalist class--movies, books, magazines, radio, schools, churches, etc.--attacks


17 Ted Tinsley's column in the Daily Worker was called "Ted Tinsley Says." This particular column, entitled, "Gene and Jean," appeared on 1/16/51, p. 11. Flynn's attack on conventional beauty standards appeared in her regular "Life of the Party" column in the Daily Worker on September 20, 1948.
women, particularly of the working class, almost from birth, to destroy their minds and creative social abilities. Every word, every picture, is aimed at making women accept sexual and kitchen slavery as their destiny.  

The sheer number of articles like these published in the Party press makes it clear that by the late 1940s and 1950s American Communists were aware of the need to recognize and expose the ways that mainstream culture damaged women. But, because they were activists as well as social critics, Communists and their allies also agreed that it was necessary to combat oppressive representations of women whenever possible. Susan B. Anthony II suggested in 1946 that the best way to oppose sexism in culture was to mobilize the masses of American women to protest against degrading images in the press, fiction, films, etc., but in the increasingly reactionary environment of the post-war period organizing such mass-based resistance was virtually impossible. Because they had no hope of reforming those who produced mainstream women's magazines, textbooks, movies and radio shows progressives decided that their only hope for winning the battle against bourgeois culture was to create their own. If images of women as sex symbols, doting mothers, and scatterbrained housewives in popular culture

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were intended to make them accept their subjection, Communists believed, then an alternative peoples' culture needed to provide new images of smart, strong, powerful women that could inspire them to fight the forces of reaction and resist their own oppression. One way that Communists tried to create such images was by rethinking the CP press's portrayal of women after numerous Communists complained about it. In 1949, for example, the editors of The Worker and the Daily Worker tried to improve the ways women were represented in those publications when they declared a moratorium on cheesecake and, in 1950, when they replaced the picture of the high-heeled woman dusting at the top of the woman's page with the drawing of a black woman and a white woman standing together. Communist writers also tried during this period to add to an existing body of CP-influenced poetry and fiction that contained realistic female role models. Progressive authors Meridel LeSueur, Eve Merriam and Gerda Lerner each contributed in the 1940s and 1950s to this older genre of left-feminist writing by publishing material that both reflected real women's problems and experiences and sought to empower them.19

19Merriam and LeSueur wrote frequently for Masses & Mainstream, the successor to the Communist publication New Masses. Merriam's "Birthday," Masses & Mainstream 2, 7 (July, 1949): 34-35 and Le Sueur's "Eroded Woman," Masses & Mainstream 1, 7 (September, 1948): 32-39 are just two examples of their work. Gerda Lerner's novel No Farewell, first published in Austria, was issued in the U.S. in 1955 and reviewed by Virginia Gardner in the Daily Worker on 7/27/55, p. 6. Less well-known writers also wrote pieces
Art (and other visual representations of women) and literature were both important parts of Communists’ crusade to improve upon the sexist and misogynist images presented in mainstream culture but, especially in the years between 1946 and 1956, Communist writers began to spend less time inventing positive fictional images of women and to concentrate instead on uncovering the creative and political achievements and contributions of real heroines from the American past. The first discussions of U.S. women’s history appeared in the The Worker and Daily Worker in the

praising women for the CP press. In April of 1952, for example, the Daily Worker published Sadie Van Veen’s poem "Symphony of Women" that praised women’s bravery and their desire to "save the youth, to save mankind from terror and war." These writers were continuing an older trend of Communist women’s authorship of proletarian novels, poems, and short stories that aimed to portray women, especially those from the working-class, in a more favorable and realistic light. Some of the books, stories, and poems published before and during WWI include: Agnes Smedley, Daughter of Earth (new York: Coward-McCann, 1929); Meridal LeSueur, "Women on the Breadlines," New Masses 7 (January, 1932) and "The Fetish of Being Outside," New Masses (February, 1935); Ruth McKenney, My Sister Eileen (1938), Industrial Valley (1939) and Jake Home (1943); Josephine Herbst, Rope of Gold (1939); Tillie (Lerner) Olsen, "The Strike," Partisan Review 1 (September-October, 1934) and "I Want You Women Up North to Know," Partisan (March, 1934); Myra Page, The Gathering Storm (1932). For critical discussions of these authors and their works see: Deborah Rosenfelt, "From the Thirties: Tillie Olsen and the Radical Tradition," Feminist Studies 7 (Fall, 1981): 370-406; Elinor Langer, Josephine Herbst: The Story She Could Never Tell (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1984); Charlotte Nebola and Paula Rabinowitz, eds., Writing Red: An Anthology of American Women Writers, 1930-1940 (New York: The Feminist Press, 1987); and Constance Coiner, "Literature of Resistance: The Intersection of Feminism and the Communist Left in Meridel LeSueur and Tillie Olsen," Lennard J. Davis and M. Bella Mirabella eds., Left Politics and the Literary Profession (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).
fall of 1946 as part of the Party's larger efforts to draw more women into the CP's milieu. These initial articles sought to show progressives that women had long been contributing to social justice movements and to demonstrate that they could participate in campaigns for social and political reform even though they were excluded from the formal political system. Only one of these early stories -- Virginia Warner's "Battle for Women's Rights Began in 1848" -- focused specifically on the 19th century woman's rights movement; the others conceived women's movements more broadly and emphasized women's contributions to other 19th century social movements as well.\footnote{Virginia Warner's "Battle for Women's Rights Began in 1848," \textit{The Worker} 12/1/46, p. 11, outlines the history of the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 and discusses the "Declaration of Sentiments" in some detail.} Samuel Sillen, for example, wrote about the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society and Virginia Warner about the contributions of women such as the Grimke sisters and Lydia Maria Child to the abolitionist movement.\footnote{Samuel Sillen, "'Go Home, Ladies, Go home,,'" \textit{Daily Worker} 9/13/46, p. 11 and "The Feminine Ferment," \textit{The Worker} 10/13/46, p. 8; Virginia Warner, "How Women Helped Fight Against Slavery," \textit{The Worker} 11/24/46, p. 11.} Similarly, Philip Foner presented Sarah Bagley and the Lowell Mill girls as pioneers in the American labor movement and, in order to combat the notion that suffragists were selfish middle-class women concerned exclusively with winning rights for themselves, Virginia Gardner discussed the coalitions that some suffrage-advocates formed with
groups such as the Knights of Labor and the American Socialist Party.\textsuperscript{22}

Worker and Daily Worker readers responded to the women’s history articles that appeared in the newspapers in late 1946 very favorably. E.R. from Woodside, NY wrote to the editor of the Daily Worker in October to say that he or she "liked the article on women in the abolitionist movement" and to express his or her opinion that "we need more information on the historical role of women in America."\textsuperscript{23} In January 1947 another reader wrote to The Worker to say "the articles....on the history of the women’s equal rights movement have been a wonderful relief from the conspicuous lack of material on the subject" and to request "more data on the American women’s movement--specifically on the struggle for equality in the shops, in unions, in politics."\textsuperscript{24} In response the editor promised, "We’ll see what we can do about getting more of it."\textsuperscript{25}

From that point on, women’s history features appeared frequently in the The Worker and the Daily Worker and


\textsuperscript{23E.R. to Editor, "Liked Article on Women in Abolitionist Movement," Daily Worker 10/17/46, p. 7.}

\textsuperscript{24Letter to the Editor from E.L., The Worker 1/19/47, p. 10.}

\textsuperscript{25Ibid.}
occasionally in other publications such as *Political Affairs* and *Masses & Mainstream*. Beginning in 1947 both CP newspapers published regular articles presenting individual activist role models for women such as Anne Hutchinson, Carrie Chapman Catt, Mother Jones, Kaethe Kollwitz, Sarah and Angelina Grimke, Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Parsons, Harriet Tubman, Prudence Crandall, Sojourner Truth, Florence Kelly, and many others, all of whom demonstrated that women could overcome the limitations set for them and achieve significant influence in politics and social life.²⁶ At the same time CP

publications also began to print regular columns on the history of the U.S. women’s movement that included the contributions of African-American and working-class women as well as those made by well-known 19th century feminists such as Stanton and Anthony. Articles such as Elizabeth Gurley Flynn’s "1948--A Year of Inspiring Anniversaries for Women" and "'Petticoat Revolt' They Sneered," and Peggy Dennis’s "World Labor’s Debt to American Women" argued that women’s struggles to improve their own status had been irrevocably linked to the abolitionist movement and the labor movement and that women had been central to the successes of all three.27

In 1953 Communist historian Herbert Aptheker published a series of three articles on the woman suffrage movement in the Daily Worker in order to refute American Historical Association president J.G. Randall’s "appalling" and "male supremacist" statement that "Woman suffrage in the U.S. was

obtained not by a revolution or a kind of Amazon's Bastille Day, but by orderly processes under mere male control." 28
In these works Aptheker analyzed the history of the suffrage struggle from its origins in Seneca Falls in 1848, to the mass arrests and gross mistreatment of suffragists picketing in front of the White House in 1917, to the ratification of the Woman Suffrage Amendment in 1920. The examples set by the suffragists and other women activists from the 19th and early 20th centuries, Aptheker and other Communists believed, were particularly important for progressive women of the 1950s who were "fight[ing] so courageously....against McCarthyite, Smith and McCarran Acts persecutions." 29
Stories about real women activists who triumphed despite persecution in the past, they thought, could inspire radical women to persevere in spite of the subpoenas, blacklisting, and arrests that so frequently threatened them throughout the late 1940s and 1950s.

Communists who contributed regularly to the CP press were not the only ones developing an interest in women's


history after 1946. Progressive writers Gerda Lerner and Eve Merriam also began to pursue the subject and the result of their labors constituted another important part of the alternative people's culture Communists and other progressives were constructing in this period. In 1951 Lerner and Merriam wrote a dramatic/musical revue entitled "Singing of Women" that they intended to "take the starch out of theories and myths which depict women as the 'weaker and feebleminded sex.'" ³⁰ Performed on March 15, 16 and 17 at the Cherry Lane Theatre in New York "Singing of Women" consisted of two acts: the first dramatized such historical events as women's efforts to keep prices down during the Revolutionary War, the Women's Rights Convention of 1848, the earliest strike of women textile workers, the fight for women's suffrage, women's struggles for the 8-hour day, and the establishment of International Women's Day; and the second acted out "the problem of male supremacy, the dual exploitation of woman as housewife and worker, unequal pay, and women's international role in the fight against fascism and the emerging peace movement." ³¹ Although reviewer Betty


³¹Betty Feldman, "'Singing of Women,' Important Achievement in People's Theatre," Daily Worker 4/5/51, p. 11. According to this review, Virginia Warner also contributed to three of the numbers in the review and Florence Greenberg wrote the music. Will Lee directed the play, Becky Lee choreographed it, and a "full regalia of radio and Broadway talent" participated in making "'Singing of Women' the kind of entertainment both women and men sing about!"
Feldman felt that "Singing of Women" suffered from trying to cover too much ground she had no choice but to praise it for including African-American and working-class women and avoiding the male supremacist stereotypes that predominated in bourgeois movies and theater. "Singing of Women," she concluded is a "very positive and welcome achievement. Gerda Lerner and Eve Merriam have made a valuable and pioneering contribution." 32 In the post-WWII United States when most cultural representations of women were extremely unfavorable and clearly intended to keep them from demanding a better place in the world it was clear that women's history in general and programs such as "Singing of Women" in particular provided positive images that Communists hoped could both inspire women to action and serve as "a vehicle for educating....men and women [about] the need [to] build a strong women's movement within the fight for peace and socialism." 33

The Communist Party's campaign to denounce sexism in popular culture and to present more positive and inspirational images of women in Party publications such as The Worker and Daily Worker was an important step forward in its campaign to recruit more women and create a way of life that reflected its theoretical commitment to women's equality. But although more women joined the CP and

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.
participated in the events and activities it supported after 1945 than had before the end of the war, it must have quickly become apparent to Party leaders that their efforts to equalize the participation of women and men in Party life were not succeeding. Despite improved theory on the woman question, special classes and activities for wives and mothers, and the inclusion of favorable representations of women and women’s issues in the Party press both the Communist Party’s leadership and its day-to-day operations were still by-and-large dominated by men. The true equality Communists had hoped to create for themselves while they worked for the revolution that might make it a reality for everyone was still a long way off.

If Communist leaders were confused in the late 1940s about why their efforts to promote greater equality between women and men in CP life were not succeeding they did not have to look far for an explanation. As early as 1946 Communist women had begun to write to The Worker women’s pages not only to complain about the ways that economic discrimination and exclusion from politics exploited them as a group, but to protest the ways that their husbands’ attitudes and behavior oppressed them as individuals. In June 1946, for example, S.T. from New York wrote to the paper to suggest that although the Party’s efforts to compensate for women’s oppression in society at large might help to recruit some new women members, others were still
limited by their personal circumstances. "It is the unsympathetic husband who throws every obstacle in the path of a political alert wife who is the real problem," S.T. argued, "It takes an almost superhuman effort on the part of the wife to overcome the scorn and ridicule of this type of husband who feels his wife's place is in the home."34 In November of that year W.O. wrote to confirm that her husband was indeed her problem and to suggest that this phenomenon was actually quite widespread:

My husband could give an excellent lecture on the necessity to emancipate women. He spends hours reading and improving his mind. Politically he is really well educated. but what about his wife? I work 16 hours a day, seven days a week. If I have the time to read the editorial in the Daily Worker I am lucky. I can jump up from a meal a dozen times, but my husband will pass the knife for me to cut him a slice off the loaf. He would never dream of helping me with the children, or doing the dishes, or putting things away when he uses them, or planning to stay home one evening occasionally so I could get out for a change of atmosphere. He is waited on hand and foot and expects it....He would think any other man described like this was a poor comrade, but if he suspected this meant himself he'd be angry at me. He is not the only one; I've met dozens like him.35

Numerous others also wrote to the women's pages to validate the notion that self-identified Marxists could also be male chauvinists and to demand that the Communist Party needed to "pay closer attention to the personal and emotional problems

34S.T. of New York City to The Worker 6/23/46, p. 11.
35W.O. to The Worker 11/10/46, p. 11.
of [its] people through a clearer delineation of Marxist behavior in human relations."

Since the 1920s the Party had always maintained that the exploitative conditions of capitalism, not men, were responsible for women's subjugation and, as a result, in 1946 and 1947 when Communist women first began to hold their male family members responsible for women's oppression CP leaders tended either to ignore their arguments that their husbands limited their participation in progressive activities or to dismiss their complaints as a "battle of the sexes approach" to women's problems. In the late 1940s, however, despite the CP's insistence that they were not approaching the problem of women's oppression correctly, more and more rank-and-filers began to insist that the Party had a responsibility to insure that individual men live out their politics in their personal lives. In the summer of 1948, for example, Joseph Gingold wrote to the Worker to say that "the fight for equality begins in the home" and E.E. from Long Island City proposed that "It is essential that when people join the party they understand that there is a

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37Many of these letters appeared in response to Margaret Brill's letter to The Worker, published on 6/6/48, asking for advice about how to deal with her husband's insistence that it was her job to take care of the house and children so he could go out to meetings.
Communist way of life and they will be expected to live it as well as to preach it." 38 Yet another reader wrote to The Worker to point out that male chauvinist husbands "created in [their] homes conditions which are similar to conditions in an open shop and placed [themselves] in the position of the union busting boss." 39 Letters like these forced the Communist Party leadership to acknowledge that individual men’s male supremacist attitudes and behaviors did sometimes keep women tied to home and children and, as a result, Party heads gradually began to take their complaints more seriously. By the late 1940s, as the political climate made it increasingly difficult for Communists to challenge publicly the economic, political and social status quo, Communist leaders began to place more emphasis than ever before on need to reform the personal and family lives of the Party’s rank-and-file members and supporters.

Communists’ stand against individual manifestations of male supremacy in the home and family in the late 1940s and early 1950s was founded on the new and deeper understanding of the role of culture in perpetuating women’s oppression that progressive writers had forged at the end of the World War II. In addition to demonstrating the ways that sexist


images in bourgeois culture damaged women's self esteem and
made them hesitant to ask for a better place in the world, a
few Communist writers also recognized that male chauvinism
in culture "corrupt[ed] men into becoming its agents for
keeping women sexual and kitchen slaves." This argument
was key to convincing Communist leaders that the Party could
address the problems of male supremacy in the family without
deviating from its longstanding position that capitalist
class relations and not individual men were responsible for
women's oppression. Once they recognized that individual
progressive and working-class men's oppressive behavior
could be blamed on structural causes CP leaders could
acknowledge that "women in the modern bourgeois family
[function] as 'the proletariat' of the man who assumes the
place of 'bourgeoisie'" and that "there are many Communist
men....who believe that a woman's function is to make love,
have children, do the cooking, the housework, and wait on
her lord and master." By the end of the decade they began
to implement a strategy for combatting this very un-
Communist but regrettably not uncommon point of view.

40 David Carpenter, "'The Woman Question': Selections from the Writings of Marxist Masters," The Worker 7/8/51, p. 7. Margaret Krumbein, "How to Fight for Women's Rights," the Worker 8/8/48, p. 9 and Claudia Jones, "We Seek Full Equality for Women," The Worker 9/4/49, p. 11 are two more examples of Communist writers who present this analysis of
the negative effects of male supremacist culture on men.

As early as 1948 CP women's leader Margaret Krumbein had insisted that the Party institute a program of education for men on the woman question that included, among other things, instruction on "Communist ethics." In the early years of its campaign to encourage Communist men to live-out their politics by treating their wives and other female comrades fully as equals the Communist Party followed Krumbein's advice. If Communist men had been corrupted by bourgeois ideology, CP leaders must have reasoned, then the best way to free them from that ideology was to explain where it came from, how it affected them, why it was bad, and how they could do things differently. Initially they relied on the CP press, especially The Worker and Daily Worker, to do this. From 1948 into the 1950s the newspapers carried regular articles and features that were intended to point out day-to-day examples of male chauvinism and give hints about how Communist men could mend their ways. In April 1948, for example, the caption under a photo of three chimpanzees dressed as people performing household chores read:

Household drudgery: Even in the St. Louis Zoo male superiority rears its ugly head as Ma Chimpanzee wields the mop, the youngster polishes the table, while Papa Chimpanzee sits back and takes it easy.

42Margaret Krumbein, "How to Fight for Women's Rights," The Worker 8/8/48, p. 9. Margaret Krumbein is the married name of 1930s CP women's leader Margaret Cowl.

And in April 1949 the caption under a photo of a small child eating lunch with her father read:

It does a girl good to have lunch with one of her favorite men occasionally, and it's especially good if the child is very young and the man is the child's father. Families are stronger and happier if the father knows how to fix the cereal, tie the bibs, and take care of the youngsters.\(^44\)

Scores of articles and letters also appeared in the CP papers in this period condemning those men who refused to treat their wives respectfully and reminding them that living in a Communist manner meant that they were expected not only to help with the dishes but to take on real responsibility for some aspects of housework and childcare. In 1950, for example, an "irate husband" spoke for many when he wrote:

I think we must be more alert to certain subtle acts of male supremacy that are keeping many women tied down to the home....Communist women today should be relieved of their household drudgery so that they can once and for all do the key political job which has been denied them before. The main responsibility lies with male Communists. They must begin to recognize that cooking, cleaning and looking after kids is not a woman's responsibility, but a joint one.\(^45\)

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\(^44\) The Worker, 4/3/49.

In 1954 *Worker* writer Jean Josephs took this analysis even further when she criticized the way progressives tended to call men who took on household responsibilities "wonderful" and "remarkable" while they continued to take it for granted that women were supposed to have two jobs, one outside the home and one within it.\(^\text{46}\) Until social legislation could achieve better daycare centers, socialized housekeeping and communal cafeterias, she argued, husbands and fathers needed to take on their share of the family responsibilities so that women could be free to pursue political activities on their own behalf and for the liberation of the working class.

Articles and letters encouraging men to fight male supremacy in their personal lives were one important part of the CP's educational campaign against individual manifestations of male supremacy, but they were only half the story. In its quest for a satisfactory resolution to Communists' version of the "battle of the sexes" in the early 1950s the Party also began to sponsor classes on topics such as "Marriage and Family Life," and "Male Supremacy and Family Relations" at the Jefferson School with the hope that they might persuade more men to renounce the privileges they gained from male supremacy and to work for

real egalitarianism in their relationships with their wives.\footnote{47} Classes such as these reminded men that despite their allegiance to the Communist Party they were not necessarily ideologically pure. On the contrary, according to the Jefferson School faculty, male supremacist ideology "infected" both the working-class and the progressive movement. Even the most progressive men, they argued, commonly exhibited their male chauvinist attitudes by:


\footnote{48}Irene Epstein and Doxey Wilkerson, \textit{Questions and Answers on the Woman Question} (New York: Jefferson School of Social Science, 1953), p. 11.

....neglect[ing] their responsibility in problems of child up-bringing, the family, household chores, etc., leaving these necessary tasks for women to perform; discouraging one's wife from participation in political and other community activities (or not making it possible for her to do so); passing jokes and derogatory comments about women in general; preoccupation with women solely as 'sex beings,' rather than as equal companions in rounded social relationships; accepting the 'double standard' of morality; and refusing to take a serious approach to the woman question, to study and understand it as a special question of prime importance for the triumph of the working class over imperialist reaction.\footnote{48}
women was especially dangerous because it obstructed the advance of the working-class.\footnote{The Communist Party and Radical Organizations, 1953-1960, reel #6, "The Educational Program of the Communist Party, USA, Part I: Communist Front Schools, May, 1954, p. 47-8; "Post-Election Courses at Jeff School," Daily Worker 11/17/54, p. 4.} Because men, not women, were the "carriers" of male supremacist ideology, the classes stressed, men had the main responsibility for struggling against it.\footnote{Ibid., p. 12.} Teachers such as Joseph Fuerst, Herbert Aptheker, and Doxey Wilkerson urged men to fight male supremacy by working for the "full equal rights of women on the job, in the union, and in the home." Additionally they taught that men needed to raise their own consciousnesses on the woman question by engaging in "the regular and constructive use of criticism and self-criticism," a practice which "alerts the individual to the role of anti-working class ideas in his own life and that of his associates, and directs the collective efforts of the whole group toward the ideological strengthening of each member."\footnote{Ibid., p. 13.} In other words, those who taught these courses stressed, not until progressive men were willing to identify and correct male supremacist tendencies in themselves and others would the Communist Party truly be able to proceed in its struggle to emancipate women and to move forward on the road to socialism.
Communist leaders realized that classes were beneficial only to those who enrolled in and attended them, and because they knew that the most sexist men were unlikely to register for a course called "Male Supremacy and the Family" they also saw to it that similar topics were addressed in regular Party educational and lectures. CP leaders such as Claudia Jones and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn often delivered lectures and speeches that emphasized issues such as the importance of equality within the home.\(^{52}\) CP National Education Director Betty Gannett also gave frequent lectures on topics such as "The Morality Demanded of a Marxist" and "Morality in Marriage."\(^{53}\) Although unlike Flynn or Jones she did not bill herself as an expert on the woman question Gannett regularly incorporated anti-male chauvinist messages in her explanations of how to live as a good Communist as she reminded Communist men that Marxist morality required them to "appreciate and respect their wives as human beings and companions" and that "moral duty in marriage demands daily cooperation with one's partner; joint handing of marital problems; and marital fidelity."\(^{54}\)

\(^{52}\)Steve Nelson: American Radical, pp. 267-268.

\(^{53}\)Gannett's notes from these lectures and others are available in Gannett's papers at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin or, in the microfilmed version of the collection, reel #5.

\(^{54}\)Betty Gannett, "Morality in Marriage," n.d., Gannett papers reel #5.
Although Peggy Dennis, the wife of a prominent CP leader has suggested in her memoirs that her relationship with her husband was in no way egalitarian, the CP’s efforts to educate Communists about the importance of gender equality in the home clearly convinced some Communist and progressive men that they needed to practice what they preached on the woman question.\(^5\) In his memoir *Steve Nelson: American Radical*, for example, Communist Steve Nelson reported that even while he was a busy local Party leader he "managed to come home every day to help with dinner and clean up" before he rushed out to a meeting.\(^6\) Similarly, progressive Joan Acker described how after she married one of her comrades from the Wallace for President campaign in 1948 her new husband "really tried to live according to the basic notions of equality," Rose Kryzak said that she and her husband "always shared" the housework and childrearing, and Ann Pagan Ginger explained that many Communist and progressive men "were excellent cooks" who

\(^5\)Peggy Dennis’s book *The Autobiography of an American Communist: A Personal View of a Political Life, 1925-1975* (Westport, CT: Lawrence Hill & Co., 1977), clearly demonstrates that not all families made efforts to live according to non-sexist practices. Her experiences cannot be used to generalize about all Communists’ and progressives’ experiences, however. In fact, that she was the wife of a nationally visible and prominent Party leader probably makes her experiences quite different from those who were involved in Communist politics at the state and local levels.

also did their share of "taking care of the kids" both at public meetings where childcare was provided and in their own homes. But although these and numerous other Communists and progressives reported that their personal lives and intimate relationships were much more egalitarian than those in non-radical households, the persistence of women's complaints about their progressive but sexist husbands published in The Worker women's pages indicated that the problem had not been solved entirely.

In response to complaints about incorrigible male chauvinists the Communist Party at least sometimes resorted to disciplinary measures. Dorothy Healey recalls, for example, that as the District Organizer in Los Angeles in the late 1940s and 1950s she occasionally visited individual Communist men in their homes to confront them about the sexist ways they treated their wives and, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, in 1954 alone the Los Angeles district of the CP intervened in at least three cases of male supremacy including:

1. An unmarried male who carried on a series of affairs with a number of women without any intention of marrying.

2. A married male who suggested wife swapping with his closest friend.

57Author's telephone interview with Joan Acker, 6/29/93; Ruth Prago's interview with Rose Kryzak, New York City, 1/4/82, Oral History of the American Left, Series I, Tamiment Library, New York University; author's interview with Ann Fagan Ginger, Cleveland, Ohio, 5/1/89.
3. A man who struck his wife and later said their was nothing political in his actions. State and local level Women’s Commissions also confronted individual men’s male chauvinist behavior and urged them to mend their ways. In 1950, for example, the Minnesota Women’s Commission investigated and dealt with numerous cases including those involving a local Party leader who brushed off his wife’s attempts to confront his male chauvinist behavior by joking with her about "feminism" and who later insisted that his daughter learn to wash dishes so she might "make some man a good wife," a second man who was "supercritical of the way his wife did housework," and third man who "habitually lectured his wife on politics instead of discussing political questions with her as an equal." Typically, the CP subjected men who were brought up on formal charges of male supremacy to the criticism of their peers and sentenced them to "control tasks involving study on the woman question" so that they might unlearn the poisonous ideology of male chauvinism. By relieving individual men of their male supremacist tendencies, CP leaders must have reasoned, they could both insure the stability of Communist families and build support for a mass movement for women’s liberation.

58Author’s interview with Dorothy Healey, 12/30/92, Washington, D.C.; Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Women’s Matters," 10/14/55, Bufile 100-3-78, LA 100-1763, pp. 57-58.

In the mid-1950s Communists continued to denounce male supremacist ideology, criticize its reflections in mainstream culture, and work to reverse its effects on the lives of progressive women and men. But in addition to counseling progressives about how to avoid male supremacy in their marital relationships some Communists also began in this period to expand their vision of a radical subculture so that it incorporated a variety of efforts to move beyond patriarchal assumptions and customs in every area of family life and set an example of real egalitarianism for the rest of the nation. Between 1952 and 1956, for example, Communist women began to argue against the notion that women were fated to suffer severe pain in childbirth, to participate in the earliest American movement towards natural childbirth practices that empowered women and encouraged the participation of husbands, and to publicize the relaxation methods that the French doctor Lamaze learned in the Soviet Union and imported to the Western Europe, China and the U.S. In the same period Communists began to argue that the subordination of women and the subordination of children in the family came from the same sources and that it was just as important for progressives to protect

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children's rights as to protect women's rights. The best way to respect children's rights and to encourage them to grow up to be self-confident and political adults, Communist advice columnists argued, was to allow them to question and challenge the status quo and to involve them in family decision-making as often as possible. This analysis clearly had a significant impact on the way Communist parents actually raised their children; Jane Lazarre and other children of Communists from this period report that their parents "always encouraged open discussion and debate," expected their children to participate in adult conversations, and urged them to express their opinions on topics ranging from racism, to imperialism, to the Army-McCarthy hearings. Not surprisingly, daughters of Communists also report that their parents expected them AND

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their brothers to grow up to become adults who combined work, family and political activism.64

Communists’ most public effort to demonstrate that individual men and women could free themselves from patriarchal assumptions and customs and to transcend the sexism and classism so pervasive in bourgeois culture was the making of the film "Salt of the Earth" in 1953. Made by black-listed progressive film-makers Michael Wilson, Herbert Biberman and Paul Jarrico, all of whom were deeply influenced by CP thinking about the politics of culture, "Salt of the Earth" immortalized the events that surrounded the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers’ strike against Empire Zinc in New Mexico in 1950-1952 and showed how surpassing traditional gender roles had the potential to liberate an entire community.65 The movie, which cast Mexican-American mine workers and their families as themselves, opened with the working men of the community deciding to go on strike for higher wages and safer working conditions, but refusing to listen to their wives’ suggestions that they add sanitation and running water in

64Lazarre, "The Lessons of Radical Women," p. 16; Kaplan and Shapiro, Red Diaper Babies.

65In her commentary that appears in Michael Wilson, Salt of the Earth (New York: The Feminist Press, 1978) Deborah Rosenfelt discusses the radical backgrounds of those who participated in the making of "Salt of the Earth" and suggests that all of them had significant contacts with the Communist Party, either as members or as participants in the organizations front groups and radical subculture. See especially pp. 100-102.
company housing to their list of strike demands. In mid-film, after an injunction forbade the men to picket, the women fought against their husbands’ male chauvinist attitudes and won their permission take their places on the picket line. By the end of the movie the women had been empowered by their crucial role in maintaining the strike and the men, who had taken care of their homes and children while their wives continued the strike, appreciated the importance of the women’s work and their demands for better company housing. Throughout "Salt of the Earth" focused on the Quintero family, showing how the husband Ramon initially attempted to limit his wife Esperanza’s participation in the strike and maintain his own power as head of the household. Against her husband’s wishes Esperanza became a leader in the strike and for the first time forged a life for herself outside of her household. Although this action initially led to discord between them, Esperanza’s political successes eventually convinced Ramon to accept her new role and, by extension, to live according to a new model of family life. In order to illustrate Ramon’s realization that his male chauvinist attitudes could only retard the progress of the union’s struggle, at the strikers’ victory in the closing scene of the film Ramon said to Esperanza, "Thank you for
your dignity. You were right. Together we can push everything up with us as we go."\(^{66}\)

"Salt of the Earth" carried on the Communist tradition of creating oppositional culture that portrayed women as strong and even heroic figures, but it also incorporated Communists' new insights about the importance of transforming personal relationships between individual men and women. The movie encountered vicious opposition from Congress, the movie industry, and local vigilantes at every stage of production and distribution but Wilson, Biberman and Jarrico managed to complete "Salt of the Earth" and to arrange showings of the film in fourteen theaters between January and September, 1954.\(^{67}\) Although a few reviewers liked the movie, critic Pauline Kael dismissed it as "as clear a piece of Communist propaganda as we have had in many years," and groups such as the American Legion warned Americans that they should "guard against one of the most


\(^{67}\)Michael Wilson, *Salt of the Earth* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1978), p. 94. According to Wilson's chronology of events at the end of the book the movie played primarily in theaters on the East and West coasts, but also got bookings from three theaters in New Mexico. It was booked by two theaters in New York, one in Los Angeles, one in Silver City, one in Aruba, one in La Habra, and seven in Northern California. Several other theaters in New York and California expressed interest in the film and even signed contracts, but backed out at the last minute after receiving pressure from major motion picture distributors.
vicious propaganda films ever distributed in the U.S.\textsuperscript{68} Needless to say, however, neither warnings issued by mainstream critics and conservative patriotic organizations nor protests that occurred outside theaters showing "Salt of the Earth" prevented Communists and their progressive supporters from attending the movie in droves. In fact, in the two New York theaters where "Salt of the Earth" was shown it played continuously all day long to accommodate all those who wanted to see it.\textsuperscript{69} CP commentators on the film included David Platt, Betty Millard, and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, all of whom gave "Salt of the Earth" the highest praise.\textsuperscript{70} The film had a significant impact on those rank-and-file workers who saw it as well. When David Platt interviewed progressive workers who had seen the movie they all commented on the power of its anti-male chauvinist message.\textsuperscript{71} In May, 1954 Saul Gross wrote to the editor of the \textit{Daily Worker} to report that he had taken his fourteen-

\textsuperscript{68}Ibid., pp. 95 and 187.

\textsuperscript{69}Advertisements for "Salt of the Earth" ran in \textit{The Worker} continuously in March of 1954.


\textsuperscript{71}David Platt, "Housewives, Teachers, Office, Shops, Mill Workers Hail 'Salt of the Earth,'" \textit{Daily Worker} 3/24/54, p. 7.
year-old son to see "Salt of the Earth" and that even he had been "completely involved in the happenings being recounted on the screen." "After we left," Gross wrote, "he asked questions about the background of the film and we had a discussion about the events portrayed in it, especially the part played by the women."

"Salt of the Earth" stands today as one of the most explicitly feminist cultural creations to come out of the predominantly anti-feminist 1950s. It shows that the Communist Party and its supporters did not, as many scholars have suggested, ignore the personal and cultural aspects of women's oppression but that, on the contrary, they actually took such concerns very seriously, especially in the decade that followed the end of World War II. Although many contemporary feminists who saw "Salt of the Earth" for the first time in the early 1970s were mystified about the origins of its feminist message and "expressed surprise that so 'old' a film should portray with such passionate comprehension the sometimes conflicting claims of feminist, ethnic and class consciousness," in fact the film is a very direct reflection of Communists' efforts to develop their


\[73\] Scholars who claim that the CP and its supporters failed to see the political nature of women's personal problems include: Ellen Kay Trinberger, "Women in the Old and new Left: The Evolution of the Politics of a Personal Life," Feminist Studies 5, 3 (Fall, 1979): 432-449; Baxandall, "The Question Seldom Asked."
understanding of the relationships among class, gender and race and to politicize culture and personal life in the decade between 1946 and 1956.\textsuperscript{74} It reveals the impressive progress that Communists had made by the mid-1950s in their struggles to create cultural artifacts that empowered women, to educate its supporters about the politics of individual relationships, and to promote an alternative subculture that abandoned patriarchal customs and modeled egalitarian family life to all those who were exposed to it.

Despite all these apparent successes, however, Communists were never able to formulate an answer to the woman question that satisfied everyone. After Kruschev’s revelations about Stalin in 1956 led the Communist Party to initiate a systematic re-evaluation of the organization’s past policies and practices, many women and men wrote to the \textit{Worker} and \textit{Daily Worker} to emphasize the Party’s deep need to re-examine its work on women as well as its orientation to the working-class and the Soviet Union. Throughout that year, CP publications were fuller than ever of discussion and debates about sexual harrassment in Party settings; male supremacy in the home and in the Party; the politics of housework; the difficulties women had combining work, family and politics; progressive men’s failure to free themselves of male chauvinist attitudes and work to free their families of hierarchy and authoritarianism; and the true extent to

\textsuperscript{74}Rosenfelt in Wilson's \textit{Salt of the Earth}, pp.93 and 96.
which women in the Soviet Union had been liberated.\textsuperscript{75} It was clear that in the minds of most progressives, the Party still had a long way to go before it could claim that it had solved women’s problems, but it was also clear that many Communists and their supporters believed that the Party’s efforts to create a new and more democratic structure after 1956 would provide a long-awaited opportunity to push the struggle for women’s liberation further than ever before.

Unfortunately for those Communists who were interested in women’s emancipation, however, 1956 proved to be the year that the Communist Party ceased to be a significant influence in U.S. politics and culture and not, as many had hoped, a renaissance for the Communist movement. By the end of that year the dual influences of McCarthyism and Communist leaders’ continued devotion to the Soviet Union led all but the most dedicated members of the CP to resign from the organization and even, in a few cases, to renounce

their socialist politics. But the progressive women who had come to recognize that their oppression stemmed from cultural norms and attitudes as well as from economic sources, who had begun to apply their new knowledge about women’s oppression and male supremacy to their home and family lives, and who realized that their personal problems might have political solutions, refused to abandon their newly raised gender consciousnesses. In fact, in the dozen or so years between the demise of the Old Left and the birth of the women’s liberation movement in the late 1960s many of these women continued to act on their progressive gender politics in numerous ways. Although they often did so quietly and as individuals rather than in groups that identified themselves as Communist or feminist, progressive women managed to sustain significant elements of the Communist Party’s analysis of the woman question across the void of the 1950s. Ultimately, they managed to pass their ideas on, by various means, to the next generation of feminists.
CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION: THE IMPACT OF THE OLD LEFT
ON THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT OF THE 1960S AND 1970S

In the late 1960s a new radical women’s movement began to coalesce within the civil rights and student movements after young women activists applied the New Left’s analysis of oppression to their own lives and realized that they, like African-Americans and other minority groups, occupied an oppressed position in American society. ¹ Although the women’s liberation movement was loosely organized and composed primarily of locally-based collective structures, it was not long before it achieved national influence. By the early 1970s the women’s movement had attracted thousands of women who worked both inside and outside the formal political arena to challenge legal and political discrimination against women, sexist cultural attitudes and assumptions, and male chauvinism in the family and personal relationships. Calling themselves the "second wave" of American feminists, the women who built the women’s

liberation movement in the 1960s and 1970s believed that they revived a struggle for women’s equality that had been essentially dormant since the suffrage victory in 1920 and that they invented the notion that the personal is political.\(^2\) Most 1960s and 1970s feminists probably would have found the suggestion that they were building upon a foundation laid by a Communist women’s movement in the 1940s and 1950s quite laughable, even absurd.

Certainly when the political climate for left-wing political movements in the United States began to improve in the 1960s after nearly 20 years of reaction and repression, the Communist Party was in no position to influence the newly emerging movements directly. Not only had the CP been decimated and discredited by both McCarthyism and Stalinism, but 1960s activists realized that their movements were vulnerable to red-baiting and so they were careful to distinguish themselves from the progressive movements of the past. When they met to write the Port Huron Statement in 1963, for example, the students who created Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) quite consciously referred to their movement as the "New Left" in order to differentiate themselves from the Communist-dominated Old Left of the

1930s, 1940s and 1950s. Nevertheless, despite such efforts, 1960s movements could not escape completely the influences of the thirty years of radical activism that preceded them. Although the Communist Party itself was no longer a significant political force by the 1960s, important elements of its analyses of race, class and imperialism survived into that decade. Not surprisingly the Party's framework for explaining women's oppression and achieving women's liberation also persisted into the 1960s, albeit only in parts and pieces. In a context where awareness of women's oppression was practically non-existent, however, the CP's work on the woman question provided the younger


generation of radical women a foundation from which they could begin to build their own version of a women's liberation movement.

The legacy of the Communist movement to the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s included concepts and terminology for explaining women's oppression and women's liberation, ideology about the importance of race and class differences among women, an analysis that stressed the political nature of women's so-called personal problems, and a framework for conceptualizing women's history and using it to inspire women and gain support for their ongoing struggles. Communists and former-Communists transmitted these components of their work on the woman question to the new generation of feminist activists in three ways. First, as radical parents who at least sometimes demonstrated the possibility of gender equality in family life and political activity, who discussed politics at the dinner table, and who encouraged their children to question the world around them Communist women and men helped to create a new generation of activists who would build the movements of the 1960s including the women's movement. Second, as radical intellectuals who had learned from and contributed to the CP's changing analysis of women's oppression between 1946 and 1956 progressive women continued to write about women's history and women's experiences in the late 1950s and 1960s and generated a small body of literature that helped to
empower the women's liberation movement and guide its future struggles. Finally, as seasoned activists some progressive women and men served as informal consultants to feminists who sought information and advice about how the struggles of the past might be relevant to their current concerns and issues, and occasionally they even served as heroines of feminist activism from days gone by.

The Communist Party’s work on women’s issues in the 1940s and 1950s laid important groundwork for the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s but it is no wonder that most young feminists were not aware of the origins of the ideas and the vocabulary upon which they were building their struggles. Most of the Communist Party’s influence on the women’s movement did not come directly from the organization itself; rather Communist influence was transmitted indirectly through individuals who had been politicized in CP circles in the 1930s, 40s and 50s and who continued to act on their commitments to women’s liberation even after they left the Party’s milieu. Because anti-communists so thoroughly stigmatized Communism in the post-WWII U.S., however, many of these individuals not only chose not to disclose their progressive histories, but went to some lengths to conceal their past relationships with the Communist movement. Although a few of the women and men who made contributions to women’s liberation in the 1960s and 1970s were very open about their ties to the CP the majority
of the people who conveyed the Old Left’s analysis of women’s oppression and its strategies for women’s liberation to the second wave of the women’s movement understandably preferred not to acknowledge their intellectual and political debts to the progressive movement and culture of the 1930s, 40s and 50s.

Anti-communists might have hoped that by crippling the Communist movement and silencing a vast number of progressive activists in the 1940s and 1950s they could halt the progress that labor, civil rights, and other social justice struggles had made since the 1930s and ensure the continued dominance of a white, male, capitalist system in the United States. But because they could only obstruct progressives’ formal political organizations and activities, however, and could not alter individuals’ ideas about oppression in U.S. culture and society or eradicate their efforts to live-out their politics in their private lives anti-communist forces could not completely stop Communists and former-Communists from quietly passing on their knowledge to the next generation of radical activists. Many Communists and progressives broke their ties with the Communist movement in the 1950s but many also continued to participate, to varying degrees, in the progressive struggles that dominated the 1960s. The women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s stands as an excellent example of a 1960s movement that was deeply influenced by the work that
Communists had begun thirty years earlier and an useful illustration of the ways that the Communist movement's politicization of everyday life ultimately helped lay the groundwork for the cultural and identity politics that quickly became so central to social justice struggles in the 1960s and beyond.

When New Left organizations such as Students for a Democratic Society burst onto the American political scene in the early 1960s their members were by-and-large too young to have had their own independent affiliations with the Old Left. But although it was relatively unusual for adults politicized by the Old Left to become wholehearted supporters of the New Left "Red diaper babies," women and men whose parents had been members or supporters of organizations such as the Communist Party in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, participated in large numbers in the civil rights

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There were a few significant exceptions to this generalization: former socialists Michael Harrington and Mildred Jeffrey served as advisors to the Port Huron Conference, Studies on the Left editor James Weinstein had been a member of the Communist Party in New York in the late 1940s and 1950s, and Barbara (Eason) Epstein belonged to the Communist Party and the Harvard chapter of S.D.S. simultaneously in the early 1960s. For more thorough discussions of Old Leftists who participated in New Left organizations see: Sara Evans, Personal Politics; Maurice Isserman, If I Had a Hammer; and Paul Buhle, ed., History and the New Left: Madison, Wisconsin, 1950-1970 (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).
movement, in S.D.S., and the anti-war movement in the 1960s. Because red diaper babies grew up listening to folk music, attending demonstrations with their parents, and talking politics at the dinner table it is not surprising that so many of them participated in events such as the Berkeley Free Speech movement or activities such as Freedom Summer. Nor is it surprising that the daughters of radical women and men served as one important channel through which elements of the Old Left's work on the woman question could be transmitted across the void of the 1950s. These women grew up in families that had challenged the gender norms of the 1950s, with strong, politically active women as role models and they expected to be taken seriously and treated as equals in the political and cultural life of the New left. Consequently many were central in early discussions about the unfairness with which women were treated in

"Many writers on both the Old Left and the New Left comment on the importance of red diaper babies to 1960s movements. See, for example: Evans, Personal Politics; Lyons, Philadelphia Communists; Isserman, If I Had a Hammer; James Miller, Democracy in the Streets; Melosh, Shapiro and Kaplan, "Growing Up Red: Children of the Left Meet and Remember"; Mishler, "The Littlest Proletariat"; Epstein, Political Protest and Cultural Revolution. Political commentators in the early 1960s, especially those writing from a conservative point of view, were also very much aware that Communists' children championed New Left causes. In September 1965, for example, The New Guard magazine printed an article entitled "The Red Diaper Babies Grow Up" listing Communists' children who had participated in the New Left and student movement demonstrations and activities. Similarly, in 1969 U.S. News and World Report published the book Communism and the New Left allegedly documenting the links between the Old and New Lefts.
organizations such as S.D.S. Many also contributed to the movement's early attempts to articulate the nature and sources of women's oppression and went on to become key figures in the first women's liberation groups.  

Most red diaper babies had not been formally schooled in the Old Left's analysis of the woman question and most were probably not even aware of the wide variety of activities that some Communist women and their allies undertook to promote women's liberation in the 1940s and 1950s. But unlike their more conventional counterparts in the New Left, red diaper babies who grew up in the post-WWII years were aware that there was a woman question and many of them had benefitted from both strong female role models and from discussions about the problems of women's subordination in capitalist society and in the family. Many daughters of

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7 Evans, Personal Politics; Lyons, Philadelphia Communists; Rosalyn Baxandall, Words on Fire: The Life and Writings of Elizabeth Gurley Flynn (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University press, 1987) have also made this point.

U.S. communists who attended the Red Diaper Baby Conferences held in New Hampshire in 1982 and 1983, for example, remembered that their activist mothers and other leftist women were the most significant political role models they had while growing up and many also recalled that their parents encouraged to believe that they could grow up to become anything they wanted to be.⁹ Many also recollected that their parents and other progressive adults talked to them routinely about women's issues. One participant named Kathy remembered "always being told that ideologically [women] were equal to men" and hearing from her father that

⁹Judy Kaplan and Linn Shapiro, editors, Red Diaper Babies: Children of the Left (Washington, D.C.: Red Diaper Productions, 1985) pp. 75-86. These edited transcripts of the Red Diaper Baby Conferences held in Conway, New Hampshire on July 31-August 1, 1982 and July 9-10, 1983 are an extremely useful compilation of the experiences of the approximately 150 red diaper babies who attended the gatherings. Barbara Melosh, Linn Shapiro and Judy Kaplan also summarize the main themes of the conferences in their article "Growing Up Red: Children of the Left Meet and Remember," Radical History Review 31 (1984): 72-83. Red diaper babies I interviewed also shared this sense that their mothers, and sometimes their grandmothers as well, were important political role models and remembered their parents encouraging them to aspire to adult lives that incorporated political activities and careers as well as marriage and children. See, for example, author's interview transcripts of conversations with with Rosalyn Baxandall, New York City, 1/14/93; with Norma Allen via telephone to Bethesda, MD, 7/19/93 and with Linda Gordon via telephone to Madison, Wisconsin, 7/20/93. Jane Lazarre discusses similar memories in her articles "The Lessons of Radical Women," Village Voice, December 2-8, 1981 and "Growing Up Red: Remembering a Communist Childhood in New York," Village Voice Anthology: Twenty-five Years of Writing from the Village Voice, Geoffrey Stokes, ed., (New York: William MORrow & Co. Inc., 1982) pp. 249-255.
"the Bible was a book written by men to oppress women."\(^{10}\) Similarly, other red diaper daughters were frequently exposed to their parents discussions about various aspects of the woman question. Linda Gordon and Rosalyn Baxandall both recall their parents disparaging the actions of various men they knew as male chauvinist and Norma Allen remembers that her mother attended a Communist women’s group in their New Jersey town in which they read the Marxist classics on women and discussed them.\(^{11}\) Like these women, most daughters of the Old Left probably grew up with at least some awareness that women were oppressed and some familiarity with the CP’s terms and concepts for discussing the issue including "male chauvinism," "male supremacy," "male superiority," "women’s oppression," and "women’s liberation."\(^{12}\)

At the same time that red diaper babies heard their parents talking about the problems of women’s oppression and male supremacy some of them also had the opportunity to watch their parents working to build egalitarian relationships with one another and struggling to realize their goal of a balanced family life that included roughly equal contributions from both women and men, mothers and

\(^{10}\)Red Diaper Babies: Children of the Left, pp. 76-77.

\(^{11}\)Authors interviews with Gordon, Baxandall and Allen.

\(^{12}\)Sara Evans makes this point about red diaper babies awareness of women’s oppression in Personal Politics, p. 120.
fathers. Certainly not all Communist families achieved the Party's vision of egalitarian marriage and family life—many probably never even tried to avoid traditional patriarchal assumptions and practices—but more than a few Communist daughters recall that their parents "dealt with the woman question very well in terms of day-to-day task breakdown" and many also remember that their mothers and the women in their families' political/social circles were well aware that the personal and the political were frequently inseparable.\textsuperscript{13} Linda Gordon, for example, remembers that her father was a "very feminist man" who "did a tremendous amount of cleaning and a certain amount of cooking" and that she "was certainly never discriminated against in relation to [her] younger brothers," and Debra, a participant in the Red Diaper Baby conferences, said that her father was a "liberated, non-chauvinistic man."\textsuperscript{14} Rosalyn Baxandall reports that her mother kept her maiden name and that both

\textsuperscript{13}Several of the participants at the Red Diaper Baby Conferences remember that their households and families were characterized by traditional male/female roles and behaviors. Despite the Party's emphasis on the need to share housework and childcare, for example, numerous red diaper babies reported that even if both parents worked outside the home, their mothers were still in charge of cooking and housework. In my interview with her, Norma Allen also suggested that her mother "cooked...cleaned, she did everything" and that her father "was a traditional man" who "couldn't cook to save his life and didn't even try." The quote in the text comes from Red Diaper Babies: Children of the Left, p. 77.

\textsuperscript{14}Author's interview with Gordon, 7/20/93; Red Diaper Babies: Children of the Left, p. 77.
her mother and grandmother discussed the abortions they had had with her and her sisters when they were growing up.\textsuperscript{15} Jane Lazarre remembers that while the Communist fathers she knew were teaching their children about the need for political discipline, Communist mothers were working to create "a consistent personal life" and to make sure their children valued "what was personal, concrete, and internal along with the essential dialogues of history we were learning at our father’s knees."\textsuperscript{16} Similarly, a Red Diaper Baby Conference participant named Lois concluded:

The women ended up exemplifying the way to behave and--this is maybe simplifying it but it sounds like what people are saying--the men passed along the theory. The women presented the [Party’s] values and acted on the values and developed relationships and networks. That’s my experience.\textsuperscript{17}

Because of their parents’ awareness that personal relationships and family life could not be separated from ideology about the necessity of ending exploitation and inequality, significant numbers of red diaper babies grew up with the knowledge that housework, motherhood, and sexuality were not just personal matters to be worked out by individuals but political issues that could not be overlooked by activists who were truly committed to

\textsuperscript{15}Baxandall interview, 1/14/93.

\textsuperscript{16}Lazarre, "The Lessons of Radical Women."

\textsuperscript{17}Red Diaper Babies: Children of the Left, p. 78.
reshaping the culture and institutions that dominated capitalist America.

When Communists' daughters became active in the New Left movements of the 1960s they expected to be treated as equals to men both in personal and political settings. Rosalyn Baxandall indicated, for example, that because of her upbringing she "did expect men not to be male chauvinist" and Linda Gordon concurred that due to the relative egalitarianism in her family she did not expect to have to deal with sexism in her adult life.\(^\text{18}\) Consequently when they were faced with the often intense male superiority that characterized much of the New Left many of these women were shocked. "In the movement I certainly got a heavy dose of men treating women very poorly," Baxandall recalled:

> We were doing most of the organizing...we were the ones talking to people, going door to door. Then when it came to talking they were talking, they were writing, they were, you know. So that was a pretty big awakening.\(^\text{19}\)

But although they were often surprised by the ways that New Left men treated women it did not take second (and sometimes third) generation radical women long to begin to analyze and challenge such dynamics. Because they had heard women's subordination discussed as they grew up red diaper babies had the concepts to identify, words to name, and strategies

\(^{18}\)Author's interview with Baxandall, 1/14/93 and author's interview with Gordon, 7/20/93.

\(^{19}\)Author's interview with Baxandall, 1/14/93.
to confront women's oppression when they experienced it themselves in the movements of the 1960s. It is not coincidental that the terms "women's oppression," "women's liberation," "women's movement," "male supremacy," "male chauvinism," and "male superiority," all used by Communists and those near the Party after 1945 to talk about women's status, how it was perpetuated, and what should be done about it, all appear again in the first articles that appeared about women in *New Left Notes*, in SDS's 1968 "National Resolution on Women," and in early pamphlets and papers from the women's liberation movement. Nor is it coincidental that Communists' debates over the the politics of housework, childrearing and male/female relationships from the 1940s and 1950s reemerged--albeit in a somewhat revised form--in the New Left and in the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Red diaper babies such as Rosalyn Baxandall, Norma Allen, Kathie (Amatniek) Sarachild, Anne Froines, Dinky Romilly--and numerous others who do not openly discuss their ties to the Old Left--served as key feminist leaders in the 1960s and constituted one important link between the Communist movement and the women's

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movement. These women brought Old Left terms and ideas with them to the New Left and revived them in their own struggles to name the historic patterns of male domination that permeated every aspect of women's lives and to outline the kind of radical, systemic change that was necessary to defeat it.

Evans's Personal Politics was the first analysis of the women's movement to discuss the important connections between the Old Left and feminism. She quotes daughters of feminists at length but, because of the continuing fears among Communists sparked by McCarthyism, she did not reveal the names of her red diaper baby respondents. Evans does say that in her research she did not seek red diaper babies out. Rather, she says in a footnote on page 120, she "pursued women and men who had participated in specific new left activities and in particular the women who provided the links between the new left and the early leadership of the women's liberation movement. Again and again I was surprised to discover a radical family background." Since the mid-1970s when Evans was completing her book, however, more of these women have begun to talk openly about their parents' political histories. Baxandall is very upfront about her political heritage in both Words on Fire: The Life and Writings of Elizabeth Gurley Flynn (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987) and "The Question Seldom Asked," in New Studies in the Politics and Culture of U.S. Communism (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1993). In her memoir A Fine Old Conflict (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977) Jessica Mitford writes at length about her daughter Constancia (Dinky) Romilly's Communist childhood and participation in the early feminist movement. In her remarks "The Civil Rights Movement: Lessons for Women's Liberation" given at "The Sixties Speak to the Eighties: A Conference on Activism and Social Change" at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst in October 1983 Kathie Sarachild was somewhat more cautious but still said that she "considered [herself] a radical before going South [to participate in Freedom Summer in 1964]," and identified herself as someone who "came from a left-leaning middle-to lower-middle class family in which I had grown up in the silent fifties loving Pete Seeger and Paul Robeson renditions of folk songs and freedom songs."
Many progressive women transmitted their work for women’s emancipation into the 1960s and 1970s through their children, whom they raised with an awareness that women were both oppressed and capable of resisting their oppression, but a small group of women who had had ties to the Communist movement after World War II also conveyed their ideas and insights to younger feminists by continuing to research and write about women even after they left the Communist Party’s milieu. Women such as Eve Merriam, Eleanor Flexner, Aileen Kraditor, and Gerda Lerner—all of whom had been active in the Communist Party or in affiliated organizations such as the Congress of American Women (and sometimes both)—survived the repressive 1950s and early 1960s by building upon the analyses of women’s oppression and women’s history they had learned from the Old Left and publishing new works about women’s lives and their contributions to the social justice movements of the past. By the mid-1960s, when feminists began to look for writings about women’s history and women’s experiences that could validate their grievances and protests and give them ideas about how to solve their problems, these and other authors had already created a small body of literature shaped by the Communist movement’s perspectives on women’s oppression and the interplay of gender, race, and class in women’s lives and historic struggles. These works not only helped to quench feminists’ thirst for knowledge about women’s movements of the past,
but brought Communists' analysis about the importance of race and class differences among women to the new movement that was, by and large, still white and middle-class. Furthermore, by developing and refining the approach to women's history they had learned from the Old Left and sustaining it into the 1960s, Merriam, Flexner, Kraditor and Lerner all laid the foundation for the discipline of women's history that grew up alongside the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s and that professional historians still practice today.

The nature of poet and writer Eve Merriam's connections to the Communist movement are not entirely clear. She did not discuss them openly during her life and there are no organizational records available that indicate whether she was or was not ever a formal member of the Communist Party. The question of Merriam's membership in the Party is not terribly relevant, however, for it is unquestionable that even if she never joined the CP she was actively involved in its activities and culture in the decade after World War II. As a consistent participant in courses and forums on the woman question at the Jefferson School of Social Sciences, one of the authors of the musical revue "Singing of Women," a writer for *Masses and Mainstream*, and the frequent author of letters to the editors of the *Worker* and *Daily Worker* in the late 1940s and 1950s, Merriam was clearly not only a student of the Communist movement’s evolving analysis of
women's oppression but one of the people who helped to shape that analysis.\textsuperscript{22} Even as late as 1959 Merriam was writing to the editor of The Worker; in March of that year she wrote to correct columnist Mike Gold for his puritanical attitudes about sex, insisting that "sexual freedom for women has been a vital part of the emancipation movement" and that "to consider it as totally removed from the main arena [of struggle] is just as incorrect as considering it the be-all and end-all of life."\textsuperscript{23}

The Communist movement's sensibilities about race and class clearly shaped much of Merriam's work in the 1940s, 1950s and later. In 1956, for example, she published a volume of poetry entitled Montgomery, Alabama, Money Mississippi, and Other Places containing poems with titles such as "The Carpenter in Alabama," "Miss Lucy," "The Elderly Walking Woman," and "Bus Boycott" that honored the African-American working people who were beginning to resist racism and stand up for their civil rights in the South.\textsuperscript{24} But although Merriam was certainly concerned with all the issues that Progressives supported in the post-WWII era, as

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{23}Eve Merriam to The Worker, "Sex and Sensibility," 3/29/59, p. 11.
  \item \textsuperscript{24}Eve Merriam, Montgomery Alabama, Money Mississippi, and Other Places (New York: Cameron Associations, 1956).
\end{itemize}
one of the women who had been responsible for developing the CP's new position on the woman question, she made writing about women one of her top priorities in the 1950s and later. In 1958 she published a new volume of poetry, The Double Bed From the Feminine Side, which included poems about women's bittersweet feelings regarding marriage, childbearing and childrearing, domesticity, and sexuality and reflected the Communist movements' analysis of women's oppression as it exposed and condemned the ways that male supremacy in the culture and the family prevented women from living fully as human beings as well as wives and mothers.25 In 1962, Merriam again attempted to popularize the progressive view of women's oppression when she published After Nora Slammed the Door, American Women in the 1960s: The Unfinished Revolution, a critique of women's position in the late 20th century United States. In this book she refuted the myths that women dominate men, that they are naturally submissive and dependent, and that their proper place is in the home; she decried the effects of sexism in traditional customs, mass culture, and language patterns on women; and called for women to demand "radical social changes" including "public babysitter services" and "public houseworkers" in order to "do away with the very real social and economic restrictions that are still set as roadblocks

in [their] emancipation path."\(^{26}\) In other words, even before the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, Merriam challenged the notion that women could be fulfilled exclusively through their roles as consumers, mothers, and suburban housewives.\(^{27}\)

Although Eve Merriam’s works never received the publicity and recognition that Friedan’s did in the early 1960s, many young feminists were reading and learning from them in the late 1960s. By the early 1970s both Merriam’s books and her analysis of the woman question were well known among supporters of women’s liberation thanks to the efforts of influential feminists such as Lucinda Cisler and others who called Merriam’s work "especially worthwhile," praised it for its "incisive critique" and "biting commentary on the present (past? not yet) role and status of women in the United States," and encouraged young women to use Merriam’s books to broaden their understanding of women’s oppression.\(^{28}\) As a writer who not only criticized the


status quo for women but who also proposed radical actions such as the institution of communal living arrangements, the passage of a "GI Bill for mothers," and a "personal strike campaign" against the instruments of mass culture that sold "sex as a commodity and marriage as merchandise," to change the gender system, Eve Merriam played a critical role in transmitting the Old Left’s analysis of women’s oppression and strategies for women’s liberation to the second wave of the women’s movement.  

Like Eve Merriam, pioneering women’s historian Eleanor Flexner also had definite but somewhat indeterminate ties to the Communist movement. Other historians writing about Flexner have discussed her involvement in both the progressive theater movement of the 1930s and the left-leaning United Office and Professional Workers’ Union in the

Merriam proposes these radical solutions to the problem of women’s oppression in the last chapter of her book After Nora Slammed the Door. It is interesting that in this book Merriam actually makes many of the same arguments about women’s problems that Friedan became so famous for only one year later. She argues that middle-class women who have been educated, who have lost their function in the home, and who have not yet gained a respected function in the world, are in a unique position to question their position and to initiate the changes that might complete women’s "unfinished revolution." Like Friedan, Merriam also details suburban housewives’ frustration with their role and alienation from the real world, criticizes social scientists such as Margaret Mead, Marynia Farnham and Ferdinand Lundberg for essentializing gender differences and blaming women for their own problems, and attacks the U.S. educational system and mass culture for "brainwashing" women into accepting a rigid classification of what is properly masculine and what is properly feminine behavior and convincing them that marriage and motherhood were the most natural aspirations for them.
1940s, indicating that she was at least peripherally involved in Communist movement politics and culture in that period. Both the extant records of the Congress of American Women and the few letters that survive from Flexner's longtime correspondence with social worker and CP member Bertha Reynolds, however, make it clear that she was considerably more than just a casual ally of Old Left causes. CAW stationery and newsletters show that Flexner served briefly as the chairman of the Editorial Board of that organization in 1948. Furthermore, although Flexner

30See: Ellen DuBois, "Eleanor Flexner and the History of American Feminism," Gender and History 3, 1 (Spring, 1991), pp. 81-90; Leila Rupp, "Eleanor Flexner's Century of Struggle: Women's History and the Women's Movement," NWSA Journal, 4 (Summer, 1992): 157-69. Historians discussions of Flexner's past have been somewhat sketchy primarily because Flexner's own papers, which are now housed at the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe College, have not yet been open to researchers. In those papers Flexner says that she has written an account of how she came to write Century of Struggle but that the information will not become public until her papers are opened. Presumably that will not happen until after Flexner's death.

31Bertha Reynolds's papers, including a few letters from a longstanding correspondence with both Flexner and Flexner's companion Helen Terry, are housed in the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College. On a questionnaire circulated by the Educational Commission of the CP and completed by Bertha Reynolds in 1972, Reynolds indicated that she had joined the CP in 1938 and been a member for 34 years. Reynolds's correspondence with Flexner and Terry can be found in box 1, folder 7 and box 2, folders 26 and 28.

32According to the CAW newsletter Around the World v. 1, n. 4 (May-June, 1948) p. 1, Flexner was one of the members of the CAW's new Editorial Board. Around the World v. 1, n. 5 (July-August, 1948) pp. 1-2, Betty Millard replaced Flexner on the Board in July 1948, probably at the time that the CAW was listed by the Attorney General as a subversive organization.
did not discuss the specifics of her involvement with the Communist Party (such as whether or not she was ever an official member) in her letters to Reynolds she did write about how difficult it was for her to leave the Party’s all-encompassing environment in 1956, which implies that she had probably been quite active in progressive causes for a long time.\textsuperscript{33} Even as late as 1960 Flexner was still discussing Marxism with Reynolds and asking consistently to borrow her copies of CP publications such as \textit{Political Affairs}.\textsuperscript{34} On the basis of this kind of evidence

\textsuperscript{33}See especially Flexner’s and Reynolds’s correspondence from early 1961 in the Reynolds papers, box 1, folder 7 and box 2, folder 28. According to Flexner her disillusionment with Marxism began in 1953, when she realized that very few of her comrades could think or talk critically about their political assumptions, and culminated in 1956 after she heard Kruschev’s revelations about Stalin’s crimes. She writes about how her departure from the movement and her isolation from her former comrades "baffled" her and caused her to suffer incurable migraine headaches that ultimately led her to seek help from a therapist. While in therapy, Flexner wrote to Reynolds, she decided that she could find the fellowship she missed from the Communist Party in the church, and so she decided to convert to Catholicism in 1961. But Flexner did not abandon her social conscience after she became religious. Rather, she continued to engage in political work of various kinds including educating her Northampton, MA parish about poverty. In July, 1970 she wrote to Reynolds to say, "My energies are devoted almost entirely to our parish religious education program. I call it working with Mr. Nixon’s silent majority! But we are having no difficulty in using texts and films on poverty and discrimination, just as long as we stay away from any suggestion of the radical new politics!"

\textsuperscript{34}In August of 1956 Reynolds wrote to Flexner and Terry to thank them "profoundly" for lending her their copy of \textit{Party Voice} which was an internal CP paper that Party members used to thrash out their disagreements on various subjects (Reynolds papers, box 2, folder 26). In April of 1960 Reynolds wrote to Flexner and Terry about her upcoming
it seems indisputable that Flexner had been deeply influenced by the Communist Party—both personally and politically—and that her associations with the Communist movement, whatever they were, continued to shape her politics and her activities long after she left the CP’s milieu.

After she began the long process of withdrawing from the Communist movement Eleanor Flexner occupied herself primarily by researching and writing a book on the history of the woman’s rights movement in the United States that was published in 1959 as Century of Struggle.35 Historian Ellen DuBois writes that Flexner was affected by the ‘social amnesia’ about past women’s movements that characterized much of her generation, that she had little awareness of the suffrage movement before she began to work on her book, and that she had to "rediscover" and even "reinvent on her own" a "feminist tradition" in order to complete her work.36 But although Flexner denied that she wrote Century of

\[\text{visit to Northampton and said, "I’ll bring Political Affairs gladly" (box 2, folder 28). Reynolds writes to Flexner and Terry often about the contents of Political Affairs, sometimes saying things like "Political Affairs is very good this month" and other times telling them that she is using it or "feeling piggy" about it in order to explain why they can not borrow her copy that month.}\]


Struggle because of her parents' involvement in the suffrage movement, she was hardly unaware of the activities that women had undertaken to expand their civil rights between the 1840s and the 1920s. Rather, she was one of a minority of women of her generation who knew a great deal about the American women's rights tradition because of her involvement in groups such as the Congress of American Women and the Communist Party. Far from having to rediscover or reinvent the feminist tradition on her own, Eleanor Flexner learned about it from the Congress of American Women and the regular women's history features that appeared in publications such as The Worker, New Masses, and Masses and Mainstream. After she left the Communist movement Flexner concentrated on expanding and developing the ideas about the history of women's activism and the uses of women's history that she had learned from Communist writers in the 1940s and early 1950s. The culmination of years of scholarly research and writing, Flexner's Century of Struggle successfully legitimized and disseminated the Old Left's work on women's history after the Communist Party was no longer in a position to do so itself.

Eleanor Flexner's analysis of the woman's rights movement in Century of Struggle in 1959 was not entirely original. The book was unusual, however, because unlike other extant works on the suffrage movement in the 1950s and

37Ibid.
1960s the book conceived of women's rights activism broadly and included a whole variety of women's struggles in its chronology. While the standard works on suffrage began with the Seneca Falls conference of 1848 Flexner's book began with Anne Hutchinson's struggles against the Puritan patriarchy in the 1630s. In keeping with this inclusive view of woman's rights activity she inherited from the Old Left Flexner was careful to include white working-class heroines such as the Lowell Mill girls, the women of the Knights of Labor, and the 1909 New York shirtwaist strikers in every chapter of her book. Furthermore, like all progressives who were writing women's history in Communist movement publications in the 1940s and 1950s, Flexner also wrote a great deal about the links and the conflicts between women's struggles and those waged by African-Americans and went to impressive lengths to include the achievements of African-American women such as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Mary Church Terrell and Ida B. Wells throughout her narrative. Although the authors of the major works on the suffrage movement published prior to *Century of Struggle* wrote primarily to applaud their own victories, Flexner wrote her history of suffrage to honor all the women who participated in the mass movements of the 19th and early

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38 Both DuBois's "Eleanor Flexner and the History of American Feminism" and Leila Rupp's "Eleanor Flexner's *Century of Struggle*" also discuss the ways in which Flexner's work was unusual for its time.
20th centuries. She hoped that her book might someday serve as a guide for women's future struggles to "take part in the political and social life of their time and to stand on a plane of equal human dignity with men in their personal relationships." 39

Except for a few male reviewers who pronounced Century of Struggle "too partisan" and too sympathetic to "feminists' statements on the extent of their oppression," many who read the first edition of the book regarded it as a notable scholarly and analytical achievement. 40 Because Flexner had somehow been able to keep her ties with the Communist movement fairly secret, most reviewers were able to appraise the book on its own merits and, unlike works by historian Herbert Aptheker which were dismissed out of hand as Communist propaganda in this period, Century of Struggle gained significant exposure in the mainstream book market. But although Flexner's work received some critical attention when it first appeared in print in 1959 and 1960, Century of Struggle did not become a powerfully influential work until the later 1960s. Betty Friedan relied heavily on Flexner's research for the material on women's history that she included in The Feminine Mystique. 41 Calling the book "the

39 Flexner, p. xi.

40 DuBois, p. 86.

41 Friedan's chapter four, "The Passionate Journey," is essentially a summary of Flexner's history of the woman's rights movement.
definitive history of the woman's rights movement in the United States" Friedan argued that *Century of Struggle* should be "required reading for every girl admitted to a U.S. college." Later, once the women's liberation movement began to take off in the U.S., many young feminists who were searching for information about women's movements of the past turned to Flexner's book for information. Soon feminist groups and publications were calling the book "first-rate" and urging everyone to read it. Nearly

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42 Friedan, p. 382.

everyone did. Ellen DuBois states, "We all read Century of Struggle, but so closely did our perspective come to Flexner's that I think, ironically, we simply absorbed her work without fully appreciating how original and innovative it was." In retrospect, however, she also realizes that "to the degree that the 'sex/class/race' framework is a feminist common place now, Eleanor Flexner's historical vision deserves some of the credit." Indeed, Flexner's inclusive vision of women's rights struggles conveyed the Old Left's emphasis on the intersections of sex, race, and class to young feminists and provided their new movement with black and white working-class heroines as well as educating them about Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and the other standard bearers of American feminism.

Eleanor Flexner's Old Left-influenced Century of Struggle laid much of the important groundwork for the modern discipline of women's history, but it is also significant that several other authors of pioneering works of women's history published in the 1960s before the resurgence of the women's movement also came out of the progressive movement of the 1940s and 1950s. Historian Rapone's Radical Feminism (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1973).

"DuBois, p. 89.

"Ibid."
Aileen Kraditor, author of *The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement*, which detailed the racism and classism of many American suffragists, and *Up From the Pedastal: Selected Writings in the History of American Feminism*, which compiled primary sources by early women activists, was a member of the Communist Party from 1947 until 1958 during which time CP women were revolutionizing the way the Party dealt with women's oppression, women's liberation, and women's history.\(^{46}\) Gerda Lerner, author of the 1967 book *The Grimke Sisters from South Carolina: Rebels Against Slavery* which documented the links between the abolitionist movement and the woman's rights movement, was an active member of the Congress of American Women in the late 1940s.\(^{47}\) In the acknowledgements of that book Lerner thanked Virginia Brodine, an CAW officer in New York, for "arousing [her]


interest in the contribution of women to American history" and for "inspiring the writing of this book."^{48} Even Eve Merriam occasionally stepped outside her usual genre and contributed to the new literature on women's history. In addition to her 1951 collaboration with Lerner on the women's history musical revue "Singing of Women" Merriam also wrote a biography of the 19th century woman poet and activist Emma Lazarus, published in 1956, and edited Growing Up Female in America, an anthology of primary source material about ten American women including ex-slave Susie King Taylor, labor organizer "Mother" Mary Jones, and Winnebago Indian Mountain Wolf Woman, published in 1971.^{49} As Old Left feminists these women all helped to preserve progressives' work on women in a period when almost no one thought such work was important. When feminism began to resurge in the late 1960s Flexner's, Kraditor's, Lerner's and Merriam's work shaped younger women's thinking about the long tradition of radical women's activism that preceded them and influenced the direction women's activism and women's history would take in the future.

There were clearly many indirect links between the Communist movement and the women's movement. Red diaper

^{48}Lerner, The Grimke Sisters, pp. ix and x.

daughters who usually kept quiet about their political backgrounds but who brought their knowledge about the Old Left's woman question with them into the women's movement comprised one of these links. Former Old Left activists who transmitted the Communist movements' analysis of women's oppression and its strategies for women's liberation to the feminist movement via popular and scholarly writing during the late 1950s and 1960s formed another. But although the threat of anti-communism and the shame of Stalinism led many Old Left progressives who later influenced the New Left to conceal their radical pasts, not everyone whose activism spanned two generations of movements was bent on obscuring their political history. For example, numerous people, such as Communist Herbert Aptheker, and former Communists Florence Luscomb, Marge Franz, Hodie Edwards and Dorothy Healey all sometimes joined in and supported feminist activities as mentors and as activists while being quite open about their associations with the Old Left.\footnote{Historian Herbert Aptheker was a very visible Communist in the 1960s and 1970s who was well known for his associations with the younger generation of activists. In 1966, for example, he visited Hanoi along with New Left activists Tom Hayden and Staughton Lynd. According to Leila Rupp, in the late 1960s when he was a visiting professor at Bryn Mawr College, Aptheker led the first discussion of women's liberation on the campus because the women students asked him to do it. Florence Luscomb was an old suffragist and Progressive whose 1957 memoir "Progressive Movements and What They Did to Me: Some Informal Recollections" (photocopied document in the Bertha Reynolds Collection, Sophia Smith Collection, box 12, folder 142) indicates that she had been close to the Communist Party in the 1930s and 1940s, frequently}
Just as not all Old Leftists hid their associations with the Communist Party, not all young feminists dismissed Communism as absolutely outmoded and irrelevant to their struggles. More than a few women who were just discovering feminism in the late 1960s and early 1970s sought out Old Left activists for advice and information, and it was not


Robin D.G. Kelley writes about Marge Franz's Communist activism in the deep South in the 1930s in Hammer and Hoe (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990) and Jessica Mitford about Franz's participation in the California CP in the 1940s and 1950s in A Fine Old Conflict (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977). Since the 1970s Franz, now a historian at the University of California-Santa Cruz, has been active in feminist causes and in the discipline of women's studies. Hodee Edwards, one of the authors of the 1946 letters to the editor of the Worker that helped to spark the CP's revision of its approach to the woman question contributed an article entitled "Housework and Exploitation: A Marxist Analysis" to the journal No More Fun and Games: A Journal of Female Liberation 5 (July, 1971), pp. 92-100. In an interview with the author Dorothy Healey said that she "was always involved with the young movements" and that she had "very good relations with all these young women." She suggested that young feminists saw her as role model and that they invited regularly invited her to their events.
unusual for young feminists to adopt openly Communist
cultural artifacts and traditions as important elements of
the women's movement. In 1968, for example, Berkeley
California feminist Laura X consulted with former Communists
William and Tania Mandel about the American origins of
International Women's Day. Once she had learned about the
history of the holiday from the Mandels and from CP
literature such as Claudia Jones's 1950 Political Affairs
article "International Women's Day and the Struggle for
Peace," she revived International Women's Day celebrations
in Berkeley in 1969. 5
Later, using her self-published
women's history document "Women in World History" and her
own feminist newsletter "Spazm," Laura X spread the word
about International Women's Day to feminists around the
country and by 1970 women's liberation groups all around the

5In June, 1993 I wrote to Laura X to inquire about how
she learned about International Women's Day and other
Communist traditions and activists. She forwarded my letter
to William and Tania Mandel, the sources of her information,
in Berkeley, CA. I interviewed by telephone on June 27,
1993. Laura X was familiar with all of Claudia Jones's
writing on the woman question from the 1940s and 1950s. Her
Women's History Research Center Library Catalog from March,
1971 (in the Women's Liberation papers, Sophia Smith
Collection, box 21, folder 220) lists not only Jones's
"International Women's Day and the Struggle for Peace,
Political Affairs March, 1950, but Claudia Jones's "For New
Approaches for Our Work Among Women," Political Affairs,
August, 1948; Claudia Jones, "An End to the Neglect of the
Problems of the Negro Woman," Political Affairs, June, 1949;
Claudia Jones, "Foster's Political and Theoretical Guidance
to Our Work Among Women," Political Affairs, March, 1951;
and Jones, "The Struggle for Peace in the United States,"
Political Affairs, February, 1952.
nation commemorated the holiday.\textsuperscript{52} In the fall of 1968 Helen Kritzler, one of the organizers of the Chicago Conference on Women's Liberation, wrote to Mary Inman to ask for copies of her work, and in the spring of 1969 Susanna Maes, the organizer of a feminist Mother's Day rally in Los Angeles wrote to Inman to ask if she would be willing to speak about "capitalism and its role in the creation of the woman problem."\textsuperscript{53} Also in the late 1960s, many young feminists such as Laura X who had contacts with the Old Left rediscovered and revived the 1950s film "Salt of the Earth."\textsuperscript{54} From 1968 into the 1970s women's movement organizations sponsored showings of the film at women's

\textsuperscript{52}Laura X details her rediscovery of International Women's Day and her work to revive the holiday throughout the country in several sources. See: Laura X and the SPAZM Society, "Women in World History," Women's Liberation Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, box 22, folder 226; pamphlet describing the Women's History Research Center Library, Women's Liberation Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, box 21, folder 220; SPAZM newsletter published by Laura X, n.d., Herstory Microfilm Collection, reel 21. Later feminists attributed the revival of International Women's Day to Laura X. See, for example, "Everywoman" (L.A.) 3/26/71, p. 4 in the Herstory microfilm collection, reel 1; the "Women's Press (Eugene, OR) 3/71, Herstory collection, reel 4; and Seattle Women's Liberation newsletter "And Ain't I a Woman," 1, 7 (February, 1970), p. 14, Herstory collection, reel 13.

\textsuperscript{53}Correspondence between Kritzler and Inman and between Maes and Inman can both be found in the Inman papers, box 2.

\textsuperscript{54}Laura X discussed "Salt of the Earth" in an early but undated issue of SPAZM. She also reviewed the film in "Spazm" 10/21/69.
conferences and at many colleges and universities. In all of these ways feminists looked directly to the Old Left’s approach to the woman question to help them form their own analysis of women’s oppression and their own strategies for women’s liberation.

Finally, at least two younger feminists who made critical contributions to the women’s movement’s thinking about the intersections of race, class, and gender were ideologically rooted in the Old Left even though they also participated, along with their radical contemporaries, in a variety of New Left and civil rights activities. In 1981

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According to the March 1968 issue of the Chicago newsletter "Voice of the Women’s Liberation Movement," (Herstory collection, reel 22) Chicago Women’s Liberation chapters sponsored "Salt of the Earth" at an all-movement party; in 1969, according to "Spazm," 10/21/69 (Herstory collection, reel 21) Berkeley Women’s Liberation and the Radical Student Union showed the movie in honor of Mrs. Albert Parsons, the wife of one of the Haymarket Square martyrs. According to "Pandora," (Seattle), October 1970, p. 4 (Herstory, reel 20) "Salt of the Earth" was sponsored by the University YWCA and the Chicano Studies Department in November of that year; in November, 1970 the film was shown at the Women’s Conference in Austin, Texas ("Second Coming," 12/11/70, p. 3, Herstory reel 4); in December it was shown by Women’s Liberation at Smith College ("Smith College Women’s Liberation Newsletter," 12/9/70, Women’s Liberation Collection, box 10); In January 1971 it was shown at Merritt College in San Francisco ("Bay Area Women’s Liberation Newsletter," January, 1971, p. 4, Herstory, reel 13; in April 1971 it was shown at a women’s film festival in Providence, RI ("Women’s Liberation Newsletter," 4/9/71, Herstory, reel 23). In its "Internal Education Packet on Sexism," Part I, n.d., the Women’s Caucus of the New University Conference urged all its chapters to "make a special effort to obtain the film Salt of the Earth" to further educate their members about how women might go about obtaining equality and about the "Mexican national minority" (Women’s Liberation Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, box 8, folder 77).
Communist scholar Angela Davis published her important book *Women, Race & Class*, which developed and expanded upon arguments Communists had long been making about the differences between white and black women's oppressions, the racism of the mainstream women's movement, and the contributions of African-American and Communist women to American struggles for women's emancipation.\(^{56}\) Similarly, in 1982 Bettina Aptheker, daughter of Communist leader Herbert Aptheker and Coordinator of Women's Studies at the University of California-Santa Cruz, published her book *Woman's Legacy: Essays on Race, Sex, and Class in American History* that built upon the Old Left's analysis of African-American women's "triple oppression" and further documented the links Communists had originally proposed between black liberation and women's liberation struggles.\(^{57}\) Both of these works, along with Eleanor Flexner's *Century of*
Struggle, Aileen Kraditor's *the Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement*, and Gerda Lerner's *The Grimke Sisters* and *Black Women in White America* informed feminists' thinking about the importance of race and class differences among women and, using the ideas pioneered by Communists such as Claudia Jones in the late 1940s, laid the groundwork for a whole new body of feminist and scholarly literature about African-American women and the historical conflicts and connections between racism and sexism, and civil rights and women's rights.⁵⁸

Directly as well as indirectly, then, the Communist movement's political and cultural work on the woman question survived to influence the "second wave" of the women's movement. Many feminists rejected the Old Left as completely inadequate when it came to the woman question, but not far beneath the surface of their day-to-day activities and ideas both activists and traditions that emanated from the Communist movement of the 1940s and 1950s continued to shape the direction the new movement was taking in the 1960s, 1970s, and later.

Although the Communist Party and Communist women refused to associate themselves with the self-proclaimed feminists of the 1940s and 1950s they clearly did not, as

many other scholars have assumed, forsake or neglect women’s struggles to improve their status in these decades. Certainly the gender politics of the Communist Party after World War II were not entirely feminist by our standards today--the Party’s adherence to the policies of the Soviet Union prevented it from supporting explicitly women’s rights to birth control and abortion and led it to romanticize the family--but Communists’ emphasis on the pervasiveness of women’s oppression, on the importance of race and class differences among women, and on the need to politicize personal problems certainly made them more radical than the women’s rights oriented feminists of the National Woman’s Party and prefigured the work of the women’s liberation movement in several important ways. The failure of the Communist Party to organize a mass-based women’s movement in the wake of World War II stemmed not so much from shortcomings in its ideological and practical treatment of women’s issues, but from the fact that it made important advances in this area at the same time that anti-Communism and anti-feminism were effectively isolating Communists and their Party from the masses of American women.

By the 1960s when economic, social, and political conditions finally converged to create the conditions necessary for a mass women’s movement, the Old Left in general and the CP in particular were in no position to influence such a movement directly. But although the
organization itself had been decimated and discredited, the CP's legacy persisted as individuals who had contributed and learned from the Party's work on women after 1945 continued to act on their commitment to women's liberation as parents, as writers, and as activists in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. The women's liberation movement of the late 1960s and 1970s quickly outstripped the older Communist program for women's liberation: once feminists had adopted the Old Left's language to articulate the ubiquitous effects of male domination, they moved on to challenge institutions the Communist Party had always regarded as inviolable such as heterosexuality, the nuclear family, and motherhood, and appalled many more conventional Old Left activists in the process. But even though the radical women's movement was, by the 1970s, very different from that of the 1940s and 1950s, feminists also incorporated important elements of the Communist Party's program into their agenda for women's liberation. The modern movement's vocabulary for expressing

59 In December 1970, for example, Eleanor Flexner's companion Helen Terry wrote to Bertha Reynolds: "Eleanor's Century of Struggle may be the basic book for women's libbers, but it doesn't seem as if many of them are much interested in anything pre-1970! She was invited to speak at Smith (by the students) and at Skidmore (a 'name' lecture) but all the discussion periods dealt with was abortion, on which she is not an authority. It is a way to make a living, she says in disgust, but she thinks she'll stick to the typewriter!" In an interview with a New York Times reporter Judy Klemesrud on September 21, 1971 Susan B. Anthony II said not only that the original Susan B. Anthony would not have approved of women's liberation, but that she thought "liberated women are buying these values of the male-created society."
its ideas, its emphasis on the political nature of women's so-called personal problems, its use of women's history to inspire women and to gain support for their ongoing struggles, and its efforts to build feminist unity in the face of women's differences all flowed from the Old Left. The Communist Party's answer to the woman question was in many ways incomplete and problematic, but its legacy has remained important to feminists' in the 1960s and 1970s and made vital contributions to the history of the U.S. women's movement in the 20th century. Communist women were, in a variety of ways, truly vanguards of women's liberation.
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