H.i.b. Saffioti, *Women in Class Society*
Ruby Rohrlich-Leavitt

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Les autres articles abordent des thèmes divers (spécificité éventuelle du cerveau féminin par Freda Newcombe et Graham Radcliff ; tabous relatifs aux épouses en Mongolie, par Caroline Humphrey ; statut de la femme dans la Grèce contemporaine par Renée Hirschon, etc.) qui contribuent à cerner, en multipliant les éclairages, les objectifs définis dans l’introduction par Shirley Ardener.

Suzanne Lallemand


The goal of science—to be able to understand, explain, predict, and control the behavior of the subject of study—has for too long been thwarted where female activities, ideologies, psychology, and biology are concerned due to male dominance of the sciences. *Women Cross-Culturally. Change and Challenge* is a remarkable contribution to the sciences in that it corrects many existing misconceptions while simultaneously providing an impressive body of new data with explanatory value that brings the professions a great deal closer to a scientific explanation of women and the relationships which obtain between females, their societies, and their cultures. Reliability of the data and insights is perhaps enhanced by the fact that about half of the articles included in the book are written by women who are native of the countries they are writing about.

The interdisciplinary approach of the book, requisite to a scientific explanation of women, makes it a landmark in its field. The contributors represent a wide range of professions: anthropology, political science, sociology, literature, history, and economics, to name a few.

The book is outstanding in its approach to a truly cross-cultural investigation of women. It contains one of the few, if not the only anthology by an anthropologist that has a large section on women's status in the United States. Other contributions investigate women's status and movements as gatherer-hunters, peasants, textile workers, miners, servants, craftworkers, prostitutes, housewives, mothers, and professional women. The status of women in capitalist countries is compared to their status in socialist countries. The peculiar difficulties and some advantages of women anthropologists are well discussed, by describing their status as students, fieldworkers, teachers, spouses, and important contributors to the theory and methodology of their field. The book is fairly global in its approach, as well. Included in the countries discussed are Bangladesh, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Zaire, Brazil, Mexico, Dominican Republic, Peru, Puerto Rico, Bolivia, Soviet Union, China, Cuba, Chile, Israel, Sweden, Barbados, Morocco, and Alaska.

The editor's conclusive chapter is a brilliantly conceived encapsulation and integration of the great variety of data and theory in the book. This integration, and her own insights, combine to produce a unified theoretical base.

Rose Oldfield Hayes


Heleieth Saffioti is a contemporary pioneer in the theory and research of women's status and roles. Her book, *Women in Class Society*, published in English in 1978, was actually written twelve years earlier, when the women's movement in North America
and Europe was in the first stages of its resurgence. Thus her approach was influenced by the work of other women pioneers, such as Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan and Juliet Mitchell.

Saffiotti’s basic orientation is that of a Marxist social scientist, but she deviates from orthodox Marxists in several ways. As against their tendency to overlook the historical particularities of the oppression of women, she has drawn a picture of their historical situation in Brazil, a dependent capitalist country, as well as provided an analysis of women’s condition in the central capitalist countries. Also, while she is convinced that only under socialism will women and men achieve egalitarian relationships, “contingent on the continuation of the process of economic development”, at the same time she is critical of the areas in which women are also exploited in the socialist countries.

A crucial facet of Saffiotti’s theory is that capitalism uses the stratagem of biological determinism to marginalize the participation of both women and racial/ethnic groups in the labor market; that is, create a reserve labor force which it cannot absorb regularly: “Society uses gender to restrict the number of persons who are able to participate legitimately in the process of competition. Since the capitalist system is unable to absorb the total labor potential represented by all normal adult members in class society, it seeks to eliminate labor power from the market. To preserve itself without excessively exposing its internal contradictions, it uses biological and/or racial and ethnic categories for this purpose; to justify the marginalization of large numbers of women from the class structure, it stresses their traditional childbearing and child-rearing functions” (p. 297).

To carry out its purpose of marginalizing women, capitalism has created the nuclear family, headed by a male wage-earner who is expected to support his wife and children. Thus, as Saffiotti points out, the nuclear family is not the universal social unit which it is commonly represented to be, but a family form specific to the needs of capitalism.

One of the most interesting sections of the book deals with the socioeconomic position of women in Brazil from its earliest colonial period to the present. Saffiotti’s description of the contrasts between the position of the white woman as wife and mother, and the black woman as sexual object, shows how women were divided from one another on the basis of class and race in the Brazilian slavocracy. This kind of analytic information about women during a specific time period in a particular geographic area is sorely needed; it enables us to reclaim our history and to understand the full scope of our oppression.

The Introduction by Eleanor Burke Leacock is an insightful overview of Saffiotti’s principal theses, from the perspective of a Marxist anthropologist who has pioneered in the ethnohistorical documentation of the egalitarian relationships between women and men in band societies.

Ruby Rohrlich-Leavitt


I once had an anthropology professor who referred to certain books in the anthropological literature as “important”. Recalling these designations of praise, and having read Molly Dougherty’s ethnography, *Becoming a Woman in Rural Black Culture*, I am inclined to make my own pronouncement: this, too, is an important book.