

Martin, Emily. 1992.
*The Woman in the Body:
A Cultural Analysis of
Reproduction.* Boston:
Beacon Press.

Menstruation, Work, and Class

I would just tell her that it comes at a certain time, and I would definitely inform her. A friend of mine said she thought that somebody put glass in her bed and she thought that she was cut and didn't tell anybody because she was always bringing in rocks. Figured she would get a beating. Went on for two years. She came on when she was nine. [What did she do with the sheets?] Threw them away. So happened her mother was taking trash out one day and seen them. Her mother says, "Why didn't you tell me?" She said, "I don't know how I keep getting glass in my bed." Her mother just laughed.

—Linda Matthews

next chapter women who regard themselves as having premenstrual syndrome, which is now considered a pathological malfunction.

Let us begin with the general cultural model. When women talk about menstruation they usually do not see it as a private function relegated to the sphere of home and family, but as inextricable from the rest of life at work and school. Accordingly, the way women talk about menstruation differs according to their expectations about the

We have seen that the image of menstruation in medical texts is unabashedly one of failed production. We have also seen that our general cultural conceptions place menstruation in the private realm of home and family. The task before us now is to see how women themselves—women in various life circumstances—regard menstruation, whether they have learned and adopted the medical model and the general cultural model or whether they have developed other kinds of models. In this chapter I discuss women who regard themselves as menstruating in an ordinary fashion, and in the

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kind of work they will do outside the home, if any, and the nature of the career or further education, if any, they envision. These in turn differ markedly between the middle class and the working class.

The closest women come to talking about menstruation as a function that belongs in the private realm is when they describe it as "a hassle." What makes it a "hassle" has numerous dimensions. Women often see menstrual bleeding as "messy" and the blood itself as "gross" or disgusting. Some express feelings that menstrual blood is fearful and defiling. Many women mention fear of death or disease: "seeing all that blood," "lying in a bed full of blood," "I was sure I was bleeding to death," "saw that blood and thought I had TB," "thought I'd injured myself," "thought that I was dying." Others mention feeling dirty.¹ Most of these remarks relate to use of pads: young women recount their disgust at the blood on pads before they learned to insert a tampon, and older women recount their disgust at the blood on pads before tampons were available.² Others relate to messages from parents or friends that the process is unclean: older friends who routinely douched "made me feel like 'Oh, my God, I'm dirty or something!'" (Marcia Robbins). A mother "who had no education . . . thought it was dirty" (Ann Morrison). "People make you feel bad, especially men. They think that you are dirty when you have your period" (Gracie Evans). Many have tried to dispel these feelings about "the dirty secret": "something I've had to try to deal with, that I'm not dirty, that I don't stink and smell. It can work against you. You start feeling inadequate and irresponsible, just a dirt ball and you don't know why" (Ann Morrison). "The most important thing is to dispel that it's dirty or unclean. It shouldn't be this thing that makes women dirty and unclean" (Ellie Yamada).

But because women are aware that in our general cultural view menstruation is dirty, they are still stuck with the "hassle": most centrally no one must ever see you dealing with the mechanics of keeping up with the disgusting mess, and you must never fail to keep the disgusting mess from showing on your clothes, furniture, or the floor.³ But problems arise precisely where menstruation does not belong, according to our cultural categories: in the realms of work and school outside the home. The "hassle" refers to the host of practical difficulties involved in getting through the day of menstruating, given the way our time and space are organized in schools and places of work. In high schools, how does a woman find time and private space to change pads or tampons so she won't "show"? "In school it's hard; teachers don't want to let you out of the classroom, they're upset if

you're late and give you a hard time" (Kristin Lassiter). "In seventh grade I didn't carry a pocketbook or anything—wow!—How do you stash a maxi-pad in your notebook and try to get to the bathroom between classes to change? It was like a whole procedure, to make sure nobody saw, that none of the guys saw. From your notebook and into your pocket or take your whole notebook to the ladies' room which looks absolutely ridiculous" (Rachel Lehman). Strategies for dealing with these problems are many: put the maxi-pad up your sleeve, tuck it in a sweatshirt, or slip a tampon in a sock. One woman took "a year's supply of tampons" with her to the SAT's and rushed out during breaks (Lisa Miner).

If high schools are difficult places to obtain enough supplies while keeping their use out of sight, the same can surely be said of most workplaces. "I have to go to the bathroom more often and because I work with two men, I can't just say 'oops' and go" (Lisa Miner). One woman remembered an "excruciating incident" on her first day delivering goods to many small convenience stores, accompanied by her boss. She had incapacitating cramping in addition to needing frequent stops at a bathroom. "I couldn't even tell him, because that stuff isn't spoken of, what the matter was with me" (Meg O'Hara).

But the woman trying to sneak a tampon from the classroom into the bathroom and the woman who cannot tell her boss what is the matter are both being asked to do the impossible: conceal and control their bodily functions in institutions whose organization of time and space take little cognizance of them. But lest we see women as passive victims of an ideology that demeans them, we must ask whether women have been able to use any aspect of the shamefulness of menstruation to serve their own interests.

Let us begin with the bathroom, the place that women depend on to take care of their bodily functions including menstruation. I think it can be shown that this place is now and was in the last century a complex backstage area in contrast to the school, factory, or firm's public front stage area. Contemporary women students or workers can use bathrooms not only as places to keep their menstrual blood from showing but as places to preserve a bit of autonomy and room for themselves in a context where their physical movements are often rigidly controlled.⁴ As one factory worker explained, "I was so tired all the time I was pregnant. There were no women supervisors and the men couldn't come into the john after me. I had an old coat I left in the john. I would put it on the floor and lie down. It was gross but

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These private areas also allow certain forms of resistance: workers can take many breaks in the bathroom (when these are on the factory's time and do not detract from the workers' wages); while they are there, they can plot to avoid some management policy they dislike.⁶ The double-edged nature of the shame of women's bodily functions here works in their favor: if private places must be provided to take care of what is shameful and disgusting, then those private places can be used in subversive ways.

Contemporary workers can probably take for granted the existence of more or less usable backstage areas designated for women. But in the nineteenth century this was not so. Accounts of working conditions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries make it clear that sanitary conditions could be appalling. Workers often ate their lunch on the workroom floor for want of a lunchroom or in dark and unventilated places.⁷ (See Figures 20–22.) (The lunchroom pictured in Figure 23 was very much an exception.) If pleasant surroundings were not provided for lunch, even less were they provided for more private functions: toilets ranged from a "dirty little closet in the side of the wall"⁸ to six holes cut into a plank over a river.⁹ It is clear that these places were not pleasant retreats; to avoid them women sometimes changed clothes "with astounding frankness" on the workroom floor.¹⁰

These difficulties in finding private areas in public places faced by white women in early factories would have been faced even more acutely by black women whenever they moved in the public realm. Toni Morrison's *Sula* contains a fictional account (probably not far from the truth) of a train ride from Birmingham to New Orleans in which there were no public facilities for black women. In desperation the women used the grass alongside the station, under the eyes of white men.¹¹

In industry, even when private rooms were available, it would not have been easy to use them for seditious purposes, for constraints on the workers' time could be extreme: washing hands, eating lunch, and going to the bathroom often had to be done during the half-hour break in a ten-hour day.¹² Especially when working on piece rates, women kept time off to a minimum. An observer overheard hoop skirt makers saying, "Let's swallow our dinner and when we have time chew it."¹³ Beyond this, women might feel further constrained if they



Fig. 20 Women at work in a medical laboratory in Lowell, Massachusetts, in the late nineteenth century. (Penny 1870:396. Library of Congress.)

had to ask a male supervisor for permission to "go upstairs," a supervisor who would "look and laugh with the other clerks."¹⁴ Upstairs they might well find a bathroom for the common use of both sexes but "many sensitive and shrinking girls have brought on severe illnesses arising solely from dread of running this gantlet [sic]."¹⁵

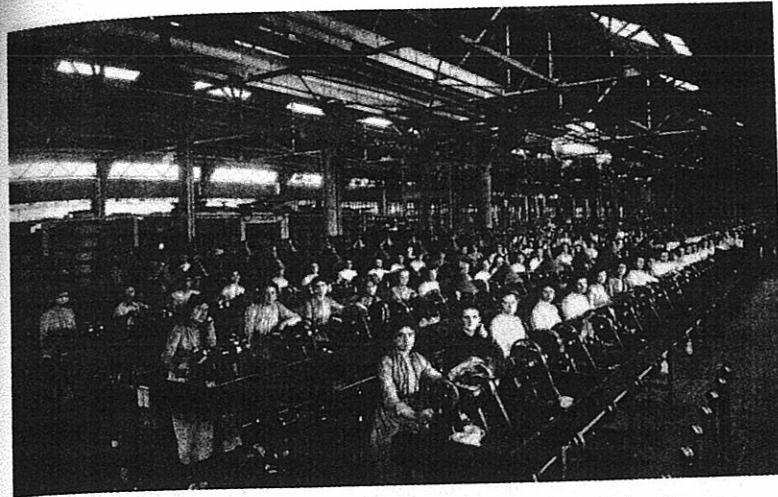


Fig. 21 The coil-winding room of the Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Company in Pittsburgh showing the conditions in factories in the early twentieth century. (Butler 1909, facing p. 219. Copyright © 1909 by the Russell Sage Foundation. Reprinted by permission of Basic Books, Inc., Publishers.)

In spite of these impediments, evidence shows that women still managed to use these backstage areas for solidarity and resistance. In early twentieth-century documents, there are scattered references to groups of two or three girls frequently found in the washroom "fussing over the universe"; groups of girls "exploding in the dressing room" because of a lack of soap and towels—"Gee! They sure treat you like dogs here"; a girl sobbing in the washroom over her stolen wages¹⁶ and girls reading union leaflets posted in the washroom during a difficult struggle to organize a clothing factory.¹⁷ Nor were managers insensitive to this threat. As recently as 1944 the Women's Bureau of the UAW passed a resolution complaining about company spies, who tried "to see if women were loitering about restrooms."¹⁸

Every taboo on something shameful has the potential for rebellion written in it: if what my body does must be kept secret, then I can use that opportunity to keep other things I do secret also. Taboos on women's activities while they menstruate cut two ways. In Anglo or European history, the taboos were based on beliefs that menstruating women cause meat to go bad, wine to turn, and bread dough to fall. In Cambridgeshire, well into this century, menstruating women could not touch milk, fresh meat, or pork being salted, lest it go bad.¹⁹ Sim-

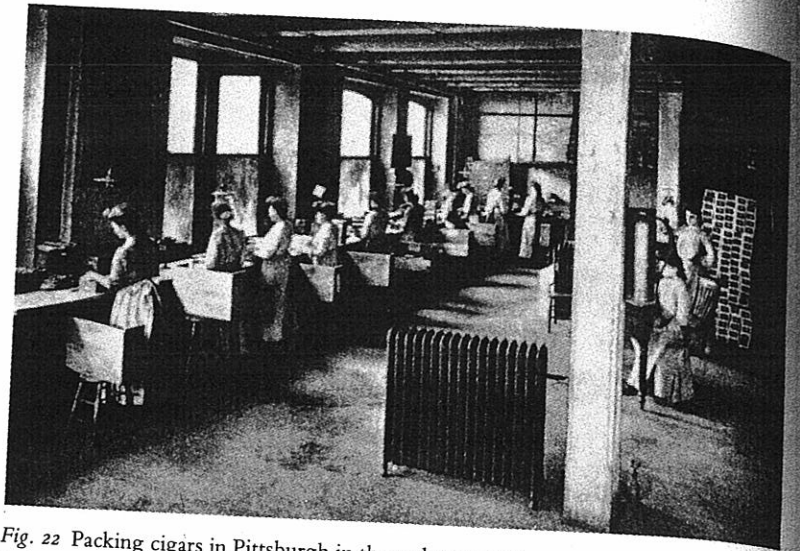


Fig. 22 Packing cigars in Pittsburgh in the early twentieth century. (Butler 1909, facing p. 75. Copyright © 1909 by the Russell Sage Foundation. Reprinted by permission of Basic Books, Inc., Publishers.)

ilarly, elsewhere in Europe, menstruating women could not touch wine or virtually anything else on the table: salted pork, a newly killed pig, salad dressing, mayonnaise, preserves, sauerkraut, pickles, or bread.²⁰ In a contemporary Welsh village, similar restrictions govern menopausal women.²¹ These restrictions are usually put forth as evidence of the ways women have been kept from acting freely in society, as a result of men's horror of the products of the uterus.²² I think an alternative account can be derived from the relationship between these taboos and the kind of work women were expected to do. In societies such as these, in which one of women's preeminent work duties was (and is) the preparation of food for the table (salting pork, salting vegetables, making bread, cooking meat and vegetables and serving it all), these taboos could very easily be perceived as providing a woman a welcome vacation.²³ After all, if she cannot touch the food to make her family's meal lest it go bad, she is automatically relieved of a large part of her daily tasks.

In other societies, similar "restrictions" are upheld by women. In China, a woman who has borne a child must stay in her room and eat only nourishing foods for a month afterward because she is "unclean" for that length of time. Although women chafe at the confinement,



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Fig. 23 A lunch room for workers in a cigar factory in Pittsburgh in the early twentieth century. (Butler 1909, facing p. 311. Copyright © 1909 by the Russell Sage Foundation. Reprinted by permission of Basic Books, Inc., Publishers.)

they regard this period positively specifically because it is free of work. I was told many sad tales of desperately poor families who were unable to free a new mother from work for this long, and the dire consequences to her health that followed from her inability to regain her strength. If we are to describe a menstrual "taboo" as restrictive on women's behavior we must be sure to distinguish activities she longs for from those she is gladly rid of, at least for a time. We must also be careful to distinguish between domestic unwaged labor and waged labor, for when taboos like these are used to keep women out of whole occupations, such as dairying, winemaking, or silkmaking, the relationship between menstruation and work is very different.²⁴

Although women easily recognize that menstruation and the world outside the home are incompatible, no women discussing the hassle and mess went so far as to ask why the outside world does not legitimate the functions of women's bodies.²⁵ Academics do not always manage this either. In her insightful study, Kristin Luker describes the very different relationships that pro- and anti-abortion women have to waged labor. She sees this split as a clash of worldviews, those on the one side valuing the contributions they make through their jobs in the outside society and setting reproduction aside, those on the other side valuing the contribution they make through their reproductive roles

and setting outside production aside, in part because they are not able to get very rewarding jobs.²⁶

Important as Luker's insights are, I think it is crucial to put these worldviews in a broader context of institutional power, asking why the workplace in this country is so incompatible with women's reproductive roles. Compared with other major industrial countries, the United States is extreme in the extent to which its institutions make productive and reproductive roles incompatible. In 1919 and again in 1952 the International Labor Organization (ILO) in Geneva drafted desirable standards for minimum maternity benefits for women workers, "including six weeks' mandatory leave after the birth of a child, six additional weeks' optional leave, a guarantee that a woman can reclaim her job at the end of the leave, and a cash allowance to assure healthy maintenance of the newborn infant." Although only eight European countries have adopted the ILO's specific conventions, most have guaranteed some minimum leave of absence with job security and cash benefits at some level.²⁷

The United States is alone among all major industrial countries in its lack of a national insurance plan that pays medical expenses for childbirth. "It is one of the few governments in industrialized nations that does not provide any cash benefits to working women to compensate for lost earnings. Only in October 1978, after a two-year legislative battle, did the federal government enact legislation to guarantee that a working woman who bears a child is entitled to sick-leave benefits ordinarily provided by her employer."²⁸ This lack of institutional support in the United States makes it very difficult for women to be whole people—productive and reproductive at the same time. "Employers object to women's desire to have their cake and eat it, to reproduce and to go on earning . . . This desire is considered unrealistic, but in fact, the only way to be realistic in the world of work is to be a man."²⁹

Luker puts the dilemma of the anti-abortion activist eloquently:

Once an embryo is defined as a child and an abortion as the death of a person, almost everything else in a woman's life must "go on hold" during the course of her pregnancy: any attempt to gain "male" resources such as a job, an education, or other skills must be subordinated to her uniquely female responsibility of serving the needs of this newly conceived person.³⁰

Of course, some women might define their needs while pregnant as all-consuming no matter what, but the current structure of work-

places in the United States does not easily allow any woman to live with her bodily functions, whether she be menstruating or pregnant.

If the shame and disgust attached to menstruation by the larger society sometimes allow women to escape their usual roles and act without the scrutiny of men, the positive feelings women themselves have about menstruation also allow them to act in their own behalf, not just as members of private families inside the home. The primary positive feeling many women have about menstruation is that it defines them as a woman. Part of the meaning of first menstruation is often a transition from girlhood to womanhood: "I remember wanting it so badly. You feel like you're not a woman but you know you're starting to be a woman and it's something that sets you apart from being a little girl" (Lisa Miner). "My mother said that I was becoming a woman, and that really got to me, so I said, 'Am I a woman now?'" (Kathleen Reardon). Mothers and sisters often greet the event with "You're a woman now!"

Sometimes the defining characteristic is closely linked with being able to have babies: "All women have it. I'm glad I'm female and that I have it because I can have babies" (Julie Morgan). But other times the defining characteristic is equally important apart from the potential to reproduce: "If a person doesn't want to have children, that's fine, but you still have to be a woman. I'm sure you could stop menstruation but I don't see any point" (Linda Ansell). Over and over again, women found different ways of saying, "No, I don't want to give it up, it's part of my self, part of what makes me a woman": "That's part of being a woman, you wouldn't want to get rid of it" (Mara Lenhart). "Sometimes I wish that I didn't have to have my period. I think everyone wishes that. But I've just gotten so much more attached to myself as a woman, it just seems so integral, I don't resent it anymore. If women didn't have to have periods, and nothing else would change, then that would be a wonderful thing. If someone said that to me individually, I'd have second thoughts. It would be nice to not have to get my period, because it's painful and changes my moods, but it seems necessary, it's supposed to happen. [Necessary?] Women get their periods and I'm a woman so I should get my period, that's what I mean by necessary" (Linda Ansell). "When I have it I think, I'm a woman, this is proof, that I get my period" (Shelly Levinson).

This common identity can often become the basis of common action. "It joins you together. It's like the one thing that all women have

in common. It's great if your friend has a Midol" (Lisa Miner). Women who are relatively late starting menstruation feel acutely the difference it makes to be a part of a menstruating group:

I remember girls used to always sit around and talk about having periods, whether you used tampons, teaching others to use tampons. Girls who had their periods longer taught girls who didn't use tampons how to use them. In junior high school, I felt so bad I didn't have it, I was left out from all this discussion. I had to keep quiet, I couldn't talk about it. So I felt when I got it, it allowed me to join these discussions and talk about using tampons, and getting cramps. It was all very important, all a part of being a junior in high school. (Shelly Levinson)

The first time I had my period I was so happy that I remember singing in the bathroom, "You are a big girl now." I was so anxious to have my period because I always hung out with older kids and they had been through this and they had napkins and I always felt like such a baby. I would pretend and I would tell them that I was having my period now too. So when it finally happened I didn't have to pretend anymore. (Gina Billingsly)

Another woman ran to tell her friends in the school cafeteria that her period had just started: "They said, 'Wow, that's great,' and they bought me some ice cream and it was a really fun experience. When the last person in our group got her period we were all like a team" (Rachel Lehman).³¹

A part of feeling joined together as women is feeling different from all men. Anne Frank spoke of menstruation as her "sweet secret," and women I interviewed also spoke of it as a "secret," especially from men.³² "I would walk around during the day and think that they didn't know, like a secret" (Shelly Levinson). Men were said to "have no concept of it" and often to completely misunderstand the process. Women found it hilarious to recount their discovery of these misunderstandings: a man who thought *all* women menstruated on the twenty-eighth day of the month because the calendar in his textbook had the twenty-eighth day marked and the man who thought all women menstruated for twenty-eight *days*!

Many women expressed the wish that men could menstruate for at least one cycle so they would know what it is like. For some this may come from the realization that when men do think about it they think it would be "horrible, the worst thing that could happen" (Tania Parrish) or disgusting. When women talk about the disgusting mess or the discomfort, they do so with an implicit, often unstated understanding that there is another side to the process: it is part of what

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defines one as a woman, and it is something all women share, even if what we share is talking about the problem of dealing with this disgusting mess. When women hear men say it's horrible or disgusting, they know full well that men are in no way appreciating the other side. So wishing they could experience it may be a way of wishing they could consider the process in totality, not in part.

Descriptions of menstruation as a "hassle" and as a mark of womanhood stretch across all interviews. Other aspects differ markedly by class. It is clear that women construct the significance of menstruation in terms of the range of opportunities open to them and their expectations about how they will make use of them. In response to the question "How do you think you'd feel about being pregnant?" a middle-class teenager said, "If tomorrow, I'd be real scared. I've kinda thought about that, I can't say what exactly I'd do. I'd be extremely scared. I would talk to my sister about it, my mother. I'd consider abortion, I'd be real scared" (Kristin Lassiter). Other women, older but also middle class, express their determination to menstruate for years before pregnancy. "I know I personally would want to have children, I don't really have fears about it, I just don't, unless it happened to me tomorrow, which it won't (Linda Ansell). "In the short term I would be fearful of being pregnant. I suppose at some point in my life I'll want to have children. I don't know when, it's not easy to say. I want to be firmly established. I don't know how I will balance holding a career and having a family. If I became pregnant now I'd have an abortion, but I would hope not to have to" (Mara Lenhart).

In contrast to these remarks by middle-class high school and college students are the accounts of working-class women in a high school specifically for previous dropouts, many of whom already have a child. Although these women are oriented toward college and a career, the colleges they enter will for the most part be local state universities or community colleges, the careers they choose second choices that take into account the lack of family resources: "I think I'd be a good lawyer, but I'd like to work with children, probably as a social worker" (Lisa Stephens).

Some of these girls mention their career plans when asked about pregnancy, just as the middle-class girls do: [What kind of birth experience would you want?] "It all depends on how my life would be five, six years from now. It all depends on the future" (Sandy Hammond). [Overall how do you feel about menstruating?] "At times I feel it's the best thing that's happening. If I'm coming on my period it means I'm not pregnant. I'm glad to see it. [Do you want to have

children?] Yeah, I think after I get my career going. When I can take care of myself, that's when I want a child, when I can take care of him and me" (Kathy Spencer). "I do not and I will not get pregnant at a young age. I want to finish school and make something of myself and have the money to support myself and a child before I do" (Rose Oliver).

For most, a threat to the regular appearance of menstruation or the direct prospect of pregnancy does elicit fear, but only about the event of birth itself.³³ [Any hopes or fears about pregnancy?] "No, I wish I could have a little girl, but I don't want to go through that pain. [If you got pregnant now, what kind of experience would you want to have?] Natural childbirth. I would want somebody [the father] to be in pain too, not just me alone!" (Mary King). [Any hopes and fears about pregnancy?] "I think the only fear I would have is having it. I have heard that it is a nice feeling, but the other side is painful, very painful. It would be nice once it comes out" (Sandy Hammond). And for others, pregnancy is simply desired: "My mother wants me to wait until I am in my twenties to have a child, but I want one now. I want one while I am still young. I don't want to be an old foggy, and be forty when my kid is sixteen. Like my mother, she is 46 and I am 17. I want me and my child to grow up together" (Cathy Roark).

Recent studies have given us important insights into the reasons why childbearing has a different significance for working-class black and white women than it does among the middle class. Carol Stack's study of a poor, black, urban neighborhood stresses the extent to which child begetting is desired as a positive good and the ways in which resources are pooled to care for those children through a variety of overlapping sharing links among kin and households.³⁴ Joyce Ladner has shown how, in the absence of many other resources, sex comes to be seen as a resource poor black teenagers can exchange,³⁵ and Lillian Rubin has made plain how pregnancy, which girls hope will be followed by marriage, leads to one of the very few kinds of "mobility" available to young, white, working-class girls, enabling them to move out of their natal households and establish their own.³⁶

It is hard to miss the implication that where access to the forces and means of production in the society is severely limited, reproduction can be (or can at least appear to be) a way of acting in the world, changing one's life, producing a "resource" to be shared or cherished.³⁷ In her research, Kristin Luker found that the break between pro-choice and anti-abortion activists ran along these lines: pro-choice women regard their fertility as a handicap to their productive roles;

anti-abortion women, because productive roles are less able to be rewarding to them, regard their reproductivity as a resource to which other roles must be made secondary.³⁸ Although most of the activists Luker interviewed were white middle-class women, Ladner has pointed out that poor blacks and the new right share moral disapproval of abortion.³⁹ It seems to me that at least the two extreme ends of the spectrum could be described as pro-production versus pro-reproduction, precisely because of the different relationship women at the two extremes have to the rewards of productive work.

Given this, an interesting question arises. The view of menstruation promulgated by scientific medicine is that it is failed (re)production. Do women whose stake in reproduction differs a lot, along the lines suggested above, also differ in how comfortable they feel about this view of menstruation or how willing they are to believe it? Among middle-class women, both black and white, two questions in the interviews elicited a version of the scientific view of menstruation in every case. The questions were: "What is your own understanding of menstruation?" and "How would you explain menstruation to a young girl who didn't know?" Accounts differed in details, but almost all began immediately with internal organs, structures, and functions.

When you reach puberty, hormones in your body cause your—you have eggs in your ovaries—I'd explain the structures—the hormones in your body cause some of these eggs to ripen and they are released into your fallopian tubes and this is where pregnancy would occur. Your uterus has prepared the lining in case of fertilization and if there is not fertilization then the lining is sloughed off. It comes out in a bloody sort of tissuey substance. (Tania Parrish)

Using the book in front of us, there is the cycle and the pictures. With the egg coming out and going in to nest at the vaginal wall and when it hasn't been, I can't think of the word, by the sperm, it would come out in the form of blood. And I found that very interesting. Waste matter with the blood. I think of it as just blood. The nesting place that is no longer needed. (Margaret Crichton)

Almost all who spoke of internal organs conveyed the sense that the purpose of the whole process is to provide key steps in reproduction, and that if menstruation occurs it is a waste product of an effort that failed: "All the blood that comes out with the egg was sort of like a home for the egg, so if the egg doesn't have to grow bigger into a

baby you just say that it leaves with all that" (Mara Lenhart). "If the egg isn't fertilized there isn't any need for that lining, so the egg leaves the uterus without being fertilized and essentially dies. If the egg isn't implanted then that whole lining comes away and that's the menstruation; it leaves the uterus; it decays and leaves the uterus through the vaginal opening and that's what the period is" (Carolyn Potter). "If you are not pregnant each month your body has to get rid of the waste which is the eggs that are released from the fallopian tubes" (Eileen Windell). The central metaphor of failed production of a baby comes through vividly.

Other middle-class women (particularly high school age women who have heard this story a lot less often than older women) became somewhat uncomfortable in the interview when they couldn't remember to their satisfaction just what body parts were doing what: "Isn't it one egg from each tube every month and it changes, something like that, I don't remember, I don't know all about the stuff that's going on technically" (Julie Morgan). "I'm bad at explaining things. A process of an unfertilized egg, making its way through your fallopian tubes, right? Into the ovary, is it? It's not—it embeds itself into the walls of the ovary and as it doesn't become fertilized, the walls of the ovary which have—I can picture it all but I can't explain it" (Kristin Lassiter). In spite of these hesitations, all of them managed to get out some version of the failed production view.

Later in the interview, many of these women made remarks in passing about how this internal model was not relevant to them.⁴⁰ "When I have my period I don't really think about what's going on inside. I think about what's coming out of me. I don't think, 'The eggs are coming down.' It's just like I have my period and it's gone. Not like in the middle of the month and then: it's about time an egg is making its way into my fallopian tubes—I mean—!" (Kristin Lassiter). "The boys and the girls were separated and we all saw this film, which was so plain and dry in describing the process that you would think that it wasn't going on inside your own body. I thought that it was pretty pointless" (Carla Hessler). "I know all about the exact hormonal changes, but it doesn't really matter to me. Exactly when my luteinizing hormone takes over that part of the cycle isn't as important" (Carolyn Potter).

But despite this kind of dissatisfaction with the medical model, the interviews with middle-class women do not contain more than a glimmer of a different view of menstruation. Only one woman began

(Mara Lenhart). "If the egg dies, so the egg leaves the uterus through the fallopian tubes" (Carolyn Potter). "If you get rid of the waste of a baby comes"

school age women (older women) became when they couldn't remember what they were doing what: and it changes, something about the stuff that's explaining things. through your fallopian tubes it embeds itself into the walls of the uterus, the walls of the uterus can't explain it" (Kris-tem managed to get

side remarks in passing to them.⁴⁰ "When I'm going on inside. I think, 'The eggs are gone. Not like an egg is making an egg' (Lassiter). "The film, which was would think that it was pretty exact hormonal when my lutein isn't as important"

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her answer in a different mode, with what might be called the phenomenology of menstruation:

[How would you explain menstruation to a young girl who knew nothing about it?] What happens in menstruation is that something that looks like blood but isn't in fact because it's darker comes out of your vagina and it—you—it has to be kept clean because otherwise you make a mess. What comes out changes its appearance. You have a flow coming out of your body for anywhere from three to seven days, and it changes. Sometimes it comes out very heavily, you can almost feel it coming out and sometimes it's very light and sometimes it stops during that time. And it changes consistency during the time it comes out. It looks very red and bloody, sometimes it's darker, sometimes it's almost brown. (Shelly Levinson)

This woman proceeded directly to the scientific model, saying that the process is caused by an egg that has died coming out with its fluids. The disjunction between this woman's two versions of menstruation cannot be overemphasized. In her first version, she deals with what menstruation feels like, looks like, smells like, what the immediate experience of being a "menstruator" is like, aspects of the process that are untouched by the medical model.

Even women who describe the scientific view of menstruation and say it is satisfying in one context find themselves at a loss with what it leaves out in another. One woman was given a "pretty good explanation" of "the mechanics" by a friend, her mother, and a fifth-grade sex education class. But when she started menstruating, she had no idea what to do when she went to bed. "I didn't know how you are supposed to cope with it. You change during the day, how could you sleep all night?" (Shelly Levinson). She was very nervous about asking her mother but when she eventually did she was told the flow slows down at night.

This same woman described a "terrible thing that happened" the first time she tried to put in a tampon. She got it in halfway, thought she had to leave it there and "went through a lot of agony that day." Other women struggle desperately to get the practical knowledge needed to insert a tampon (where to insert it, how far, what to do with the applicator) and can make painful mistakes, like leaving the applicator in with the tampon. The few women whose mothers, sisters, or friends take them in the bathroom (or, as in one case, shout through the door) and show them in concrete detail how to do this thing, are moved by the experience: they feel close to the person, indebted to them, and dedicated to teaching others. Aside from the dif-

ficult first rite of inserting a tampon, the middle-class interviews are full of anguish surrounding first periods, when women wonder Is the color of my blood all right? What do I wear? What if I skip a month? How often do I change pads or tampons?

If middle-class women readily incline toward the medical view of menstruation, even though this leads to difficulties dealing with the actualities of menstruating, how do working-class women explain menstruation? There the middle-class pattern is reversed: almost nobody—black or white—came out spontaneously with the failed production model of menstruation, and almost everybody accounted for it either phenomenologically or in terms of a life change. Here are some examples of working-class responses to the question "How would you explain menstruation to a young girl who didn't know anything about it?"

I'd just tell her it's when your body's changing and you're ready to have children. Your body allows you to have children now and it's one of the first steps to becoming a woman. (Valerie Bartson)

Your body's changing. [Is there anything else other than your body's changing?] No. [Your body's changing so does that mean anything to you?] Yeah, well, I think it's when you're on your period; I don't know really. All I know is your body is changing an awful lot. That's all I really know. [Later in the interview the interviewer returns to the same question.] I would say, well, you're gonna get on your period when you are about from nine to twelve and it's like an egg passing through you. It's . . . I couldn't even explain it to myself if I tried to! (Kathy Spencer)

I guess it's a part of your life, growing up. [Could you give a description of menstruation itself?] Yeah. [What would you tell her?] Just red blood. (Patricia Henderson)

I know, right. OK. [Doesn't have to be scientific, just your own understanding.] OK. It comes once a month usually sometimes five to seven days. I know I don't like it. You want to know why it came about or . . . [Just your own feeling of how it comes about or why.] Oh! I don't know really why it came about, I know my mother says if Eve didn't do this then we wouldn't have all these troubles with childbirth and menstruation and stuff like that. That's mostly my understanding, back to Genesis in the Bible, right? (Lisa Stephens)

I would tell her that her menstrual is like one of the worst nightmares. I don't know. I would tell her that it is something that she had to go through. With it comes displeasure because one, your period makes me sick because the blood, it ain't got the best odor in the world and I would tell her to

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check with the pharmacist for the best thing to use. Because tampons can give you toxic syndrome or something. But the Kotex is very uncomfortable. It is like a big bulk. And you feel it close to you and it is an icky feeling. Just like having sex and not going to wash up. And if she has sex she could get pregnant if she wasn't using some kind of protection. (Crystal Scott)

I don't know, it's part of mother nature I guess. I guess I would explain it the same way my mother explained it to me. [Which was?] It's just part of life, your body's changing and you're becoming a woman. (Kathleen Reardon)

I guess to clean out the body. [If there was a little girl who didn't know anything about menstruation and you had to explain it to her, what would you tell her?] I don't know. [Just picture me as being a little kid . . . (Interviewer proceeds to act out the role of a girl asking for information about a friend who had blood in her pants.)] I'd just tell her she came on her period. It's a cycle you go through every month. [What happens?] You bleed. [Why do I bleed?] To clean out your insides. (Jody Kelsey)

I would just tell her there's going to be a time when you're going to start seeing this blood and it's called your menstrual period. Don't be frightened or anything like that, because it's just a sign that you're growing up and becoming a woman. (Cheryl Dinton)

That it is nothing to be afraid of. That was something my mother told me. It is nothing to be afraid of. It is natural, and you have to live with it whether you want to or not. And just keep yourself clean. Make sure you change your pad or whatever you are using . . . [How would you explain what was going on?] Everyone says you are becoming a woman. That is not true, I don't know. You are thirteen years old and you get your period. And it is just something that you have to worry about. If you are fooling around with a guy, I would definitely tell him to make sure he uses something. Because if you miss your period you are in trouble. I guess you are changing into womanhood. It would be hard to explain. [What would you tell her about what was happening inside her body?] I don't know, it is hard to explain. For me I have trouble, you know, trying to explain something. I have trouble putting words together, or trying to think of the right words. (Mary Jo Lasley)

These women share an absolute reluctance to give the medical view of menstruation. This is so in spite of the interviewers' many efforts to give them a variety of opportunities to come up with it and in spite of the fact that all of them have been exposed to it in classes in school. In fact, many of the women mentioned how much attention was paid to menstruation in school: "had films and everything, books and pamphlets given out." In spite of this only two of the working-class

women we interviewed mentioned anything inside the body: "the eggs passing through" and "to clean out your insides." All other responses involved only what a woman sees and feels or the significance it has in her life.

There are many possible explanations of this striking difference between middle-class and working-class women. Some might suggest that the difference occurs simply because working-class women are less exposed to scientific vocabulary, less familiar with the kind of written materials that schools use to disseminate the scientific model, or less able to produce the cultural performance of explaining something in an interview. Yet the interviews make it plain that these women can explain other things with ease and comfort and that they can integrate knowledge gained from books, say about a career they want to pursue.

It strikes me as at least equally likely that these women have simply been more able to resist one aspect of the hegemonic scientific view of women's bodies because it is not meaningful to them or because it is downright offensive, phrased as it is in the negative terms we have seen. The ironies in this are many: middle-class women, much more likely to benefit from investment in the productive system, have swallowed a view of their reproductive systems which sees menstruation as failed production and as divorced from women's own experience. Working-class women, perhaps because they have less to gain from productive labor in the society, have rejected the application of models of production to their bodies. It is striking that in the working-class interviews there is none of the angst that runs through the heart of middle-class interviews: almost no one describes being mystified at the details of menstruating (though they may dislike it), at a loss about the mechanics of taking care of it, or the variety of forms menstruating can take. The working-class woman who told the story in the epigraph for this chapter found her friend's ignorance bizarre and inexplicable. Mothers, grandmothers, sisters, and friends give these women the detailed information and practical knowledge they need: "My mother just told me how to use everything and that was it" (Kelly Morse). "My mother talked for hours the whole day about it" (Mary King).

Now that we have looked at how women talk about menstruation, how do we size up their overall consciousness of scientific and general cultural models? To be sure, there are many instances where women produce the same kind of oppositions between the valued public

world of work and the devalued private world of family we saw in Part One. One woman said, "There should be celebration around menstruation. If done right it could be wonderful! But what would you be celebrating? The ability to bear children? You know there's that whole uselessness part of it, too, if you decide not to bear children" (Meg O'Hara).

But there are other instances in which menstruation is seen as an emblem of women's particular experience of the world, which begins to look very different from the cultural oppositions we laid out in Part One. Even though women do not often imagine it could be otherwise, they experience a reality on a monthly basis that confounds the separate spheres of men and women. They are also able to use this "anomalous" experience as the basis for common action by sharing its griefs, trading equipment, combining knowledge, and using the private spaces necessarily provided in school or work for refuge or rebellion. Beyond this, a portion of these women, working-class women, have a view of this process that runs exactly counter to the scientific model. Here we can learn from each other. Perhaps if we all gave our daughters a phenomenological as well as a medical explanation of menstruation, going into all the little details about how it feels and what you do, maybe we could restore a feeling of wholeness about the process and reduce in and of itself some of the disgust.⁴¹ It may be that part of the impetus behind the alienated language we began with—it happens to me, I go through it, I get it, I am on it—is that women do not feel like menstruation is something they actually do. Articulating the sensory and emotional experience each person has may be a step toward that end.

Over all, middle-class women appear much more "mystified" by general cultural models than working-class women. They have bought the teleological aspect of medical accounts, which sees menstrual flow as waste products of a failed pregnancy and casts it in very negative terms. Within some of the interviews are faint protests: the "uselessness" referred to by Meg O'Hara, the "blindness about the body," or the "ignorance of the uterus" referred to by others. One effect of a teleological functional model is that it allows a set of internal organs to have only one purpose. Yet the woman who wants to bear children, the woman who is a lesbian and does not have sex with men, and the woman who does not want to bear children have vastly different relationships to the potential functions of those organs. By focusing on birth, a function which all female reproductive organs are supposed to fulfill, the medical model and women who accept it tend to

conceal the true unity women have: we menstruate or have menstruated in the past. By making pregnancy the end point for which the system strives (and menstruation a wasteful failure), we come to despise menstruation—the one thing we all share, fertile, infertile, heterosexual, homosexual.⁴² Ironically, in our society the great majority of the time most women are not intending to get pregnant. Most of the time, therefore, the arrival of menstruation could be seen as a welcome sign.

Perhaps we can escape the prevailing cultural view that internal invisible organs and structures in the body are central to menstruation, as the working-class women I interviewed have done. Or perhaps we could reappropriate the functions of those organs to our own ends. Maybe they developed that way because of the exigencies of our natural history, but it need not be the natural history of the species that determines the meaning of those organs and their processes today. If the body really is blind and the uterus ignorant (that is, not possessed of purpose), then—depending on our own purposes—they can just as well be making the life stuff that marks us as women or heralding our nonpregnant state as they can be casting off the hemorrhage of necrotic blood vessels and the debris of endometrial decay.