

## THE LANGUAGE OF SEXISM

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OUR IDENTITIES, who and what we are or think we are, how others see and define us, are greatly affected by language. The power of language to affect identity is reflected in the fact that language has been used again and again to define and dehumanize individuals or groups of individuals into submission. The Nazis used language to redefine and dehumanize the Jews to the point that elimination of the "Jewish bacilli," the "Jewish plague," and "Jewish vermin" seemed "reasonable" to the Nazi audiences.<sup>2</sup> The language of white racism has been used for decades to "keep the nigger in his place."<sup>3</sup> It was not until the 1960s that people like Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and Floyd McKissick pointed to the need for blacks to stop allowing whites to define who the blacks were and are. Carmichael summed it up when he said to an audience of students at Morgan State College on January 16, 1967: "It [definition] is very, very important because I believe people who can define are masters."<sup>4</sup> Individuals or groups of individuals who allow others to define them as lazy, ignorant, inferior, inhuman, et cetera, have given the power of defining who and what they are to others, and this power carries with it the master-subject relationship.

It is the intent of this essay to demonstrate that the "liberation" of women, the eradication of the sexual subject-master relationship, will have to be accompanied with a conscious effort on the part of women to allow themselves to be defined by men no longer. Although the language of sexism has been with us for a very long time, recent experience has demonstrated that a "minority group" intent on defining itself and eradicating the language that has, in part, been used to maintain inequalities, injustices, and subjugation can effect changes in language behavior. The blacks who have no longer allowed themselves to be defined by the whites are a freer people. Women need to do the same. As George Orwell has pointed out in his famous essay, "Politics and the English Language," the decadence of some of our language is

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probably curable. "Silly words and expressions have often disappeared, not through any evolutionary process but owing to the conscious action of a minority."<sup>15</sup> Conscious action by women and men can reduce the usage of, and perhaps eliminate, the language of sexism.

This conscious effort to reduce and eliminate the language of sexism was reflected in the action of *The Old Mole*, an underground newspaper in the Boston area, when it announced that it would no longer accept manuscripts or letters that used "male supremacist language." In its announcement, *The Old Mole* stated:

Use of this language reflects values and patterns of thought that are oppressive to half the people in the world and harmful to all. To use the word "balls" to mean courage implies that (1) balls have something to do with courage and that (2) women, because they don't have balls, don't have courage. Similarly, the words "castration" and "emasculatation" imply acceptance of the myth that man is superior to woman because of the strength that having a penis gives him.

These words reflect a power structure (men having power over women) that we want to change. One way we can work to change this is to challenge the use, conscious or unconscious, of words and phrases that go along with this power structure. In other words, we will not print letters that call women "broads" just as we would not print letters that call blacks "niggers."<sup>16</sup>

The necessity for actively ridding our language of sexist terminology was recognized by Wilma Scott Heide, President of the National Organization for Women, when she stated in a speech delivered at the University of Nebraska: "In any social movement, when changes are effected, the language sooner or later reflects the change. Our approach is different. Instead of passively noting the change, we are changing language patterns to actively effect the changes, a significant part of which is the conceptual tool of thought, our language."<sup>17</sup>

While the media can do its part to reduce the usage of the language of sexism, the individual (female and male) can make a great contribution by making a conscious effort to reduce the language of sexism in everyday language behavior.

Examples of male supremacist language are numerous, and as Aileen Hernandez, past president of NOW, has stated, our sexist language makes it abundantly clear that "in all areas that really count, we discount women." She presents the following examples of sexist language:

"Mankind" is the generic term for all people or all males, but there is no similar dual meaning for "womankind." The

masculine pronoun is used to refer to both men and women in general discussions.

The Constitution of the United States is replete with sexist language — Senators and Representatives are “he”; the President is obviously “he” and even the fugitive from justice is “he” in our Constitution . . . .

But just in case we as women manage to escape the brain-washing that assigns us to “our place” in the order of things, the language continues to get the message across.

There is a “housewife” but no “househusband”; there’s a “housemother” but no “housefather”; there’s a “kitchenmaid” but no “kitchenman”; unmarried women cross the threshold from “bachelor girl” to “spinster” to “old maid,” but unmarried men are “bachelors” forever.<sup>8</sup>

Other examples of the language of sexism abound. Writing in *Women: A Journal of Liberation*, Emily Toth points out that “generally, women lack their own words for professional positions: a woman must be a ‘female judge,’ ‘female representative,’ ‘madam chairman,’ or — in a ghastly pun — a ‘female mailman.’” She notes that “one textbook defines Standard English as that language spoken by ‘educated professional people and their wives.’”<sup>10</sup> We find in *Webster’s New World Dictionary of the American Language* the word “honorarium” defined as “a payment to a professional man for services on which no fee is set or legally obtainable.” It was not until November 1971 that it was announced that the standard directory of scientists, *American Men of Science*, would henceforth be known as *American Men and Women of Science*.<sup>12</sup> It was not until January 1972 that it was publicly noted that the faculty washroom doors for women in Philosophy Hall at Columbia University were labelled “WOMEN” and the washroom doors for men were labelled “FOR OFFICERS OF INSTRUCTION.”<sup>14</sup> So ingrained is the language of sexism that it is with great effort that people will refer to a “jurywoman,” a “churchwoman,” a “journeywoman,” or a “chairwoman.” Instead, the females end up “countrymen,” “middlemen,” “businessmen,” and “jurymen” when these groups are referred to generally.

The pervasiveness of the problem is exemplified by the fact that the very women who are attempting to bring about the women’s liberation fall into the trap of using the sexist language. The magazine *Aphra* presented on its “Contributors” page the following information about one of its contributors: “Berenice Abbot is to have a one-man show at the Museum of Modern Art this winter. . . .”<sup>11</sup> On one occasion I heard a female speaker discussing child-adoption regulations; she remarked to her audience that “the women at the adoption agency acted as middlemen.” Even the National Organization for Women

(NOW) places men in higher precedence in its 1966 Statement of Purpose. The first paragraph of that Statement begins: "We, men and women who hereby constitute ourselves as the National Organization for Women, believe the time has come for a new movement toward true equality for all women in America, and toward a fully equal partnership of the sexes, as part of the world-wide revolution of human rights now taking place within and beyond our national borders." The firstness of "men" in "We, men and women. . . ." reveals that the "liberated" women find it hard to shake off a part of the language of sexism. The Statement, considering the context, should begin, "We women and men. . . ." The connotations of the two phrases are entirely different.

The blacks of the 1960s recognized that "American Negro" was the white's definition which relegated black identity to a secondary status. Why was it, the blacks asked, that everyone else was an "Italian-American," a "German-American," or an "Irish-American," but the blacks were always "American Negro"? (Even with "American Indian" the Indians were relegated to a secondary position in their own land!) Just as the blacks began to insist on defining themselves and bringing into question the firstness of their "masters," so too will women have to use language more carefully to avoid words and phrases that define them as the "second sex." There are many occasions when "women and men" would be more appropriate and accurate than "men and women." In fact, one might argue that since women are a majority in this nation, we should henceforth always speak of "the women and men of this nation. . . ." instead of "the men and women of this nation. . . ."

In the church we have the "clergyman," the "altar boy," the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Males dominate in Christianity not only in language but also in terms of the decision-making powers, a domination that can be attributed partly to the language of sexism. This male domination exists despite the fact that "every survey that measures sex differences in religiosity shows that females attend church more frequently than males, pray more often, hold firmer beliefs, cooperate more in church programs. This is true at all age levels from childhood to senior-citizen, and of both single and married women, of women gainfully employed and home-makers."<sup>6</sup> But what is woman to do when in Scripture she is told: "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord"? This, in the same book, Ephesians, which tells children to obey their parents and servants to be obedient to their masters. Somehow women, along with children and servants, end up subjects in the master-subject relationship.

Another effect of the language of sexism is that it makes the male visible and the female "the invisible woman." In a world of "chairmen," "churchmen," "spokesmen," "businessmen," "congressmen," "jurymen," et cetera, the woman is not only secondary, she is invisible. The invisible woman remains invisible when in a classroom of women and men the teacher says that "each student must see to it that his assignment is turned in on time" or when the President of the United States says that "each citizen must do his duty to alleviate injustice and inequality in this land." Once we consistently begin talking about "congresswomen," "jurywomen," "spokeswomen," "businesswomen," et cetera, the woman becomes much more visible. She becomes more visible outside of the stereotyped duties of housewifery and childbearing. To many males, of course, this increased visibility is a threat, and often requests that males use this language that will accomplish the increased visibility of the female is viewed as "troublesome," scoffed at, ridiculed or seen as really unnecessary.

This invisibility of women was clearly demonstrated in a one-page anti-war ad that appeared in *The New York Times* of April 4, 1971. The ad was made up of a large half-page drawing of President Nixon with huge corks in his ears and over the drawing were the words: **THE MAJORITY IS NOT SILENT. THE ADMINISTRATION IS DEAF.** About a dozen individuals are vigorously attempting to get the corks out of the President's ears, and it appears that getting the President to uncork and listen is a man's job. Nowhere in this anti-war ad does there appear a woman who can claim to be part of that majority which is "not silent," part of that group which is attempting to uncork Nixon's ears. Considering the important roles played by women and women's organizations in the anti-war movement, it is odd that nowhere in this one-page anti-war ad are women represented as attempting to get the "deaf" President to listen to the not-so-silent majority.

Even in the everyday world of memoes, the woman remains invisible:

TO: Deans, Directors, Chairmen, and Advisers

RE: Minority Student Awards

Gentlemen:

Letters of nomination are now being prepared. . . . In the larger world of international politics, "the battle for men's minds" goes on decade after decade with apparently little interest in the women's minds. Or does the "battle for men's minds" suggest that women have no minds?

While women, like the blacks, have been kept in "their place" by language and have remained invisible for so long, unlike the blacks the women have not yet been dubbed as a "problem" in the sense of whites speaking of "the Negro problem." While Gunnar Myrdal presented the similarities between the treatment of blacks and women in his now famous Appendix 5 of *The American Dilemma*, interestingly he spoke of the "Negro problem" but not of the "Woman problem."<sup>10</sup> The book is subtitled "The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy" and Appendix 5 is titled "A Parallel to the Negro Problem," titles carrying with them the connotation that the Negro is the problem. The continual use by the Nazis of the phrase "the Jewish problem" implied that the Jews were a problem. There was no "Jewish problem" until the Nazis linguistically created and defined this fiction. Similarly, there is no "Negro problem" in this country; what exists is a "white problem" — the bigotry, ignorance, and inhumanity of so many whites. But Myrdal does not speak of the "Woman problem"; instead, he refers to "the women's problem." In the first paragraph of his Appendix 5, we find him saying: "In studying a special problem like the Negro problem, there is always a danger that one will develop a quite incorrect idea of its uniqueness. It will, therefore, give perspective to the Negro problem and prevent faulty interpretation to sketch some of the important similarities between the Negro problem and the women's problem."<sup>10</sup> It may be that we will begin to hear more about the "Woman problem" as women begin to make vocal and persuasive their demands for a halt to the inequalities, injustices, and inhumanity based on sex.

The ritual of women adopting the name of their husbands upon marriage also has its male supremacist implications, as does the ritual of giving the newborn child the male parent's surname. "What's In A Name?" asks Julie Coryell in *Women: A Journal of Liberation*. She answers the question, in part, by saying: "Plenty. Why is it that women take their husband's name on marriage? Why don't we keep our names if we want to? In studying about patriarchy, I learned that women and children came to bear the husband's name and father's name because he owned them. I am no one's possession but my own self. Social usage clarifies the potential sexual availability of a woman in her name. We are Miss so and so — fair game — or Mrs. (man's name) — safe, hands off, men — or Mrs. (woman's name) — divorced? Available? Probably. Mr. does not reveal a man's marital status. After all, what does marital status have to do with one's work and attitudes? Why must women continue to be forced to declare it unless it is truly relevant?"<sup>5</sup>

The institution of marriage forces the woman to undergo a change from "woman" to "wife" while the man remains a "man." The minister says, "Do you take this woman to be your wife?" and then turns to the woman and asks, "Do you take this man to be your husband?" After both have said "I do" they are informed that they are now "man and wife," not "husband and wife." The wife then adopts her man's surname, exchanging one male's surname for another male's surname; and in almost all facets of life she is required to use her man's name. In September 1971, for example, a three judge Federal Court in Montgomery, Alabama ruled that a married woman does not have a constitutional right to have her driver's license issued in her maiden name.<sup>11</sup> Although Mydral did not discuss this matter, another similarity between the status and treatment of blacks and women is that they both have been given the names of their "masters."

In his book *Women and the Law*, Leo Kanowitz devotes several paragraphs to this practice of the married woman taking her husband's name. Kanowitz asserts that "the probable effects of this unilateral name change upon the relations between the sexes, though subtle in character, are profound. In a very real sense, the loss of a woman's surname represents the destruction of an important part of her personality and its submersion in that of her husband."<sup>9</sup> As far as the law is concerned, it is the male, father and husband, who has the last word on what names the women and children shall bear. Kanowitz cites several laws and court decisions that reflect this male power of defining through naming. Among the conclusions which he presents, based on his examination of the law, are "... under many of the statutes that prescribe formal procedures for changing one's name, the right to do so has been expressly or impliedly denied to married women. No comparable restriction has been imposed upon married men. Finally, the law, once more either expressly or by implication, generally requires that a change in the husband's surname produce a corresponding change in that of his wife, but never the reverse."<sup>9</sup>

As Faith A. Seidenberg has observed, not only does the woman become lost in the anonymity of her husband's name, but "her domicile is his no matter where she lives, which means she cannot vote or run for office in her place of residence if her husband lives elsewhere. If she wants an annulment and is over eighteen, in certain cases she cannot get one, but her husband can until he is twenty-one. In practice, if not in theory, she cannot contract for any large amount, borrow money, or get a credit card in her own name. She is, in fact, a non-person with no name."<sup>18</sup> What has occurred over the decades and centuries is that linguistically the law has institutionalized the lan-

guage of sexism, and when the law gave the male the power to name the female it served to perpetuate his status of master in the master-subject relationship.

The power that comes with the privilege of naming another person is directly related to the centuries-old belief in the magic of words. "From time immemorial," writes Margaret Schlauch, "men have thought that there is some mysterious essential connection between a thing and the spoken name for it."<sup>17</sup> If a man can use the name of his enemy to exercise an evil control and influence over that enemy, how much more power has that man who can control the naming of others? If "not only people, but plants, animals, forces of nature, gods, demons, in fact all creatures could be affected for good or ill by solemn pronunciation of their names in the proper context,"<sup>17</sup> how much more power has the person who not only pronounces their names but also designates for them his choice of names.

It should come as no surprise at this stage in history that these female "non-persons" are beginning to seriously demand the right to designate their own identities. What is surprising is that it has taken so long for women seriously to attempt to define themselves and demand the eradication of social, political, and economic discrimination that has, in part, been perpetuated by the language of sexism. A conscious effort to diminish the use of the language of sexism may be an important step towards eradicating man's inhumanity to women.

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## BATTLE WAGING FOR PLASTIC

FROM the sidelines I have been watching the battle over the meaning and connotation of the word *plastic*. Classicists and those who enjoy word derivation predominate on one side — Sociologists and those who relish the contemporary American scene predominate on the other. For those who are fond of the word *plastic*, the stakes are high: Classicists find it virtuous, Sociologists find it villainous.

Heavy ammunition is being used by both sides. The Classicists are backed by *The American Heritage Dictionary* (copyright date 1969) where eight definitions of the word plastic contain not one whiff of the colloquial *a cheap, tawdry, mass-produced article*. The closest definition is set far down: 6. *Made of a plastic or plastics: a plastic garden hose*. This is tame stuff considering colloquial usage. The seven other definitions follow the first: *capable of being shaped or formed, pliable*. And finally, the clincher: *From the Greek plastikos, fit for molding*. Thus it can be seen that *The American Heritage* focusses on the process of manufacturing plastics or, by extension, that quality of character which is appealingly flexible.

Ammunition from the other side comes from most current hip talk. However, a heavy gun from Academe entered the foray with the bestseller *The Greening of America* (copyright date 1970) where Yale professor Charles A. Reich says on page 327: "... a culture that is not plastic or artificial..." Coupling these two words indicates that professor Reich realizes *plastic* can not stand alone — an alarming state for a word to be in!

Will a decision soon be reached whether *plastic* is a good way to be — or bad? As things stand now, no one can safely use the word *plastic* until the battle is won.

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