

BOOK REVIEW

Cosmetics, Fashions, and the Exploitation of Women

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Marx and Makeup

Are women who use cosmetics running-dog lackeys of the sexist-capitalist system? Or is the pursuit of beauty complete with push-up bras, facials, and home permanents the right of every woman, not just the rich? Just what *is* the party line on eyeliner?

These are some of the questions raised in *Cosmetics, Fashions, and the Exploitation of Women* (Pathfinder Press), a collection of articles and letters that appeared in the *Militant*, a socialist newsweekly, in 1954. Ignited by an article by *Militant* editor Joseph Hansen critiquing the then-slumping cosmetics industry's aggressive advertising assault on American women, a debate soon erupted on the proper Marxist analysis of cosmetics. Should working-class women eschew makeup and fashion altogether, thus protesting America's inherently bourgeois standard of beauty, or should we take up the necessary evils of lipstick, mascara, and pressed powder as weapons in the fight for good jobs, men, and positive self-image?

The publication of this debate, along with an introduction by Mary-Alice Waters, a leader of the Socialist Workers Party in the United States, provides a lively and surprisingly timely historical lesson in the ever-raging controversy surrounding women, beauty, and oppression.