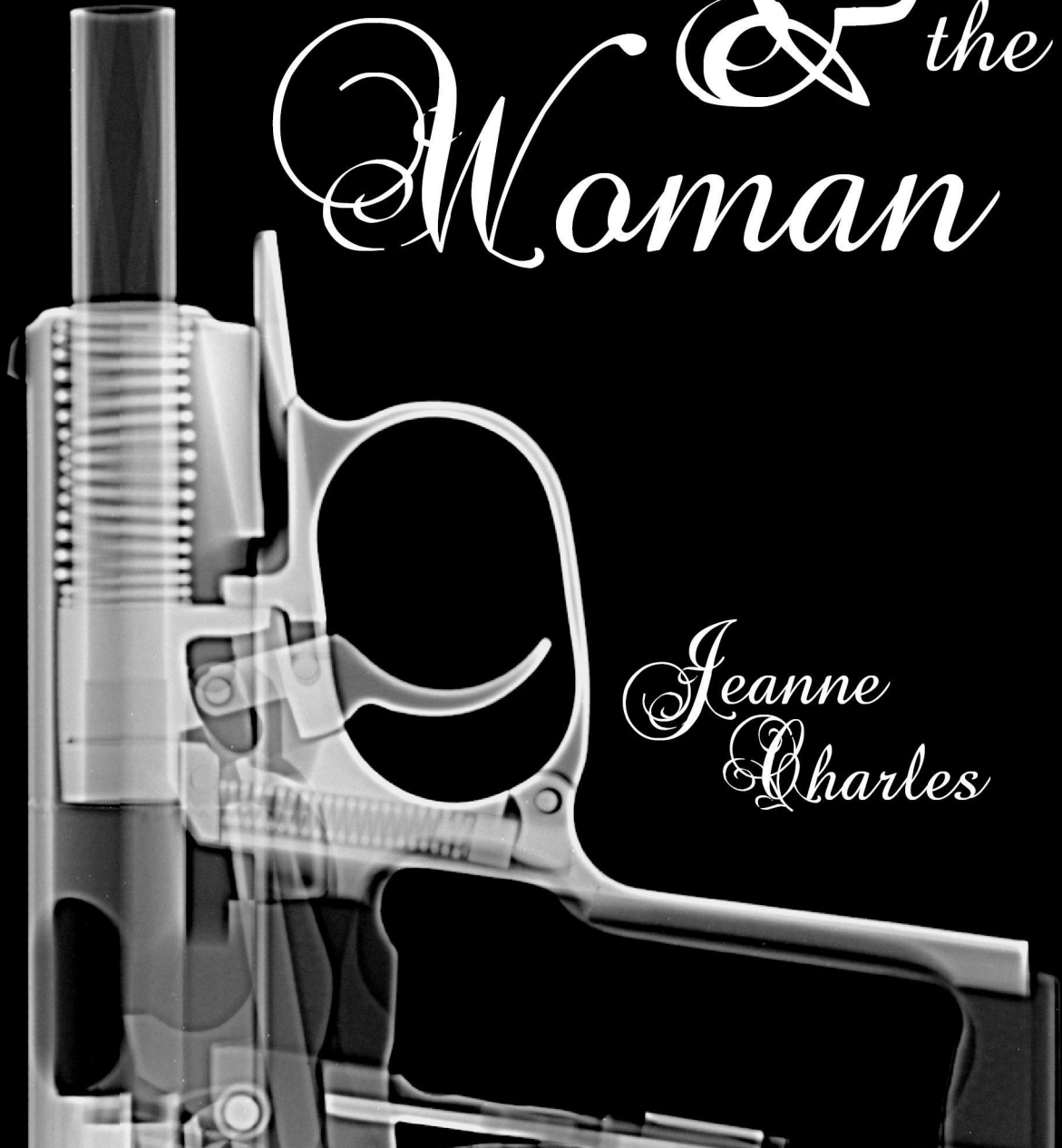


“Jeanne Charles” was the pseudonym of situationist Françoise Denevert. This article, under the title “La critique ad mulierem,” originally appeared in the journal *Chronique des Secrets Publics* (Paris, 1975). This new translation by Ken Knabb supersedes the 1975 version included in *Public Secrets*.

# Arms & the Woman

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*One* of the symptoms of the weakness of the revolutionary movement today is that it has not yet reached the point of producing a qualitative and autonomous expression of revolutionary women. It is known that the degree of development attained by the forces of negation of the existing society finds its unequivocal, decisive and obvious manifestation in the relations between revolutionary men and women, and in the manner in which the direct and natural relation of the sexes is conceived.

The sexual division of roles in alienated society, inherited from feudal society and the first stages of industrial society, can be roughly described in this way: femininity concentrates the antihistorical tendencies of alienated life (passivity, submission to nature, the superstition that follows from the latter, repetition, resignation); masculinity concentrates its pseudohistorical tendencies (a certain degraded taste for struggle, arrogance, pseudoactivity, innovation, confidence in the power of society, rationalism). Femininity and masculinity are the two complementary poles of the same alienation. As they lose their former material bases due to the general proletarianization imposed by modern industrial society, these two poles are tending to blend into each other, causing the differences between the sexes to become less marked.

Regardless of the era, men and women have never constituted two pure types. Individual men and women represent various combinations of the behavior and character traits of the two sexes. Nevertheless, femininity has up till now

her passivity and public nonexistence is supposedly compensated by a greater hidden richness, and this male-female complementarity provides a justification for the monogamous couple. If sensitivity is still considered a “feminine” quality, it is because theory is not understood for what it is, since men who are considered to be theorists are considered to lack sensitivity. In fact, theory includes the *practical application* of this sensitivity and this subtlety.

The modern revolutionary movement must destroy and transcend this opposition of pleasure/activity, sensitivity/lucidity, conception/execution, habit/innovation, etc. The femininity/masculinity opposition corresponds to a reified stage of human development.

Individuals colonized by the spectacle of a revolutionary theory are in fact colonized by the need to appear autonomous; they are slaves of appearance. As long as theory continues to be seen as a product of intelligence, as the individual faculty of “thinking” and of “writing,” and, as such, as a potential source of personal prestige, men will continue to want to “express themselves” at all costs and women will continue to lament not being able to imitate them.

It is now a matter of understanding theory for what it is. It is essential that women (and men) no longer accept one’s acts being in contradiction with one’s words, and no longer accept the existence of critiques without consequences. Subjectivity must be given practical follow-through. No one should be able to be lucid about others without being lucid about herself, or lucid about herself without being lucid about others. The modern revolutionary movement must become unlivable for masculinity and femininity. It must judge individuals *on their life*.

- JEANNE CHARLES  
*Paris, 1975*

participated in, or because of an ideology they have well assimilated. These latter are admitted with the traits of masculinity, as men are.

Some of these women say absolutely nothing in public, contenting themselves with making remarks in private that they wouldn't otherwise dare to make. Or they don't open their mouths except in response to the trivial sort of matters that are believed to be the only ones that can be posed to them. Or, finding themselves in some "theoretical discussion," they anxiously watch out of the corner of their eye for the approval of their protector; not daring to admit their ignorance of the subject, they entangle themselves in the confusion of their thoughts or repeat what they've heard someone else say, their difficulties in this domain seeming shameful to them. Others openly admit their insufficiencies, excusing themselves by the difficulties they have in writing — but only in writing, as an inexplicable calamity, implying that they nevertheless *think* admirably. Or perhaps they recognize this a feminine defect, and fancy themselves protected, supposing that their honesty guards them from any more direct critique. Still others express themselves by means of aggressive attacks against men, so as to demonstrate that they aren't under any man's thumb and that they think autonomously. In each case what is paralyzing them is their colonization by the spectacle of theory.

Thus, for the most part the only relations which remain to these women are amorous ones. There they flaunt their sensitivity, privately complaining that theory is cold and abstract and lauding "human relations." Women are often recognized as having greater sensitivity and subtlety when it comes to judging people. In addition, men, having a certain degree of practical exigence, are considerably more prudent when it comes to critiques that will entail practical consequences. They prefer to admire their female companions for such a capacity, which, having had to repress it in themselves, they claim to possess only in a lesser degree. In this way a man can also justify his relation with his girlfriend:

always been the dominant trait of the alienation of women, and masculinity that of men. But the generalized passivity produced by the reign of the modern economy has particularly encouraged the reappearance of the "classic" feminine traits, although both feminine and masculine traits, freed from their material roots, are adopted by both sexes as modes of spectacular affirmation.

Within the alienated society at large women and men find themselves more and more on a plane of equality (except in areas where patriarchy still prevails): a woman can no longer see her male companion as an admirable and all-powerful protector, because it is obvious that he is just as powerless as she is. Within the modern revolutionary movement, in contrast, women begin by finding themselves in the classic feminine position in the face of the domination of a certain theoretical prestige. For an individual who is not *involved* in theoretical activity, theory appears as an "ability to write" or to "think," a product of intelligence, an individual creation full of mystery. This is the spectacle effect: the fetishism of theory for those who find themselves outside it. A woman often finds herself forced to admit that she has "not yet written anything," and that she has no active role in the elaboration of revolutionary theory, in apparent contrast to certain of the men she sees. When it comes to theory, her first impulse is to rely on men, who seem "more qualified" than she is. She ends up distrusting her own thought, paralyzed by external criteria. If she happens to come upon some unexplored terrain, she stops short, thinking that if it hasn't been done before, it must have been because it wasn't worth the trouble. If she manages to come up with an idea, it remains a dead letter because she never follows through to its practical consequences. She often judges an individual very quickly, making a pertinent, perceptive critique, even before her male friends; but in her passivity she stops there. When it comes to practical consequences, she hides behind them. Her reflections and critiques are made in private, leaving men to *put them into practice*.

But in this way she deprives herself of a direct grasp on her social environment; she never directly influences anything and thus cannot become a theorist. For theory is the critique of daily life; it is the operation of each individual conducted in this daily life; it is a succession of renewed and corrected *interventions* in relations with people (which are also the *effective terrain* of alienation) and, what amounts to the same thing, it is also a series of interventions in society. Theory is an undertaking of *revolutionary transformation* that implies that the individual theorist accept her own continuous transformation. It requires understanding and acting on both individual and social-historical blocks.

If men have an *apparently* preponderant place in the revolutionary movement, it is because many of them enter the revolutionary struggle with the character traits of *masculinity* (i.e., in reality with as few aptitudes as women, and with the same *unconscious complacency* regarding their character traits as women have regarding femininity), which can *create illusions*, since the practice of theory demands imagination, real struggle, confidence in oneself and in the power of the individual, aptitudes which the masculine character possesses in a degraded form. To convince oneself of this hidden misery of the modern revolutionary movement, it suffices to note that femininity would not be allowed to exist in it without the assent of masculinity, or at least would not be tolerated for long. Feminine passivity has its flip side in masculine activism. If the passivity has been more often noted up till now, this is because it is a more glaring contradiction in a movement supposedly based on individual autonomy.

Women are colonized by the spectacle of theory insofar as they remain totally outside of theory. And neither the example nor the intervention of men, who are themselves largely colonized by this spectacle, can precipitate women's demystification or make them understand what theory is. Women's passivity must henceforth be criticized not *superficially*, because they don't write or don't know how to express themselves autonomously, but at the root, because they

don't have any direct and practical efficacy; notably in their relations with others. Equally, it must no longer suffice for a man to "express himself" *abstractly*. His writings and his thought must have direct concrete effects. Masculinity and its activism must no longer have as a foil femininity and its passivity.

There is an obvious complacency in the maintenance of these roles. Alienated individuals are reluctant to root out what they have repressed; and since masculinity and femininity are complementary, they have all the solidity of *natural* and *inevitable* phenomena. Failure to fight against these roles amounts to accepting alienated society as a whole. Those who claim to be revolutionaries say that they want to change the world and their own lives. But in reality these individuals hope that a revolution will change their lives for them. They remain passive individuals, ready to *adapt* themselves *if necessary*, but who *fundamentally* fear all change. They are quite the opposite of *situationists*.

Overcoming the deficiencies of revolutionary practice at the beginning of the new era now requires overcoming the deficiencies of revolutionary women. And that in turn requires superseding the limited masculine practice which has up till now reinforced and accommodated itself to those deficiencies. The *critique of everyday life* must definitively destroy the inequality of the sexes within revolutionary activity; that is to say, it must destroy the respective *roles* which both sexes maintain in alienated life, the character structures of femininity and masculinity and the limits that they impose on revolutionary experience.

There are two main types of women in the revolutionary movement. The most numerous at present are those provided with a protector. They are admitted into the revolutionary milieu with the traits of femininity, because they are presented by a man. The others present themselves: they are admitted as the result of a prestigious past they have