



## The case for socialist feminism

Ten years ago the Conservative government, under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher came into office. We know Thatcher's government would be bad for women — what we did not know was how.

At the time the response of feminists, and of the left, was that the Tories would drive women back into the home. Cuts in health, education and social services, it was generally agreed, would not only mean job losses for women employed in those sectors, but would increase the pressure on women to stay at home to look after the old, small children, and the infirm.

For sure Tory cuts have increased the already heavy burden on women. But the effect on women's employment has been the opposite of what we expected. As manufacturing industry has declined relative to the service sector, consequently the proportion of women in the workforce has increased: in the year 1986-87, 42% of all new jobs

were part-time jobs for women. Only 8.6% were full-time jobs for male workers. Indeed, part-time work for women is the fastest-growing area of employment, after self-employment.

Of course, these are part-time jobs, with fewer rights and lower pay. Women's earnings still average only 70% of men's earnings. The areas in which women work are, in general, badly unionised — women's union membership is only 60% of men's.

The labour movement is having to catch up with these changes in order to survive. The TGWU and the GMB have suffered massive drops in membership over the past 10 years, with the erosion of their traditional industrial bases. Both have launched glossy campaigns to attract new layers of workers into membership — particularly targeting women. But though some union regions have done decent work around Link Up (TGWU) and Flare (GMB), these campaigns really amount to little more than piles of flashily-produced bumf.

The Labour Party, and Kinnock's ideological mentors around *Marxism Today*, make much of women's increasing importance in the labour force — but see the changes through rose-tinted spectacles. *Marxism Today* eulogises 'New Times' in which large-scale factory production and 'old style' militant trade unionism are things of the past. Individual consumer advice and flexible working are the order of the day. Kinnock's Policy Reviews hymn the praises of the 'exciting new possibilities' for working at home provided by new technology. Both miss the reality of what this means for most women — low paid, isolated, non-unionised homeworking, with the sewing machine replaced by the VDU.

Meanwhile, local authorities passing on Tory cuts attempt to set worker against worker, arguing that the wages and conditions of women workers can only be improved by attacking those of men.

The case of the local authorities highlights not only changes in the workforce, but the changes which have taken place in feminism over the past decade.

The vibrant, lively, women's movement of the 1970s had, by the end of that decade, dwindled and split into different factions. The radical/cultural feminists retreated into lifestyle personal growth strategies, or radical separatism. The socialist feminists, for a period, had no clear strategy. But the advent of Thatcherism had its repercussions here too.

The abject pro-capitalist Labour government of Wilson/Callaghan directly brought about the victory of Thatcher. The left in the Labour Party was galvanised around the slogan of 'Never Again' a Labour government like the last one. The left organised around democracy and accountability.

Many socialist feminists joined the Labour Party at this time, linking the issues of democracy with the need for the labour movement to be responsive to the needs of women.

Women's sections were transformed from apolitical fund-raising groups to active, campaigning organisations.

These developments were very positive. Women's issues became

part of the labour left's agenda. But, ultimately, the fusion of socialist feminism and municipal socialism was not to be a good thing for labour movement-oriented women's politics.

The debacle of the labour left in local government, and the inadequate politics of the socialist feminists have led us up a blind alley.

Today, the dominant feminism in Britain is a variety of cultural feminism with a bureaucratic bent. Much of what passes for socialist feminism is simply cultural feminism in a labour movement environment.

This pamphlet attempts to put forward an alternative socialist feminism, a socialist feminism based on an understanding of the links between sex oppression and class exploitation. We examine the history of the Marxist movement and women, and attempt to unravel the themes of modern Anglo-American cultural feminism.

We attempt to do this not as sectarian critics outside of the movement, but in the spirit of revitalising and re-orienting women's politics. We still need a women's movement, but we do not want to repeat past mistakes. We hope that this pamphlet will clarify the experience of the past decade, and help to provide the basis for the re-founding of a fighting socialist-feminism in Britain.

## The origins of women's oppression

In *The Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, Engels set out to investigate the pre-historic roots of women's oppression and thus to answer those who claimed that women's inferior status was part of the natural order of things.

Drawing heavily on the work of anthropologist Lewis H Morgan, Engels argued that a "predominance of women generally obtained in primitive times". Its "material foundation" was "the communist household", headed by women because descent could only be reckoned with certainty through the mother in this era before each woman was tied to only one man.

What Engels saw as changing this was the domestication of animals and the breeding of herds. Human groups no longer lived hand to mouth. They could now possess fixed wealth. "But to whom did this new wealth belong? Originally, undoubtedly, to the gens (kin group). But private property in herds must have developed at a very early stage...On the threshold of authenticated history we find that everywhere the herds are already the separate property of the (male) family chiefs." Wealth came into the hands of *men* because of a sex-

ual division of labour which had existed previously without implying male domination. "According to the division of labour then prevailing in the family, the procuring of food and the implements necessary thereto, and therefore also, the ownership of the latter, fell to the man... Thus, according to the custom of society at that time, the man was also the owner of the new sources of foodstuffs — the cattle..."

The fact that human labour could now produce a surplus above what was immediately needed for subsistence also gave an impulse to make slaves of prisoners taken in war. These slaves, too, belonged to men. "As wealth increased it, on the one hand, gave the man a more important status in the family than the woman and, on the other hand, created a stimulus to utilise this strengthened position in order to overthrow the traditional order of inheritance in favour of his children." So 'mother-right' — the reckoning of descent and inheritance through the mother — was replaced by inheritance in the male line. "We know nothing as to how this revolution was effected" — but it happened.

And: "The overthrow of mother-right was the world-historic defeat of the female sex. The man seized the reins in the house also, the woman was degraded, enthralled, the slave of the man's lust, a mere instrument for bearing children." Women thus became the first oppressed class. "However, within this structure of (primitive) society based on ties of sex, the productivity of labour develops more and more: with it, private property and exchange, differences in wealth, the possibility of utilising the labour power of others, and thereby the basis of class antagonisms... until, finally, the old society, based on ties of sex, bursts asunder in the collision of the newly-developed social classes; in its place a new society emerges, constituted as a state... a society in which the family system is entirely dominated by the property system..."

Recorded history — the history of class struggles — shows the continuing effects of the 'world-historic defeat of the female sex' interwoven with, and subordinated to, class relations of exploitation. Engels himself pointed to a gap in his account, saying that he knew nothing about *how* mother-right had been replaced by the dominance of the father. His pioneering effort also calls for revision or supplementing on at least three other points.

First, later researches have established that matrilineality — reckoning of descent through the mother — by no means necessarily means female dominance. In fact most researchers, bourgeois and Marxist alike, reckon that no period of female dominance ever existed.

Second, how did human society crystallise out into kin groups and finally into families? Engels, following Johann Bachofen, saw this as "brought about essentially by the women", who found sex with many men "degrading and oppressive" and "longed fervently" for the right to "temporary or permanent marriage with one man only". This view seems to contradict the thesis of original female dominance: it is unsatisfactory in its own terms (why should such an attitude on the part of women lead to the complicated marriage rules of primitive

peoples?); and, above all, it is plainly based on inaccurate, culturally-conditioned assumptions about biology. Engels also assumes that men naturally preferred promiscuity.

Third, Engels leaves unexplained why the sexual division of labour was such that acquiring cattle was man's job, or indeed, why there was a formal sexual division of labour at all. All known societies have *some* sexual division of labour — though what this division is, and how rigid it is, varies — but why?

In *The Second Sex* Simone de Beauvoir accepts the view of modern anthropologists such as Claude Levi-Strauss that men have always dominated. Relations between the sexes are in a state of tension, and it is not surprising that one should seek to establish dominance over the other. Man defines himself as the norm of 'mankind', and woman as the 'other'. That women should be the sex to be subjugated is facilitated by her biological functions. Childbirth, suckling, and menstruation made her heavily dependent on men for protection and food in the earliest societies. Women thus had no opportunity to participate fully in 'real existence'.

"The domestic labours which fell to her lot because they were reconcilable with the cares of maternity imprisoned her in repetition and immanence: they were repeated from day to day in an identical form, which was perpetuated almost without change from century to century; they produced nothing new." Man, however, went out into the world on hunting expeditions. He set out to master nature in order to change it. Also, hunting was dangerous. De Beauvoir writes: "It is not in giving life but in risking life that man is raised above the animal."

In these earliest societies, however, women were not "put upon and bullied as happened later under paternalistic auspices. No institution ratified the inequality of the sexes..." De Beauvoir thus gives no credence to the idea that the institutions of male dominance are natural and inevitable. Women's biological functions were "a terrible handicap in the struggle against a hostile world" in the earliest societies, but they need not be in industrial society. "Woman was dethroned," writes de Beauvoir, "by the advent of private property and her lot through the centuries has been bound up with private property; her history in large part is involved with that of the patrimony" (the property handed down from father to son).

De Beauvoir's account of the earliest societies, however, depends a great deal on abstract reasoning, and cuts a few corners. Contrary to de Beauvoir's assertion that women "produced nothing new", women were responsible for advances in horticulture, pottery, etc. De Beauvoir herself later acknowledged problems: "As for the content, I should take a more materialistic position today in the first volume. I should base the notion of woman as *other* and the Manichean argument it entails not on an idealistic and a priori struggle of consciences, but on the facts of supply and demand..."

A recent volume, *Women's Work, Men's Property*, edited by Stephanie Coontz and Peta Henderson, summarises more recent

Marxist investigations. Coontz and Henderson themselves locate the origins of women's subordination in the development of a form of property, kin corporate property, which is not true private property — being owned by a kin-group in common, but not accessible to members of other kin groups. This new form of property interacts with the pre-existing sex division of labour, and with marriage/residence rules, to produce societies in which women's oppression is institutionalised.

Coontz and Henderson consider that "there is no evidence for a matriarchal stage in human history." Matrilineal societies — where descent is reckoned from the mother — may well be male-dominated. Coontz and Henderson place the origins of male domination earlier than Engels, though not as early as de Beauvoir. They also, however, dispute the orthodox view of modern anthropology that male domination is universal. There have been, they say, societies in which men and women were equal. There was a sexual division of labour, but women's work had no lower status than men's.

The earliest human societies were communally organised subsistence economies, in which informal rules about returning gifts ensured that everyone had enough to live on. Both matrilocal and patrilocal groups existed — groups where either men married into a woman's kin-group, or women married into a man's kin-group. All known human societies, it seems, have rules about 'exogamy'. That is, they are divided up into kin-groups, and men and women are obliged to marry outside their kin-group. Such rules and structures are considered by anthropologists of the school of Levi-Strauss to be the most basic and fundamental features of human society.

Lila Leibowitz, in Coontz and Henderson's book, argues, however, that the rules and structures of exogamy are generated by the development of *production*. The crucial step was the beginning of the use of projectiles in hunting and of fire. This greatly expanded the range of human products, and also the amount of skill needed for different jobs — both hunting, and processing the animals caught. Specialisation of labour arose, and also exchange between groups. (It is not clear, but Leibowitz seems to refer to ritual exchange rather than barter).

In the very earliest human groups, Leibowitz argues, there may have been *no* sexual division of labour. But as specialisation arose, biological factors tended to direct men towards specialisation in hunting, and women towards specialisation in processing the results of the hunt. This division of labour was still, however, not necessarily rigid. With the rise of exchange of products between groups, there also emerged the exchange of *people* between groups (in marriage). This made the sexual division of labour rigid, because each group had to be able to be sure that a man marrying in, or a woman marrying in, would have predictable skills.

Evelyn Reed, in *Women's Evolution*, offers a completely different account. She defends the matriarchy thesis. And she argues that exogamy rules evolved together with prohibitions against cannibalism.

Both were part of the process by which the human species became human, recognising itself as a species distinct from others. Sex within the kin-group was tabooed because of the violent character of primitive male sexuality which women sought to restrain in the interest of perpetuating the species.

Be that as it may, kin-groups and a sexual division of labour in which women's work is mostly at home while men range more widely, for example to hunt, are common features of primitive societies. Coontz and Henderson undertake to show how male dominance emerged from such societies. They consider that the question of *matrilocality* or *patrilocality* — whether a man goes to live with a woman's kin-group, or vice versa — is crucial, rather than *matrilineality* or *patrilineality* — descent reckoned through the mother or the father.

As a surplus began to be produced, argue Coontz and Henderson, the mechanisms of reciprocal gift-giving which had previously safeguarded equality now began to work in the opposite direction. The group which got the biggest catch in the hunt would lay on feasts for other groups. This in turn drew in pledges of goods, labour and wives. *Wives*, rather than husbands, because the groups with the greatest potential for expansion were those which were *patrilocal*.

Because men were the hunters, men brought in more *variable wealth*. The produce of women's work was very much for immediate distribution and consumption — it was not wealth. But in matrilocal groups the 'male' goods were reallocated back to the kin-groups of the individual men (their sisters, etc.), rather than staying within the kin-group. Patrilocal groups concentrated men from the same lineage, and consequently concentrated their goods.

So differentiation between kin-groups emerged, with the patrilocal groups at the top of the heap. Historically, this is backed up by evidence that matrilocal groups remained static whereas patrilocal groups expanded. Women in patrilocal groups were non-owning producers. As the surplus increased, more women were needed to process it. Patrilocal groups had an advantage there, too: the men dominating those groups could apply pressure to the women, non-owning producers, to increase their labour.

Patrilocal groups further encouraged hierarchy *among men*: senior men controlled junior men's access to wives. More powerful men claimed numerous wives. The in-marrying woman's kin-group ceased to have control over her, and she became subordinate to men.

Conquest of weaker groups, and slavery, also developed. As true *class* societies emerged from this process, kin-based kingdoms arose. In these there was a general subordination and denigration of women, but it seems that aristocratic women did play an important role in maintaining the social order. With the overthrow of aristocratic clan rule, and the institution of a civil state, with laws, even aristocratic women lost their privileges, and civil state functionaries took over their political functions. Women were rigidly confined to the home, as in ancient Athens and in Islamic society.

Nicolle Chevillard and Sebastian Leconte (in the same volume) agree with Coontz and Henderson about patrilocal groups proving economically superior to matrilineal groups. From patrilocal groups, they say emerge 'lineage societies' which do not have classes in the modern sense, or state machines, but in which women are acutely oppressed, having to do practically all the work while the men do little but make war. These 'lineage societies' will conquer and supplant more egalitarian societies. But Chevillard and Leconte disagree with Coontz and Henderson about how patrilocal groups emerged. For Coontz and Henderson it was a gradual economic process: Chevillard and Leconte argue that at least in some pioneering cases patrilocality was established by a violent struggle of men against women.

To reconstruct the whole story of how male domination emerged, in detail, is difficult, probably impossible, because the factual evidence available is fragmentary. But some things are clear.

Women's oppression is not dictated by nature. And it is not the result of a male conspiracy, of a cataclysmic sex war. It arose out of the dynamics of development of early societies — the same dynamics which led to the development of classes, states, and private property.

Since then, class and sex oppression have been intertwined and interdependent. A programme for proletarian revolution and real working-class democracy must have the participation of women at its core. The overthrow of capitalism will not immediately mean the liberation of women. But it will cut the roots of sex oppression, which will wither away with the development of a classless society.



## Capitalism, socialism and women

On the face of it, there is no necessary relation between women's liberation and socialism. Many socialists are sexist, and many feminists are anti-socialist. Logically, why shouldn't common ownership of the means of production be combined with sexual discrimination, or private ownership with equality? The issue cannot be handled by abstract logic, but only by starting off from facts and history.

Women have been oppressed for thousands of years. Possibly they resisted the beginnings of this oppression with violence. For sure individual women have always kicked back and stood up for themselves. But the *programme of women's liberation* dates from capitalist society. Mary Astell put it like this in 1706, linking women's liberation to the democratic manifesto of the bourgeois revolution: "Is it not partial in men in the last degree to contend for and practise that arbitrary dominion in their families which they abhor and exclaim against in the state?...If all men are born free, how is it that all women are born slaves?"

Capitalism continued the oppression of women, but changed it. In

the old patriarchal household, women were domestic slaves. But the division of labour and the relations of power were all worked out within the household, which existed for the outside world only through the head of the household, the man. Capitalism brought women into the labour force as independent individuals. However underpaid and overworked the woman factory or office worker, in the workplace she is not part of any man's household, but an independent person. In line with this, capitalist laws have given at least a measure or a promise of formal equality to women.

The underpinning of women's oppression in most societies has been the family property or plot of land, handed down from father to son. The woman is an indispensable part of the family — for children are economically necessary — but a secondary one. Jewish, Hindu, Islamic and Christian ideologies all defined women as subordinate. Traditional Chinese usage bound women's feet. Ancient Greece was particularly ruthless in imprisoning women in the home. Roman law recognised women only as dependents of fathers or brothers. Ancient codes of law punished female adultery severely while not touching male adultery.

Probably feudal Western Europe was, of all major pre-capitalist civilisations, the least harsh in its oppression of women. The sexual division of labour was not rigid. Women workers were frequently paid the same as men for the same work. Women, though their economic activity was much more centred on the home than men's, played a large role in social life. They dominated important trades, as for example the alewives dominated brewing in medieval England. A widow could engage in trade as more or less the equal of men. Women at the head of convents were important people. Still, women were clearly subordinate. They could not hold any public offices. Even guilds of tradeswomen were headed by men. Generally they could not appear as independent persons in court. Rape, for example, was defined by law not as an attack on a woman's body, but as a crime against a man's property; and lords could rape peasant women with impunity. Women inherited property only exceptionally, and in such cases the property was likely to be seen as dowry for a future husband rather than as a basis for the woman's independence. The household headed by the father was the norm on which society was based; and for each individual woman the best available course was to find a 'good' husband.

Oppression does not always, by any means, produce rebellion; and the oppression of women in feudal times produced no women's rebellion. There was no arena where women could gather collectively, as independent persons. Oppression produced not rebellion but a search for consolations, as in the medieval Catholic cult of the Mother of God.

Industrial capitalism did not abolish women's old household drudgery, far from it. But the nature of housework was changed. It became a sphere sharply separated off from social labour, rather than closely intermingled with it. In the old order, the household was the

basic economic unit. Most production was done in or around the home. Under the new industrial capitalist order, the centre of production was the factory, outside the home, bringing together people from thousands of different households.

But the new factory system was not self-contained. The job of transforming the exhausted, dirty and hungry worker at the end of one day's work into a fresh, clean and fit person, ready for labour the following morning, was left outside it. So was the upbringing of children. Seizing upon the subordination of women which it inherited from older societies, capitalism imposed this 'housework' on women. The natural role of women in childbirth solidified the allocation.

The state has taken on a few parts of the work (schools, nurseries). Some labour-saving devices have been introduced for the home. Yet average hours of housework are still reckoned today at about 70 a week — though in fact housework merges into (and blights) life, while wage-labour is sharply separated from it. Despite the fact that more and more housewives are also wage-workers, there is no sure evidence that hours of housework are decreasing. Unlike wage-labour, housework is structurally cut off from the labour-saving benefits of cooperation and (above a certain point) of mechanisation.

This burden of housework has become the basis for the whole elaborate structure of women's disadvantage in capitalist society, including the relegation of women to lower-paid wage-jobs modelled on their domestic roles, the organisation of labour without regard for women's special needs and problems (periods, maternity, etc.). It is structurally impossible to remove the burden within capitalism. State provision will always be limited because it is not profitable and because capitalism is inherently an individualistic system (families would not want to socialise all their housework under capitalism even if the capitalist state provided facilities). Enlightenment, feminist protests, and conscience can drive men to take over more of housework, but all evidence suggests that such a process of purely moral reform is and must be very limited in its effects.

Thus capitalism keeps women oppressed. In some respects it even worsens their situation. But the replacement of the old order of god-given hierarchies and social stagnation by a new society which is fluid, which preaches the abstract equality of all people, and which changes itself constantly with the aid of science, contained a huge potential for women to demand and get better conditions. The relegation of the household to a secondary place in the economy likewise opened the way for women to become workers as independent persons. The coming of capitalism was tremendously progressive for women.

Under capitalism, as Marx commented (*Capital*, Vol.1), "the notion of human equality" for the first time "acquires the fixity of a popular prejudice". This is because of the basic economic structure of capitalism, geared around formally equal individuals in the marketplace and not, like all previous class societies, founded upon relations of personal dominion.

Many men, of course, wanted to restrict this notion of human

equality to males. "It might well have been expected that the (French) Revolution would change the lot of women. It did nothing of the sort. That middle-class Revolution was respectful of middle-class institutions and it was accomplished almost exclusively by men...Middle-class women were too well integrated in the family to feel any definite solidarity as a sex; they did not constitute a separate caste capable of imposing claims...Women who...could have taken part in events were prevented from doing so on account of their class (the working class), (but) those belonging to the active class were condemned to stand aside as being women." (Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, pp.139-41).

But women were similar to men in all the basic human attributes on grounds of which human equality was claimed. The biological differences between the sexes had no bearing on the basic argument for equality. Thus, as early as 1789 the French Revolution prompted Olympe de Gouges to produce a 'Declaration of the Rights of Woman' alongside the 'Declaration of the Rights of Man'. Capitalism irresistibly impelled women to demand equality.

Capitalism makes the promise of equality, and incites the demand for equality, but beyond a certain point its roots in the family household make it incapable of satisfying those demands and those promises. That is why the movement for women's liberation is a child of capitalism, but potentially a tremendous force for anti-capitalist revolution.

## What can socialism do?

Socialism can socialise housework and thus release the drive to equality generated by capitalism. But if it can, why should it do so? Why should the working class be expected to be responsive to feminist demands? For sure the capitalist class will not be. Not even the women of the capitalist class will be. Beyond some formal legal reforms, which have their limits, women's equality is *expensive* to capitalism. It also threatens capitalism politically, by mobilising 50% of the working class out of passivity. The women of the capitalist class are integrated into and depend on their households. They will not sacrifice their income, and ultimately the whole system of privilege they rest on, to sex solidarity. Besides, they have the material means to evade the burden of housework, the hard core of the oppression which bears down on the working class woman.

Working class men gain materially from sexism. But their position is different. Whatever the annoyances of women refusing the role of submissive housewife, the overall programme of socialism and women's liberation offers a levelling *up* to both working class men and women, whereas for women of the capitalist class it means catastrophe.

Short-term interests divide the working class in many ways — skill-

ed versus unskilled, employed versus unemployed, permanent workers versus temporaries, natives versus immigrants, and so on, as well as men versus women. Yet it is possible in struggle to overcome those divisions and unite round a common long-term programme. The experience of working together in the factory or office and in the strike can make working class men come to support the measures needed to give women full equality.

It is not automatic; of course not. But over 50% of the working class are women. They can be expected to respond to demands for women's liberation; and then they will put a very powerful pressure on working class men to support those demands. It is hardly conceivable that they should not succeed at least to a large extent. Dozens, hundreds and thousands of households can break up because the man obstinately resists the woman's attempts to enlighten. Can we imagine the majority of the working class breaking up into two camps unable to communicate with each other, men and women? No: if working class women become sufficiently mobilised for their own emancipation, they will pull the men along with them. The miners' strike showed us how.

Working class women are not yet sufficiently mobilised. The working class is still sexist. Yet in almost every case the fact is that the working class movement is more enlightened on women's issues than the capitalist parties. Even the most hidebound social-democratic or Stalinist party, the most bureaucratised trade union movement, will be more radical than its ruling-class opponents.

Our day-to-day concern, of course, is usually to denounce the limits of that radicalism, yet it is a fact worth thinking about. The Labour Party supports abortion rights (hypocritically); the Tories oppose them. The trade unions pursue claims for equal pay (sluggishly); the employers oppose them. Why is it not the other way round? There are basic social pressures which drive the working class and women's liberation towards an alliance, pressures which make themselves felt dimly even despite the inertia of the most conservative leadership.

## Socialisation of housework

The demand for the socialisation of housework, and particularly of childcare, for the "abolition of the family" is one which often calls to mind the idea of a rigidly structured, regimented, impersonal society. Even many socialists have a rather ambivalent attitude about the spectre of "24 hour concentration camps for children". Hardly, surprising, really. In capitalist society, forms of social organisation which are quite historically specific assume the appearance of timeless truths — even strands of modern feminism assume something mystical and essential about the mother-child bond.

Moreover, in many ways, the family provides for the human needs which are missing in outside society. In an increasingly impersonal, violent, often alien world, the family provides love, refuge and per-



sonal warmth — it is the heart of a heartless world. Not surprising then that the notion of “abolishing” this fills many with horror!

But there is another side to this. The “labour of love” which a wife performs often willingly for husband and children — wanting to see them well fed, clothed and cared for, is in essence a boring, mindless continuous round of cooking, washing, cleaning, washing-up which never ends. Once you’ve finished, you start all over again. What is performed out of love produces a fit labour force for capitalism to make its profits out of. And for many women and children the home can be little better than a prison. Wife-beating, child abuse (both mental and physical), rape, incest — all take place within the four walls of the domestic idyll. The power-relations within the family, where “the man is the bourgeois, the wife the proletarian”, where children are deprived of the most basic rights, reproduce the power-relations within society as a whole. As Marx said in the *Communist Manifesto*: “The bourgeois claptrap about the family and education, about the hallowed co-relation between parent and child, becomes all the more disgusting the more, by the action of Modern Industry, all family ties among the proletarians are torn asunder, and their children transformed into simple articles of commerce and instruments of labour.” The hypocrisy of bourgeois values, which shout for the tightening of family ties, the importance of the nuclear family to children, in fact reinforce the very inequality of power which leads to rape, child abuse, etc.

But do we want to simply “abolish the family”? In the *Revolution Betrayed*, Trotsky said: “We cannot simply abolish the family; we have to replace it.” Socialism does not intend to rip families forcibly assunder (though doubtless in a revolutionary period traditional ties will be loosened, and different relationships formed), but to remove the economic and social constraints which force men and women to maintain relationships they no longer want, which tie the women to home and childcare. With the provision of good quality social facilities, creches, etc., with the development of building programmes which do not design houses around traditional small family units, individuals will have the freedom to choose how they live, what relationships they form, children will have more freedom to form a variety of relationships through choice, not pure necessity. We cannot crystal ball gaze and prescribe exactly how people will live — presumably there will be a variety of forms. But we do know that this will be based on a real choice.

The family as we know it is a historically specific thing. Often the traditional man, woman, two kids, cat and dog model doesn’t correspond with reality. It never really has done. In previous societies, families were very different, broader things than they are now. Even today, in the Israeli Kibbutz, childcare is very different from in the stereotype family. The key is to break from the confines of the narrow view of relationships which bourgeois society imposes on us and to look at things in a historical perspective. Our programme is for a society based on choice rather than naked economic compulsion.



## Wages for housework

The demand for wages for housework, re-raised in the 1970s by the likes of Zelma James and Mariquisa Della Costa, has in fact been around for a long time. In the early socialist movement it was put forward by the followers of Lassalle, as part of their strategy of driving



women out of factory production (by organising strikes of male workers to do it, if necessary), so that the working man could have a nice cosy family home to return to at the end of a hard day at work. It was based on the premise of natural male/female spheres — man as a social being, woman as the domestic nurturer and carer. It was a plainly reactionary demand, and completely utopian — ignoring the actual social dynamics which were, like it or not, taking women more and more into waged work. It would seem obvious that all socialists and feminists would oppose it.

However, in the mid-1970s, the demand re-emerged again in the women's movement. At its most radical, it purported to be part of a strategy to get society, and women themselves, to acknowledge that work in the home was *work* — not simply a wifely/motherly duty, performed for love. Women, by being paid a wage, were thus supposed to be given the power to refuse housework, or to organise together to set up their own communal structures, thus undermining capitalist society from within.

Exactly how this was imagined to happen is unexplained. Presumably if women were to be paid a wage for housework, the state would want, by some method, to make sure they were actually doing it. Working, according to most figures, about 70 hours a week — and for women with young children this expands to 24 hours a day — it stretches the imagination a little to see where women could find the time to go off and set up these community organisations.

More fundamentally, the demand essentially locates women's problem as a lack of money. The reality of the position of women in the home is not examined, except in the assertion that "male values" devalue women's work in the home, making it out to be mundane and trivial. But most of women's work in the home really *is* mind-numbingly boring and trivial. Being with young children can be immensely fulfilling — but day after day of wiping bottoms, washing up only for the dishes to be dirtied again, Hoovering in the morning only to have to do it again in the afternoon? No-one should have to do this sort of work full time, waged or otherwise.

To demand wages for housework would simply lead to institutionalisation of a private domain. The force for change comes from people — women and men — participating in productive labour outside the home. Capitalism creates its own gravediggers by bringing increasingly large numbers of workers together in big factories, where there is ability for the class to organise itself, initially defensively, to form trade unions, political parties, etc. For women, this frees them from permanent isolation within four walls, dependence on one other adult economically and emotionally, and from the intellectual stupefaction that this isolation and dependency breeds.

We demand and fight for the socialisation of housework, the freeing of women from the daily drudgery of mindless routine chores, to participate fully in all areas of social life. Without this not only is women's liberation impossible, but the liberation of the class as a whole.



Clara Zetkin and Rosa Luxemburg

## Classical Marxism and women

The early 19th century socialists — the most radical and thorough of the advocates of the idea of human emancipation or liberation which was launched by the American and French Revolutions — were also advocates of *women's* emancipation. Charles Fourier declared: "The degree of emancipation of women is the natural measure of general emancipation."

Fourier, writing in 1808, also went beyond legal formalities in his programme for equality. "People would be housed in large buildings which would be equipped with various services including creches. Young children would be cared for communally. There would be communal restaurants and public rooms..." (Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden from History*). Robert Owen had similar ideas.

There were exceptions in the socialist movement. Until relatively

late in the 19th century there was a strong current of 'proletarian anti-feminism', represented by such leaders as Proudhon and Lassalle. They reflected the element in the working class that looked backward — to the old patriarchal household economy — rather than forward. (In early 19th century England, radical workers often defined their aim as a return to the happy state before the 'Norman yoke' was imposed in 1066). Claiming they wished to protect women, they opposed women's employment in industry. Proudhon, in Marx's words, sang "the glories of the petty bourgeoisie and of the miserable patriarchal and amorous illusions of the domestic hearth."

Marx and Engels added little or nothing to the programme of their more radical predecessors. They integrated that programme into a perspective of class struggle rather than utopia-building; they opposed Proudhon's ideas as "both reactionary and Utopian" because they tried to run backwards away from that class struggle.

In *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1885) Engels endeavoured to use the researches of the US anthropologist Lewis Morgan to map the evolution of women's position. The attempt has been criticised in the light of later research, but for sure the *approach* was a lasting scientific advance. The position of women was discussed in terms of the changing material conditions that determined it, not just in terms of abstract moral rights and wrongs.

Engels also summarised the socialist programme: "The modern individual family is based on the open or disguised domestic enslavement of the woman; and modern society is a mass composed solely of individual families as its molecules...In the family, (the man) is the bourgeois; the wife represents the proletariat..."

"The peculiar character of man's domination over woman in the modern family, and the necessity, as well as the manner, of establishing real social equality between the two will be brought out into full relief only when both are completely equal before the law. It will then become evident that the first premise for the emancipation of women is the reintroduction of the entire female sex into public industry; and that this again demands that the quality possessed by the individual family of being the economic unit of society be abolished..."

"With the passage of the means of production into common property, the individual family ceases to be the economic unit of society. Private housekeeping is transformed into a social industry. The care and education of the children becomes a public matter. Society takes care of all children equally, irrespective of whether they are born in wedlock or not" — and, Engels adds, this will underpin a great expansion of sexual freedom.

In their early writings, like the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels made sweeping statements about "the practical absence of the family among the proletarians." In later writings they were more cautious, but never proposed a clear alternative view. It may well be that there was a considerable collapse of family relations in the tumult of the Industrial Revolution, but for sure family structure was being consolidated by the end of the 19th century. It remained relatively

solid until recent decades, when a new breakdown has begun to develop. The analysis of such developments was left as uncharted territory by Marx and Engels.

Mark Poster (according to Michele Barrett's account, *Women's Oppression Today* p.203-4) argues that the *bourgeois* family — a form of family based on the material interests and circumstances of the bourgeoisie — was imposed on the working class as a norm through an ideological victory of the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie managed to establish itself and its form of family as the idea for humanity. Even though working class families were always in fact heavily dependent on women's wages, they came to accept the bourgeois model of the passive housewife as a norm or ideal.

Marx and Engels did keep pace with the radical thought of their day, and integrate it into their overall theory. Sometimes they are discussed in terms of whether they foresaw all the insights of the modern women's movement. This is hardly useful, unless we have a religious conception of Marx as the All-Wise, the font of all knowledge.

In Germany, in particular, the basic ideas worked out by Marx and Engels (building on previous socialists) were bulked out a great deal by the experience of a proletarian women's movement, led by Clara Zetkin.

## The German Social Democratic women's movement

In 1879 August Bebel, leader of the German Social Democratic Party, the SPD, published a book *Women and Socialism*. This explored the historical origins of women's subordination, and presented a picture of what socialism would mean to women, both materially, and in terms of relations between the sexes.

The impact of the book was enormous. By 1895 it had gone through 25 editions in Germany alone, as well as having been translated in several languages. Ottilie Baader, a working class woman activist, later remembered:

"Although I was not a social-democrat, I had friends who belonged to the party. Through them I got the precious work. I read it right through. It was my own fate, and that of thousands of my sisters. Neither in the family nor in public life had I even heard of all the pain the woman must endure. Her life was ignored. Bebel's book

courageously broke with the old secretiveness...I read the book not once, but ten times. Because everything was so new, it took considerable effort to come to grips with Bebel's views. I had to break with so many things I had previously regarded as correct."

In her 1896 speech which established the framework for the SPD's work amongst women, Zetkin said of *Women and Socialism*:

"This book must not be judged according to its positive aspects or its shortcomings. Rather, it must be judged within the context of the times in which it was written. It was more than a book, it was an event — a great deed."

*Women and Socialism* presented a powerful indictment of capitalist society, contrasted with a vision of the socialist future. It covered every aspect of women's subordination, ranging from her economic position, through to the distortion of sexual relationships.

"The marriage founded upon bourgeois property relations, is more or less a marriage by compulsion, which leaves numerous ills in its train."

And: "Where the blending of the sexes is a purely mechanical act: such a marriage is immoral." Woman suffers under capitalism "both as a social and a sex-entity, and it is hard to say in which of the two respects she suffers more."

In contrast, socialism will remove the economic pressures which force women into such a position. Domestic labour is socialised; society is organised on the basis of real, direct democracy. Sexuality is able to develop undistorted.

"The individual shall himself oversee the satisfaction of his own instincts. The satisfaction of the sexual instinct is as much a private concern as the satisfaction of any other natural instinct."

Such passages give the lie to the rather stuffy image we might have of 19th century Marxism. On some issues, of course, Bebel's book now seems old-fashioned: but in its day it was a bombshell. Its effect can be gauged from the shocked response of James Connolly. Not the most backward of men, Connolly nonetheless complained that Bebel's work was "an attempt to seduce the proletariat from the firm ground of political and economic science into the questionable ground of physiology and sex."

In 1885 came the publication of Engels' *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*. This examined in detail, on the basis of the available anthropological work, the historical origins of women's oppression.

These two works were milestones in the development of a Marxist theory of women's oppression. The task now was to set about the work of actually organising working class women.

In 1891 the first edition of *Die Gleichheit* (Equality) paper appeared, edited by Clara Zetkin. This paper was intended as an educator of women party members, geared towards the development of women party cadre. It was quite heavily theoretical, and Zetkin constantly argued within the party for the maintenance of this bias, as against any watering down in the quest for some mythical 'mass appeal'.

Later on, though, special supplements for working class women and for children did appear with *Die Gleichheit*. The ones for women dealt with their more day to day concerns, whilst the children's supplements were largely educational — probably a bit like a left-wing *Look and Learn*.

In her speech to the party congress in Gotha in 1896 Zetkin summarised the existing Marxist analysis of 'the woman question', dealt with the differing natures of the oppression of women of different classes, and suggested ways in which the SPD should attempt to relate to and organise working class women.

Women workers had to be organised into trade unions, and drawn towards the party. For this a network of *vertravenspersonen* was to be appointed — women comrades who would take on the job of agitation/organisation amongst working class women. Because of the anti-socialist laws existing in Germany at the time, which prohibited women from directly joining political organisations, this seemed the best way to proceed. Women were also prohibited from joining the same trades unions as men, and the one way this was got around was by setting up women's trade associations, which developed links with the corresponding 'men's' unions. This enforced separate organisation probably coincidentally aided the development of women activists, and forced them into leadership positions within the trades associations.

Zetkin also emphasised the importance of good-quality written material in reaching working class women. They were, because of their position in the home, less likely than men to be able to attend meetings.

"Thus if the mountain does not come to Mohammed, Mohammed must go to the mountain...we must use small pamphlets which discuss a single practical question from one angle of vision, especially from the point of view of the class struggle."

Zetkin suggested that these should be modelled on English and American temperance literature. The daily party press (the party produced a plethora of daily, and regional publications) should also produce special supplements for women. Some were doing this already, but Zetkin did not consider them adequate.

"But until now the daily press has regarded the proletarian woman as a subscriber, flattering her ignorance, her bad and unformed taste, rather than trying to enlighten her."

The women's organisation produced masses of pamphlets, organised discussion groups for working class women, and attempted to unionise women workers and draw them towards the party. In 1908 the anti-socialist laws were repealed and women were legally able to become party members. By 1910 there were 189,442 women in trade unions, 82,642 women party members, and *Die Gleichheit* had a circulation of 82,000. The circulation of *Die Gleichheit* peaked in 1913 at 112,000.

But the work amongst women was very much the task of the women comrades themselves. The party as a whole does not seem to have taken this work particularly seriously. During this period the divisions

between right and left within the party, between the reformist wing and the revolutionaries was widening. Zetkin and Die Gleichheit were consistently on the left, and the marginalisation of the women's work cannot be separated from the attempts by the right to squash the left. As usual, reactionary attitudes about women were the first to re-emerge, sexism being such a deeply ingrained phenomenon. One woman comrade asked:

“Many comrades make such a joke of the woman question that we really have to ask ourselves: are these really party comrades who advocate equal rights?”

As early as 1900 one male conference delegate said:

“The trouble is there are too few women comrades in the Party. I wish there were many more. The few who have to do all the work are overloaded and thus prone to be bad-tempered. So it comes about that they sometimes make life miserable for us, even though we are not to blame.”

This patronising sexism was thus not simply men putting down women, but was used as a weapon by the right, who were bent on turning the party into a propagandist electoral machine, against a left wing section involved in day to day agitational and organising work among the working class.

With the outbreak of war in 1914, and the voting for war credits by the majority of the SPD's representatives in the Reichstag, the split became irreparable. Die Gleichheit attempted to put a proletarian internationalist anti-war line in the face of terrible state harassment and censorship, colluded in by the SPD leadership. The paper appeared with more and more blank columns, to reveal the extent to which it had been silenced. Ultimately Zetkin was removed by the party as editor and Die Gleichheit was politically neutered.

Zetkin, with other Leftists, among them Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, went on to form a new communist party and made attempts to continue some sort of communist work among women. As for the SPD organisation, after the war it became a sort of cross between the worst sort of Labour Party women's section and the Women's Institute — mainly doing electoral donkey-work, and welfare work among the working class.

The complete degeneration of the SPD on the question of women was shown by its support for the Demobilisation Decree, by which different categories of women were forced out of work to provide jobs for the men returning from the trenches.

We have much to learn from the work pioneered by Zetkin. The development of special methods for work amongst women, which take into account their special difficulties of participation, is essential. The smashing of the women's movement by Social Democracy only goes to show how closely tied the fate of women is with that of the working class. The abandonment of serious attempts by the party as a whole to organise and educate women for socialism was the sharp end of its abandonment of any perspective for organising the working class as a whole for its emancipation.

## Protective legislation

The debates in Germany on the question of protective legislation for women workers show the dangers of lapsing into demands for abstract equality with men, without taking into account the social and economic realities of women's role in society. In reacting against the paternalistic notions that women should be sheltered from the outside world, confined to the truly feminine pursuits of maintaining hearth and home, etc., the bourgeois feminists refused to demand any extra legislative protection for female workers. This ignored the practical consequences for most women — a double exploitation, rather than exploitation equal to men.

Louise Kautsky, at the International Workers Congress in 1893, criticised this approach:

“In view of the fact that the bourgeois women's movement rejects any special legislation to provide legal protection for women workers on the grounds that it interferes with women's freedom and her equal rights with the male; and that, therefore, this movement does not, on the one hand, take into account the nature of contemporary society, which is based on the exploitation of the working class — women as well as men — by the capitalist class; and that it fails on the other to recognise that through the differentiation of the sexes woman obtains a special role, namely as the mother of the children, which is so important for the future of society, the Zurich International Congress declares that it is the duty of the representatives of women workers from all countries to advocate most emphatically legal protection for women workers.”

In short, the spectacle of women factory workers toiling at their machines in appalling conditions throughout pregnancy, even at times giving birth on the factory floor, was not an example of women's liberty or equality, but of her complete enslavement to the capitalist and his thirst for profit.

As against the Lassalleans — the “proletarian anti-feminists” — who saw the degradation of women under developing capitalism, and reacted by looking backwards to the restoration of women to the heart of some imaginary domestic idyll, and the bourgeois feminists, with their abstract notions of equality and freedom, the Marxists stood firmly on an analysis of the real historical development of capitalism, and the class struggle. Capitalism was bringing more and more women into factory work. This was progressive, in providing the potential for women to fight as part of the working class, against their exploitation. But because of women's position as childbearers and rearers, with primary responsibility for the home, legal protection was essential. Marx put it like this:

“The labourers must put their heads together and, as a class, compel the passing of a law, an all-powerful social barrier that shall prevent the very workers from selling, by voluntary contract with capital, themselves and their families into slavery and death.”

The demands of the bourgeois feminists showed a fundamental ignorance of and lack of concern for the reality of life for working class women.

To bring the question into the present, it has been shown that working at VDUs for prolonged periods is dangerous for women, particularly if pregnant. We obviously do not demand that these women leave their jobs, go home or put their feet up for nine months. But we do demand frequent breaks, limits to the amount of time at a stretch spent working at VDUs. For pregnant women we demand adequate time off for ante-natal care, and decent maternity leave. All without loss of pay, etc. Moreover, we would be in favour of the labour movement campaigning for such provisions to be enforced legally — we don't insist that they be won workplace by workplace.

## Bolshevism and Stalinism

The Bolsheviks, under the leadership of Kollontai, Inessa Armand and Samoslova, were pupils of Zetkin and the German movement in relation to organising women. According to Kollontai, "Our work received whole-hearted support from Lenin. And Trotsky...unfailingly and gladly appeared at our conferences."

On taking power the Bolsheviks abolished all reactionary laws relating to women, and established full political and legal equality for women. Freedom of divorce, abortion, etc., were introduced. Special trains were organised to take birth control facilities into remote areas. All laws against homosexuality were scrapped until 1934. "The presentation of homosexuality in the great Soviet encyclopaedia was based on Magnus Hirschfeld and partly on Freud." (Hirschfeld was a pioneer for homosexual rights in Germany). And a great beginning was made towards freeing women from domestic toil. Communal kitchens, laundries and creches were established.

But these facilities were always far from adequate both in terms of quality and quantity. Trotsky wrote: "Moreover, the existing creches, even in Moscow, Leningrad, and the other centres, are not satisfactory as a general rule to the least fastidious demands. 'A creche in which the child feels worse than he does at home is not a creche but a bad orphan asylum,' complains a leading Soviet newspaper. It is no wonder that the better-placed workers' families avoid creches."

The same applied to other facilities. The communal dining halls left much to be desired when compared to 'home cooking'. The laundries did virtually everything but return your laundry clean and fit for use. None of this is particularly surprising, if we think about the nature of the Soviet Union at this time — a materially backward country, with a predominantly peasant economy, where the First World War was followed by the revolution and then civil war in defence of the revolu-



Greenham women

tion. There were severe shortages of the basic necessities of life. Given that the precondition for the socialisation of housework and childcare is a high level of economic development, most of the attempts made in the early years of the Soviet state were bound to be utopian.

Trotsky warned that only "our children and grandchildren will realise this aim" of women's full emancipation. Some Bolsheviks, however, went in for doctrinaire fancies. "Acute food shortages rather than the exigencies of socialist theory led to a large extension of communal feeding. The vast problems of homeless children imposed on reluctant and overburdened authorities the establishment of children's homes and settlements. In this aspect of war communism, as in others, doctrine was invoked to prove that what was done in the emergency of war was identical with what had long been included in the cherished precepts of socialist programmes...(Though from 1925 the state had to resort to foster-parents instead).

"The revolution and the civil war had left behind them immense numbers of children, orphans or separated without a trace from their parents, who, being without homes or protectors and without normal means of subsistence, roamed in gangs through cities and countryside, living by their wits and engaging in every form of crime and violence. The sequence of war, revolution and civil war had produced many of the same unpremeditated and disintegrating effects on family and sex relations as on other aspects of social life. Here too, "war communism" marked a specific period; and here, too, what in other conditions would have been treated as the unwelcome result of chaos, confusion and licence was now retrospectively justified in terms of socialist doctrine." (EH Carr, *Socialism in One Country*, Vol.1, p.27)

Lenin and Trotsky had to fight against fantasists and utopians on this front as on the fronts of economic policy, military and diplomatic policy, art, etc. It is in this context that Lenin's famous comments to Clara Zetkin — often cited to prove the Bolsheviks' alleged backwardness in sexual politics — must be read. Wilhelm Reich, in *The Sexual Revolution*, comments: "Lenin was extremely reticent in expressing definite views on sexual problems. His correct grasp of the tasks of the revolution in this respect was expressed in his statement: 'Communism should not bring asceticism, but enjoyment of life and vigour in life through a fulfilled love-life'. But what really became known, thanks to the sex-reactionary attitude of the responsible circles, was that passage from Lenin's talks with Klara Zetkin in which he discussed the 'chaotic' sexual life of youth..."

"Let us try to understand what Lenin meant here. First of all, he refuted economism, that concept which derives everything cultural directly from the economic basis. He recognised the fact that the refusal of tender relationships in the sexual life of youth was nothing but the old conservative view in reverse; and the further fact that the glass-of-water theory was nothing but the exact reverse of the old conservative ideology of asceticism. Lenin also recognised that this sexual life was not the desired, sex-economically regulated one, for it was anti-social and unsatisfactory... Often enough, mothers deserted their children, men their women on the way. Many women had to sell themselves in order to feed themselves and their children. Under such conditions, the adolescent urge for sexual freedom was found to take different forms than it would have under normal conditions. Instead of a painful struggle for clarity and reorientation there was a brutalisation of sexual life... Fundamentally, this brutalisation only laid bare a structure which has always been typical of the patriarchal individual and which under ordinary circumstances is more or less covered up and may show up only in occasional excesses..."

The theses presented to the Third Congress of the Comintern in 1921 argued for active efforts to involve women in all aspects of Soviet society. It was also the responsibility of the party to fight an ideological battle against backward attitudes towards women amongst the working class, and particularly the peasantry. Lenin criticised the backwardness and complacency of many male party members: "They regard agitation and propaganda among women and the task of rousing and revolutionising them as the job of just the women communists... Unfortunately we may still say of many of our comrades, 'scratch the Communist and a philistine appears'."

Despite the existence of these attitudes, it is clear that the party did have the political will to fight against this, and saw the active participation of women in all areas of Soviet society as essential. With the development of a privileged bureaucracy which usurped political power from the working class, all this changed. The Stalinist big lie, that the Soviet Union was "steaming towards socialism" made it impossible to admit that anything was wrong with the position of women. The exodus of the workers from the shoddy communal

facilities was answered with the rehabilitation of the family hearth, of motherhood and of the traditional feminine role. Divorce and abortion laws were tightened up. Women were no longer permitted to decline "the joys of motherhood" as "we have need of people". Working class and peasant women, that is. As for the bureaucrats' wives, "they will, as formerly, do what they find necessary under the very nose of an indulgent judiciary." (Trotsky). The enormous gains made by women were completely lost, to be replaced by the old slavery of domestic toil. The old family units were reinforced as "forty million points of support" for the bureaucracy.

What conclusions do we draw from this? Was it simply that material conditions made the advancement of women impossible? Or was it that the conservative philistinism of party men about women overcame their revolutionary principles? Certainly, complete emancipation of women was not possible in the young, isolated, materially-backward Soviet state. But the answer to this was a consistent conscious struggle against those conditions, and internationally for the success of the revolution. The Stalinist bureaucracy subordinated these to the defence of its own material privileges.

As for the question of sexism, surely it can be no coincidence that the worsening of the position of women went hand in hand with that of the working class and peasantry as a whole. With their wholesale exclusion from political life. Eurocommunists argue that the experience of the USSR shows that socialism will not bring women's liberation without an autonomous women's movement. But the Stalinist USSR was not and is not socialist. The problem was not the workers' movement excessively dominating women's organisation, but the workers' movement and all independent organisation, male or female, being crushed. The history of the USSR does not show women's position declining while the working class forged ahead — but the defeat of women coming with the defeat of the working class.

Trotsky summed up: "How men enslaved women, how the exploiter subjected them both, how the toilers have attempted at the price of blood to free themselves from slavery and have only exchanged one chain for another — history tells us much about all this. In essence it tells us nothing else. But how in reality to free the child, the woman and the human being? For that we have as yet no reliable models. All past historical experience, wholly negative, demands of the toilers at least and first of all an implacable distrust of all privileged and uncontrolled guardians."





Miners' wives demonstration, London 1984

## Modern feminisms

From the 1960s a new mass women's movement emerged in the advanced capitalist countries. There was a bigger female wage-working class than ever before; women had more economic independence; and traditional moral restrictions had weakened.

The new women's movement thus had a huge impact. Lip-service, at least, to women's liberation has become almost universal, and institutionalised in such things as equal pay and equal opportunity laws.

Such things are difficult to measure, but it seems impossible to doubt that the ideas of women's liberation have changed millions of women in Western societies who have never been feminist activists. Changes in the orientation of mass-circulation women's magazines are one index of this. Serious academic feminist writing has expanded hugely. Everyday use of language has changed significantly.

The basic drive of the new women's movement was for enlightenment and for legal reform. On these fronts it had sizeable success. But women's oppression is rooted deeper in economic structures. Those roots remain. Nothing short of a social revolution could change them; and the women's movement could not at will make a social revolution.

There have therefore been defeats in the women's movement's victories, failures in its successes. Over the last 15 or so years, as the movement's impact has broadened, the movement itself has fragmented and dwindled. Big, active campaigns of the women's movement no longer exist.

The struggle for enlightenment has run up against its inevitable limits. And so it has turned aside in various ways. Parts of the women's movement have become integrated as a lobby within liberal capitalist politics. Parts have sought a more 'real' enlightenment, of a mystical sort. (These developments parallel those within Third World nationalism in the wake of the victory of colonial liberation struggles and the disappointments generated by the new capitalist states).

Meanwhile, the broader left has been in disarray. Influences both from the new **reformist** feminism, and from the new **mystical** feminism, have been incorporated in the 'liberation alliance' or 'rainbow coalition' politics which now serve much of the left as a substitute for working class socialism. The authentically revolutionary core of modern feminism needs to be disentangled from this embrace.

## The original goals of the women's movement

The new women's movement which emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s was, like the feminism of the 19th and early 20th century, humanist and rationalist — "a whole people" movement.

The phrase is Sheila Rowbotham's, from a pioneering pamphlet *Women's Liberation and the New Politics* (1969). She concluded the pamphlet:

"The so-called women's question is thus a whole people question, not only because our liberation is inextricably bound up with the revolt of all those who are oppressed, but because their liberation is not realisable fully unless our subordination is ended. Nor does the particular experience of women speak only for itself. Like the consciousness of all people who are kept down it brings its own species of implication for the revolutionary struggle. Trotsky's comment...is



most apt: 'It is quite true that there are no limits to masculine egotism in ordinary life. In order to change the conditions of life we must learn to see them through the eyes of women'...

The project here was to create a new socialism, more rounded, more humanist, more revolutionary, than the old formulas of social democracy and Stalinism. Many of the new feminists saw their struggle in the same light.

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* which, published in 1949, was the outstanding feminist work of the whole epoch from the 1920s to the 1960s, saw the prospects this way: "When economic power falls into the hands of the workers, then it will become possible for the working woman to win rights and privileges that the parasitic woman, noble or middle class, has never obtained" (p.141). Juliet Mitchell wrote *Women: The Longest Revolution* in 1966, and posed the problem like this: "The problem of the subordination of women and the need for their liberation was recognised by all the great socialist thinkers in the 19th century. It is part of the classical heritage of the revolutionary movement. Yet today, in the West, the problem has become a subsidiary, if not an invisible, element in the preoccupations of socialists...How has this counter-revolution come about?"

The bulk of the new women's movement was, and saw itself, part of the general workers' and student radicalisation in the advanced capitalist countries starting in the late 1960s. But even those of the new feminists who were not socialists were resolutely humanist. They made it central to their argument that the natural, biological differences between men and women were limited in scope and importance. Only women could give birth to children, it was true; but men could care for them just as well as women. And women could do almost anything men could do.

Once prejudices and oppressive institutions were swept away, then an individual's sex would no longer be of special importance for determining her or his position in society. A new human nature would develop, breaking from previous definitions of masculine and feminine.

Kate Millett, a radical feminist, denounced "the threadbare tactic of justifying social and temperamental differences by biological ones. For the sexes are inherently in everything alike, save reproductive systems, secondary sexual characteristics, orgasmic capacity, and genetic and morphological structure" (*Sexual Politics*, p.93). There were versions of radical feminism that stressed essential, biological differences between women and men, but they were marginal. Eva Figes argued: "The remedy lies in our own hands, it will be found in social change, not on the analyst's couch. The change is one that men should welcome as much as women, because female neurosis and dependence does not make the lives of men any happier either..." (*Patriarchal Attitudes*, p.200). Betty Friedan's version of US middle class feminism was equally humanist. "It was 'the feminine mystique' that was at fault, with its insistence on woman's sole function as wife and mother. In Betty Friedan's frame of reference, what was required

was a new and more realistic, more fully human, concept of woman..." (Dale Spender, *For The Record*, p.11).

The original four demands of the women's liberation movement in Britain, adopted in 1971, were resolutely focused on giving women freedom to escape the housewife role and to take part in social production as equals with men:

- Equal pay
- Equal education and job opportunities
- Free contraception and abortion on demand
- Free 24-hour nurseries, under community control.

The fifth demand, 'legal and financial independence', was in the same vein. The sixth and seventh were 'an end to discrimination against lesbians', and a demand against 'male dominance and male aggression'. Against strong opposition, the 1978 Women's Liberation Conference made 'the right of every woman to a self-defined sexuality' a preamble, prior to all other demands.

## Cultural feminism

1978 was also a watershed in that it was the last of the regular yearly Women's Liberation Conferences that had met since 1970. The conflicts within the movement were now too great to be contained in a single conference.

In 1981, the editorial introduction to an anthology of feminist writing from 1975-80 stated: "The period 1975-80 saw the emergence of Revolutionary Feminism's distinct emphasis on man as the enemy, and renewed anger about sexual violence, rape and pornography." That anthology, however, still made 'Male Violence' only fifth of six sections; the contents page was headed by 'Women and the State', and 'Sex and Class'. The equivalent anthology for 1981-3, *Sweeping Statements*, had 'Violence Against Women' as its first and longest section. Now, as Lynne Segal reports, "The feminist writing which is now most popular in this country, which is always listed among the bestsellers in progressive literary magazines, is a new form of radical feminism. Mostly from North America, where it is known as 'cultural feminism', it celebrates women's superior virtue and spirituality and decries 'male' violence and technology." (*Is the Future Female?*, p.3).

Susan Brownmiller's book, *Against Our Will*, published in 1975, sketched the outlines of a feminism centred on *rape* as the instrument of a natural male drive to domination. "When men discovered that they could rape, they proceeded to do it...It is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all* men keep *all*

women in a state of fear.” There is also a ‘softer’ new feminism, one centred on language and meaning. Dale Spender, for example, in her book *For the Record*, generalises: “At the very heart of the feminist endeavour...is the necessity to end the male monopoly on knowledge, and decision-making. For no matter what women achieve, no matter what gains are made...white men remain in charge of the decisions about what is important and significant, they are able to decree women’s achievement as unimportant and insignificant. And while they continue to do this, women continue to be oppressed.” (p.182).

Men dominate through language and social values: through such things as using the word ‘man’ for both the male and for the human species, and devaluing women’s work, in the home, for example. To fight this domination, women must “strip away the perverse patriarchal meanings which are our mental baggage (and) arrive at the nugget of pure meaning, the beginning, the first, the uncontaminated essence...” (p.209). Or, as Mary Daly (quoted by Spender) puts it: “There is...an extremely rich, complex diversity among women and within each individual. But there is also above, beyond, beneath all this a Cosmic Commonality, a tapestry of connectedness which women are constantly weaving...Breaking the bonds/bars of phallocracy requires breaking through to radiant powers of words, so that by releasing words, we can release our Selves.” (p.204)

By digging down to women’s ‘Cosmic Commonality’, feminists will thus create an ‘independent women’s culture.’ “The claim for an autonomous women’s movement was the beginning of the celebration of an independent women’s culture: it ushered in the growing realisation that women could produce their own meanings, their own cultural forms, and use them for the further replenishment and inspiration of women. This recognition of women’s culture, from books to art, from courses to centres, from plants to politics, is one of the most significant and least publicly acknowledged gains of the women’s movement...” (p.73).

Spender is confident about some of these women’s meanings. They are more in harmony with nature, more peaceful and value technology lower than men’s meanings (pp.171-2). But she recognises that not all women have the same views and values. So some women’s ideas are not *real* women’s ideas. “Feminism is based on values, on values of self-identity, responsibility, autonomy, equality and the absence of dominance, coercion and oppression. Understandings which do not respect these values, no matter from whom they emanate, are not tolerated.” (p.203). But within those limits there can be many feminist truths: “That under patriarchy men have asserted that there is only one truth — and one ‘objective’ means of getting to it — tells us more about the power and authority of men...than it tells us about what we know and understand of the world. And if we are to have a common feminist framework then it must be all things to all women, it must be able to take account of what all women know and understand of the world even when they know and understand contradictory things...a framework which can contain many truths.” (p.4).

Developing the independent women’s culture is the key to change. “Women have identified that bastion of male power — knowledge-making — and have attempted systematically to undermine it.” (p.157). On the other hand, it is vital to make men “hear what women are saying.” (p.201). Spender further believes that *all* feminists essentially agree with her, and indeed that women have been conducting her sort of feminist struggle for decades and centuries. “Some of the distractions which have been made over the years between socialist feminism and radical feminism are based on little substance...” (p.156).

In truth, the power of such ideas as Spender’s is that they do embrace the whole range of male domination, especially as it is experienced at the personal level. Men are violent to women, they do arrogantly refuse to listen to them, they do set up institutions and assumptions which devalue women. And indeed all sorts of feminism do have it in common that they challenge such behaviour. Where this ‘cultural feminism’ differs from other feminisms is that it sees the detailed economic circumstances of women as almost *irrelevant*. “Despite the fact that many of our foremothers — as well as our contemporaries — have identified a specific platform of male power and have sought to change it, the position of women in relation to men remains much the same...Yes, women are better off now that they can be educated, own property, get divorced, obtain contraception, establish women’s health centres, and get feminist knowledge published; but yes, too, men still retain the power.” (p.197). Any *material* improvement or enlargement of women’s position can immediately be annulled by men redefining values (pp.204-5).

Male domination here is seen as a *conspiracy* — whether exercised through ideology and definition of values, or more crudely through violence. No wonder Spender’s theory has to see women’s material position as almost irrelevant: with this definition it is impossible to analyse the great changes in that position that have taken place in history. There is simply *patriarchy*, unchanging and old as time.

Patriarchy can then be explained only by resorting to assumptions about male and female essences. The essence of male nature is to strive to dominate. Female nature is gentler and finer (or so it is assumed); but somehow it has been submerged. It needs to be rescued. Here Dale Spender ends up closer to traditional anti-feminist arguments than to a feminist like Simone de Beauvoir, who wanted to *strip away* woman’s ‘mystic aura’. “The epochs that have regarded woman as the Other are those which refuse most harshly to integrate her with society by right of being human. Today she can become *Another* who is also an equal only in losing her mystic aura. The anti-feminists have always played upon this equivocation. They are glad to exalt women as the *Other* in such a manner as to make her alterity (otherness, difference) absolute, irreducible, and to deny her access to the human Mitsein (community).” (*The Second Sex*, p.102).

Ideologically, this ‘cultural feminism’ is a radical break from the rationalisation and humanism which were part of the first wave of the

modern women's movement. Politically, conclusions can differ. Softer versions come to little more than a sort of bland liberalism, cherishing and developing 'women's values' until they eventually permeate society. Harder versions turn cultural feminism into a sort of 'ghetto feminism', identifying men as the unchanging enemy and seeing no resort but to build a women's ghetto within existing society.

In class terms, the lack of concern for the detailed material circumstances of women ties both soft and hard versions to the leisured and comfortable classes.

## Rape, porn, peace and sexuality

"Of all the concerns of feminists in the past two years," wrote the editors of the 1981-3 women's liberation anthology, "violence against women is the area where a clearly defined analysis has been developed, and, as in the peace movement, women have undertaken direct — and often illegal — action in protest" (*Sweeping Statements*, p.1). Rape, pornography and peace have been defined as the central issues, not only practically, but also theoretically.

There is good reason for feminists to be bitterly angry about rape. It is widespread and increasing. Yet its victims receive less protection from the law than the victims of any other serious crime of violence. Rape within marriage is not even theoretically recognised as a crime. Even outside marriage, rape is very often not reported to the police. Unsympathetic treatment by male-dominated police forces and courts can be unbearable for the victim. And often when a woman goes to law and the rapist is convicted, the judge will deliver a demonstratively mild sentence, accompanying it with a speech which practically excuses the crime.

Since the early 1970s feminists have been setting up Rape Crisis Centres to help rape victims. Adequate and guaranteed public finance for these centres, and extensive rights for them to deal with the police on behalf of victims, would further help. Special women-only police squads to deal with rape make it easier for victims to use the law. A thorough democratic reform of the judiciary is necessary; in the meantime, the courts' terrible record on rape makes the case for measures of positive discrimination such as requiring women judges and all-women juries in rape trials. There should be strict rules against irrelevant introduction of victims' sexual history into rape trials.

But all such measures will leave much unchanged. For example, when a woman alleges rape and a man alleges consent, it is her word against his. Often there is little or no third-party evidence. According to the classic rule of justice, 'innocent until proven guilty', the man will get off. Some feminists have therefore come to demand that in such cases the woman's word should be believed. The man should be guilty until proved innocent. Here the theories about women's knowledge as different, deeper and incommensurable with male

knowledge overlap with theories about male sexuality as the instrument for keeping women down. The principle has been extended to demand that women's word be believed automatically in lesser cases of sexual harassment and even in clashes and arguments of any sort between a woman and a man. Rape, indeed, is seen as the sharpest and most authentic expression of male sexuality, or men's relation to women. A feminist will no more demand exact proof of rape before siding with a woman than a socialist will demand legally-watertight demonstration of a capitalist's brutality before siding with a worker. And pornography is the ideological counterpart to the physical business of rape. "Pornography is the theory, rape is the practice," as Robin Morgan put it.

To be analytical and scientific about these issues is difficult. But we must try. The "clearly defined analysis" mentioned by the editors of *Sweeping Statements* is not merely a gut reaction, but a *theory*. It must be judged as a theory.

The slogan 'All men are potential rapists' should not be dismissed too quickly. In a recent US survey, a full 50% of men said they would 'force a woman to have sex with them' if they knew they could get away with it. The radical feminist theory moves directly from such facts to its conclusion. Male sexuality is sadistic. The only way to protect women is to suppress that sadism. This is over-simple.

In some primitive societies, rape is unknown, although sexuality is relatively unrepressed. Rape was far more widespread than it is at present long before mass-circulation pornography existed. Arranged marriages against the women's wish — a drastic form of rape — are uncommon in modern capitalist civilisations, but were common in older societies. Writing as recently as 1949, and apparently basing herself on conditions in the French countryside, Simone de Beauvoir wrote: "It is not uncommon for the young girl's first (sexual) experience to be a real rape and for the man to act in an odiously brutal manner; in the country and wherever manners are rough, it often happens that — half consenting, half revolted — the young peasant girl loses her virginity in some ditch, in shame and fear" (*The Second Sex*, pp.403-4). Sexual repression was much stronger in Catholic, rural France in the 1940s, and pornography much less available than in big Western cities today.

Today, as Lynne Segal points out (*Is the Future Female?*, p.109ff), "Psychological research and official statistics, designed and collected to test the link between pornography and violence against women...are unclear and contradictory..." If we compare countries, the rule seems to be that the more widespread pornography is, the better off women are. Women have more equality in Scandinavia or in the USA than in Catholic Ireland. Despite the vast expansion of the pornography business since the return of bourgeois democracy to Spain, it is difficult to argue that women were better off under Franco.

This is not because pornography is good for women! In truth, wider women's rights, increased circulation of pornography, and a growth

in violent crime, including rape, are all based on one fundamental tendency — the break-up of old family structures, in an individualistic and competitive society where it is difficult to find alternatives to the family as a source of love and sympathy. The socialist answer is not to try to reimpose the old family structures, but to fight for a new society based on cooperation.

Lynne Segal points out that “the billion dollar pornography industry has flourished in the West precisely as women’s economic *independence* (a far cry, of course, from women’s economic equality) has increased, and the power and control of men over women has declined...one very likely explanation for the increased consumption of pornography by men...is that pornography is a compensatory expression of men’s *declining* power” (pp.106-7). Lynne Segal also points out that “in all cases of rape, violence is the dominant motive, and (despite revolutionary feminism and popular concern with it) phallic penetration quite often does not occur” (p.104). Rape is violence, and not an exaggerated form of sex.

But radical feminist theory tends to focus on the penis as a ‘symbol of terror’, to insist that male power “authentically originates in the penis” (Andrea Dworkin). “How,” Lynne Segal acidly inquires, “does something so vulnerable and fragile as men’s *genital* equipment (for it is well known that a tiny tweak of the testes or a knee to a man’s groin never fails to produce shrieks of pain) transform itself into something which appears as...the very basis of men’s power?” (p.73).

By reading rape as the direct and authentic expression of the power of the penis, of male sexuality, of ‘phallocracy’, the radical feminist theory paradoxically ends up minimising and devaluing rape. “All women have been sexually assaulted, we’re all kept in fear by men’s sexual violence, we’re all threatened by men, we’re all hurt and damaged by pornography and the objectification of women...(it) is a false division (between women who have been raped and women who have not)...patriarchy wants to put the poor ‘rape victims’ on one side of a line and make out that everyone on the other side of the line is treated just fine by men...” insists an article in *Sweeping Statements* So all woman have been raped, or as good as. It makes little difference whether you are literally raped or not. Lynne Segal again, on this nihilism: “It is insulting to women who have been raped to imply all women have been raped; it diminishes rather than clarifies rape’s hideous reality and prevalence” (p.36).

## Biology and society

In general, the radical feminists put themselves on the same terrain as a whole school of right-wing writers who argue that all social life is dominated by natural, primarily male, instincts or aggression. The radical feminist doctrine of the power of the penis directly echoes much male-chauvinist fantasy. The only difference is that the values are inverted. (Earlier modern feminist writing, by contrast, used to *deride* the cult of the penis).

The right-wingers conclude that socialism is impossible; human society is necessarily a brutal war of all against all and the best we can do is to restrain it by a strong state. The conclusions of the radical feminists, despite all their intentions, are not much different. Arguing against the right-wing views of human nature, socialists do not necessarily deny that human biology may generate aggressive and anti-social instincts. But human society is complex and changing. Nothing in it is just a direct reflection of biological drives. “Human nature” varies in different societies, from the peaceful to the warlike, from the cooperative to the competitive, from the sex-equal to the sexist.

Male sadism may reflect deep instincts. But in its influence on action it is mixed up with dozens of other impulses. And even if a man must express his sadism in action, there are dozens of ways of doing so, from the more or less harmless to rape and murder. All men *are* potential rapists. All people are potential murderers. Which of these potentialities express themselves, and how, depends on society and circumstances. In feudal society rape was commonplace, and it was not considered a crime against a woman. It could only be a crime against the woman’s father or husband. In capitalist society women are, at least on some level, considered to be equal human beings, and rape is a crime against a woman. Despite the 50% of men saying they would force a woman to have sex if they had the chance, no sizeable number of men agitates against rape being legally considered a serious crime. Elderly male judges often behave outrageously in rape cases; but the male-dominated media condemns them.

There are profound ambiguities in our attitudes to sex and violence. There is nothing so simple as a basic drive in all men to rape women. Rape is not linked directly, in a straight line, to male sexual drives, and to the ‘theory’ provided by pornography, any more than murder can be explained directly from human aggressive instincts and from violence on TV, without reference to social structure.

What can be done about it? Women can learn self-defence. Self-defence can be made a standard lesson for girls at school. Better street-lighting and better public transport, catering for the special needs of women, can be provided. The planning of cities can be improved so that there are fewer desolate, empty, dangerous spaces. The economic (and the psychological) independence of women can be increased, making it easier for them to leave men who abuse them. All these measures have been advocated by feminists. It is still true, short of a social revolution, that they will only reduce the problem, not solve it. That is why some feminists demand more drastic measures: automatic convictions in rape cases, heavier sentences.

Of course we are angry, and we protest, when a judge gives a lighter sentence to a rapist than to a burglar. But the answer is not heavier sentences for rapists, any more than the answer to growing crime generally is hanging and flogging. Prison brutalises: it does not reform, and it hardly deters. The US has six times as many people in prison, in proportion to population, as the Netherlands; yet crime increases in the US as fast or faster than in the Netherlands.

The pro-punishment view of some feminists here is not particularly feminist. It is part of a wider shift on the left. People who previously had a nihilistic attitude, regarding all criminals as noble, if slightly off-beat, rebels against capitalism, have sobered up and become aware that much crime is directed against working class people. They have swung over to the other side of the political spectrum, calling for more capitalist policing but with a garnish of reform.

To make men accused of rape guilty until proved innocent would be unjust. It would be abandoning a very important principle which, like most democratic principles, is valuable chiefly to the weak and the oppressed. In the Southern United States, black men used to be considered guilty of rape just on the say-so of a white woman. It was a licence for racist lynchings.

In any case, drastic legal measures — a 'guilty until proved innocent rule', heavy punishments — would not stop rape. They might even make things worse. If there were compulsory heavy penalties (long jail terms, or castration or death), many women would be more reluctant to prosecute rape cases. If a victim's statement was enough to convict, the pressure on victims to withdraw or change their statements would be increased. Any loopholes in the law (and there would have to be some, for example for insanity) would be ruthlessly exploited. Rape trials would be even more nerve-racking for the victims.

There is no simple legal/administrative answer, just as there is no simple legal/administrative answer to other horrors such as incest and child abuse. Only a social revolution will give women the confidence and strength to impose adequate social prohibitions on rape.

## Pornography

The call for increased punishment by the state is, of course, paradoxical from feminists — for the state is male-dominated. Many radical feminists, as well as social feminists, are aware of this. Some radical feminists call for state action against pornography, but others equally 'radical' do not. They want pornography suppressed by women's direct action. In the US, reports Lynne Segal, "Anti-pornography legislation has been drafted by Andrea Dworkin and Catherine McKinnon (supported by Mary Daly, Robin Morgan and other feminists). This has fiercely polarised the feminist movement in the US, where other feminists are fighting the legislation in the courts. Those opposing the legislation object to the theoretical analysis behind it, and argue that it reinforces sexist myths about men and women... (also) feminist art, erotica, and advice on women's sexuality will be laid open to possible prosecution..." (p.112).

From Britain, *Sweeping Statements* reprints a press release by the 'Angry Women' group (p.49): "Angry Women have so far set fire to three sex shops in Leeds... We will fight pornography wherever it may be, whether in the back streets or in main roads. Its very existence is an insult to all women, and as long as it is prevalent the streets will continue to be unsafe for women. We have resorted to illegal action as ten



years of legal activities and 100 years of feminist struggle have had no effect whatsoever on the porn issue. We hope that these arson attacks are the start of a more active protest by women against all forms of pornography." The idea that pornography should be somehow censored is, however, widespread on the left, as was shown when Brighton's left-wing Labour council banned the film '9½ Weeks'.

A lot of pornography is vile and insulting. A film like '9½ Weeks' probably deserves to be picketed. But, pornography does not necessarily and straightforwardly produce violence against women. Furthermore, while it is true that sexism undoubtedly encourages violence against women, there are many other forms of sexism besides pornography. To ban all sexist literature, or try to, is simply impossible. To ban only, or specifically, the sexist material that is *about sex* — ie. pornography — is, inescapably, a move against *material about sex* as much, or more than, a move against sexist material. But sexual repression does not benefit women.

The socialist-feminist journal *Scarlet Woman*, in a special issue in the late '70s, coined a distinction between 'erotica' and 'pornography' (though they were not for banning even 'pornography'). But the dividing line must be very blurred. Any move against pornography is likely to be also a move against erotica. *Feminist erotica*, or pornography, is growing. Any anti-porn measures would hit that, too. Censorship — or banning, or 'no platform' — is always dangerous. Even if in the short term it seems like a good way of beating down reactionary ideas, censorship is always, by definition, a weapon in the hands of established majority opinion against unorthodox, minority opinions. It thus bears down most heavily on the oppressed and rebellious, on the working class and on women.

The Obscene Publications Act in Britain has been used against Gay's The Word bookshop and against radical magazines. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* was denounced as 'pornography' when it was published. For feminism to break from its rationalist, humanist

roots on this issue is dangerous and counter-productive. Simone de Beauvoir also wrote to defend the publication of the works of the Marquis de Sade ('Must we burn Sade?').

According to Lynne Segal, "one member (of the Women Against Violence Against Women group) publicly announced her support for Mary Whitehouse in a national BBC discussion on pornography in the early '80s" (p.112) and Lynne Spender "assures us that 'The divisions between "radical" women and "conservative" women (all of whom see themselves as primarily concerned with women's options and status) need not be destructive ones'..." (p.201). Other supporters of the same sort of feminist politics, pivoted on rape and pornography as the means of male domination, would vehemently disagree. But Lynne Spender has the logic of their common ideas on her side.

If feminist truth is a direct reflex of women's experience, then any differences between right-wing women and left-wing women must be more apparent than real. And the argument about basically opposed female and male essences puts the theorists of male domination as a sort of conspiracy on the same terrain as a whole current of conservative thought. Conservative ideas about 'protecting' women are often *not* based on a direct and straightforward anti-woman impulse — and that is why they can appeal to millions of women. There is, as Simone de Beauvoir put it, a strong drive "of imprisoned women to transform her prison into a heaven of glory". A repressive and bigoted morality is often preached in the sincere intention of security for women. Even the *impulses* of right-wing women are not necessarily very different from those of some radical feminist.

Thus the coincidence of positions between some radical feminism and right-wing thought on pornography, on heavy punishments and so on, is not just an apparent parallel of actually very different politics like the coincidence between Trotskyist support for Solidarnosc and Reagan's and Thatcher's 'support' for the Polish workers. It is a basic convergence.

## Peace

The Greenham Women's Peace Camp, and the associated women's peace movement, did tremendous progressive work, and mobilised thousands of women of the most diverse political ideas. Some women in the peace movement, however, constructed a whole theory about women and peace which is linked to 'cultural feminism'. Women, they claim, are by nature more peaceful, less violent and sadistic, and closer to nature, than men.

The claim is untrue — indeed, it is an old conservative myth which many other feminists have demolished in detail. Women have played a prominent military role in some modern guerilla wars; on the other side, Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst abandoned their women's suffrage agitation in 1914 in order to organise a women's movement in support of British imperialism in World War I, and there was a Women's Battalion on the counter-revolutionary side in Russia in



Women workers march through streets of Petrograd demanding an end to the war, and bread, Women's Day 1917.

1917. Working class women have no more to gain from across-the-board condemnations of all violence than working class men; women workers, too, have picket lines to defend! And working class women certainly have nothing to gain from a programme of opposition to technology and a return to nature. Modern technology is the material basis for the liberation of women, as of the working class.



## The politics of experience

'The personal is political' was one of the main slogans of the women's movement of the late '60s and early '70s. It meant making 'personal' issues into issues for collective action; telling women that their problems were not just a matter of personal inadequacies, but part of a social oppression directed against all women; and enlarging socialist ideas with a wider humanism. With the ebb of the movement, the slogan has been inverted: the political is personal.

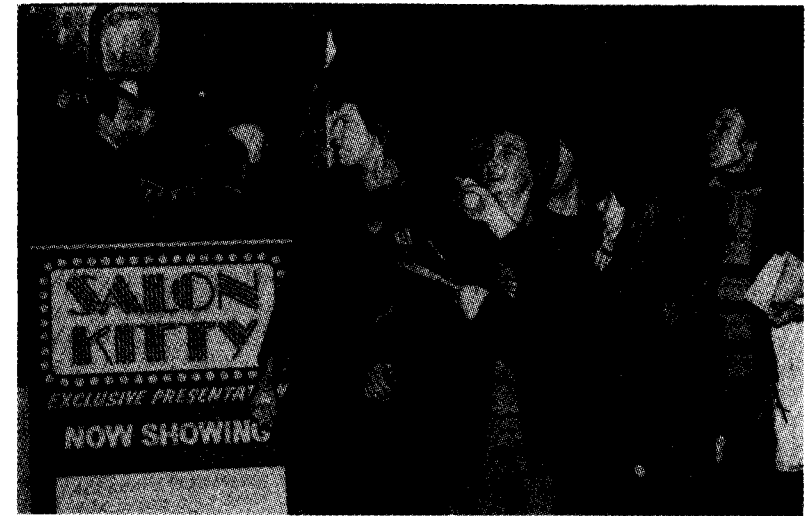
This is obviously so for the versions of radical feminism concerned with 'releasing our Selves' and asserting the hidden 'Cosmic Commonality of women'. But the same approach also emerged amongst socialist feminists. Sheila Rowbotham argued in *Beyond the Fragments* (1979) that "Our views are valid because they come from within us and because we hold a received correctness. The words we use seek an honesty about our own interest in what we say. This is the opposite to most left language which is constantly distinguishing itself as correct and then covering itself with a determined objectivity."

A Marxist critic commented: "Sheila Rowbotham appears to believe that the less well thought out ideas are and the more spontaneous the better. Difficulties are experienced by women because of our conditioning, particularly in analysing ideas and articulating our thoughts. However, the last thing we need is to glorify these difficulties and mystify them under the guise of sisterhood (or, as it might be today, 'autonomy'). Sheila Rowbotham sees subjective experiences as being pure and honest. However...subjective attitudes can be extremely dangerous and reactionary," (Pat Longman, *Workers Action* no.149).

More women can be mobilised to oppose abortion rights than to support them. Some women campaign for peace: others wave flags for troops returning from the Falklands. Some supported the Equal Rights Amendment in the US; numerous others campaigned vehemently against it. There is no single subjective 'women's view'.

Any politics basing itself on women's essence thus has to argue that some women are not *real* women. If what you say is the authentic feminist line because it reflects authentic women's experience, then anyone saying different is either a man (of course) or a woman whose experience is not really a woman's experience or who is brainwashed.

Often women do feel the need to claim authority for personal experience, for example in trying to get issues open for discussion in the



'Reclaim the Night' march Manchester 1978

face of resistance by arrogant and articulate men. But something different is happening today. Susan Ardill and Sue O'Sullivan put it like this: "With the increasing dominance of 'identity' as the organising factor of so many feminist activities and discussions... 'naming' and 'claiming' came to be invested with a particular moral authority. Just to *name* yourself as part of a given group is to *claim* a moral backing for your words and action.

"What was being invoked was a particular feminist ideology...an analysis of the world as made up of a fixed hierarchy of oppression...around gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity, age and ability; and notions of the 'authenticity' of subjective experiences — experience which can be understood only with reference to the hierarchy. In this context, any clash, whether between groups or individuals, becomes a matter of rank determining righteousness. Taken to extremes, if there are divisions within the same 'rank' or group, suppression becomes necessary, so as to protect the 'official' version's claim to define and describe the oppression" (*Feminist Review* No.23, pp.33-34).

Ardill and O'Sullivan are writing about a dispute where some political lesbians tried to ban sadomasochistic lesbians from the London Lesbian and Gay Centre. Here 'naming' and 'claiming' was being used not to swat down arrogant men, but to proscribe other women. And the argument can go further.

Jayne Egerton (in *Sweeping Statements*, pp.199-202) defines "male sexuality as the crucial instrument of our control" and concludes: "I cannot see (a feminist sexual politics) as being synonymous or compatible with the pursuit of pleasure, given that we live under male



supremacy and may have internalised male sexual values...What gives us pleasure may not always be in our best interests...Our needs, desires and preferences have all been constructed under male supremacy and our subjective response to our powerlessness and subordination cannot be prioritised if they further enslave us..” Here the politics of experience have come full circle. True ‘female values’ are buried so deep under the influence of male supremacy that only a few women can perceive them; but in the name of those values, those few women condemn the ‘desires and preferences’ of *most women*. Jayne Egerton is in fact criticising a feminist journal which argued for a libertarian attitude to sexual politics, including pornography: the same sort of argument has been used against women having heterosexual sex because they want to. “Q.But I like fucking. A.Giving up fucking, for a feminist, is about taking your politics seriously” — Leeds Revolutionary Feminists, 1979). Now sadomasochistic lesbian sex is out. Only lesbian sex, and only the right sort of lesbian sex, is permitted! A Victorian moral code could hardly be stricter.

In the 1980s, the ‘politics of experience’ has been substantially exploded within the women’s movement by the protests of black and Jewish feminists. The result has been, however, not a return to rationalism, but the construction of more and more hierarchies of oppression and the oppressed-group identities conferring moral authority. In truth the Palestine question is the most dramatic illustration of the unviability of the politics of experience. In terms of ‘the views that come from within us’, Israeli Jews and many non-Israeli Jews are Israeli-nationalist. Palestinian Arabs are Palestinian-Arab nationalists. Jews are oppressed, Palestinian Arabs are oppressed. Yet neither Israeli nationalism nor Palestinian-Arab nationalism can provide a progressive solution. It is necessary to rise above all instinctive, subjective responses, to analyse objectively.

This is the condition of all scientific thought. Generally, science demands that we distance ourselves from immediate reactions and impressions. No individual can claim that her personal experience represents or sums up the universal experience of all women. Indeed, she can only know that her personal experiences are even *typical* of women’s experience to the extent that women’s experience is objectively analysed and described. And then conclusions follow from the objective analysis and description, not primarily from the individual experience.

Hegel stated the case boldly when he condemned “the sort of ecstatic enthusiasm which starts straight off with absolute knowledge, as if shot from a pistol, and makes short work of other points of view simply by explaining that it is to take no notice of them...Since the man of common sense appeals to his feeling, to an oracle within his breast, he is ready to meet anyone who does not agree. He has simply to explain that he has no more to say to anyone who does not find and feel the same as himself. In other words, he tramples the root of humanity under foot. For the nature of humanity is to impel men to agree with one another, and its very existence lies simply in the explicit realisation of a community of conscious life. What is anti-human, the

condition of mere animals, consists in keeping within the sphere of feeling pure and simple, and in being able to communicate only by way of feeling-states” (*Introduction to the Phenomenology of Mind*).

Feminism generally has been a daughter of rationalism and humanism here enounced by Hegel. It appeals against the common-sense appearance of women’s subordination as a fact given by nature to the higher authority of rational analysis; it appeals against sexist dehumanisation of women, to a principle of treating every human being equally as an individual. Not only the ghetto-feminists, but also ‘rainbow coalition’ politicians, who see politics as a range of oppressed groups all striving for status, have here broken from classic feminism, and from the foundation which classic feminism shares with democracy and socialism.

Science and logic as they exist have, it is true, been shaped by men; and probably that has warped them. But Simone de Beauvoir gave the reply to any feminist who might therefore wish to abandon science and logic: “Culture, civilisation, universal values, have all been the work of men, since it is they who have stood for universality. Just as the proletariat, challenging the bourgeoisie as the dominant class, does not throw out the whole bourgeois heritage, in the same way women have to use, on an equal basis with men, the instruments men have created, not reject them totally” (quoted in Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley, eds., *The Rights and Wrongs of Women*, p.356). Better this approach than one which reproduces the old sexist notion of ‘feminine intuition’ in a new feminist guise.



Simone de Beauvoir



Jesse Jackson

## Rainbow coalition politics

Elizabeth Wilson is a *Morning Star* Stalinist, but her comment is apt: "One disturbing aspect...is the way in which some radical men have taken up the question of pornography. Half of those on the left who think they are sensitive to feminism have taken up the pornography issue often without being aware that it is one on which socialist feminists disagree. Ken Livingstone, for instance, could say that Andrea Dworkin was the most wonderful feminist living as if there had been no debate at all about her book (*Pornography*)."

The Irish Marxist leader James Connolly used to protest at English socialists allying themselves with wave-the-flag Irish nationalists rather than with the Irish socialists. Something of the same sort happens on the left today. A nod to Sinn Fein, an expression of sympathy with Andrea Dworkin, and some flag-waving for the PLO and the ANC defines you as a radical even if you have no programme at all for class struggle to seize the means of production.

Bloodthirsty revolutionism for abroad is a traditional badge for

those who are not so revolutionary on their own home terrain. But how can radical feminism (or some version of it) be co-opted in the same way? Surely it strikes much closer to home? It does not, for two reasons: its effective acceptance of the doctrine of separate spheres for women and for men, and its focus on biological or almost biological issues such as the alleged universal nature of male sexuality, rather than social and economic issues more readily addressed by political action. The out-and-out radical feminist has no demands to make on men, because from her point of view such demands are useless. But that means that the unthinking or demagogic leftist man can identify himself with what seems to be the most extreme and revolutionary feminism at the cost of little more than a few self-condemnations. To endorse Andrea Dworkin was easier than doing something about the pay and conditions of the GLC's women cleaners!

The resulting male leftist stance is little different, despite its intentions, from the 'chivalrous' versions of old-fashioned sexism. The division between male and female spheres is not even very different from the traditional. Sex, pornography, rape, and so on are 'women's issues': the more impersonal social and economic issues are left as 'men's'. Seen in the perspective of the development of the left over the last 20 years, 'rainbow coalition' politics have several roots. The failure of the revolutionary Marxists to inspire and organise the majority of those radicalised in the late '60s and early '70s has left a lot of people anti-capitalist but disappointed in socialism. They seek to supplement their socialism by other struggles. The most obvious example is Eurocommunism. A number of feminists, in particular, have become sympathetic to Eurocommunism: it tells them that 'socialism' may not be very good (as in the USSR), but it can be improved by autonomous feminist and other struggles.

The new left in the Labour Party made a big impact in local government. Between 1978 and 1983 left-wing Labour administrations were elected in local authorities, at first in London, then in other major cities, for instance Manchester. In May 1981 Ken Livingstone was elected leader of the Greater London Council (GLC). The GLC of May 1981 was very different from the image we now have of it. Its manifesto contained an explicit commitment to confronting the government over cuts. Livingstone personally pledged the support of the GLC to any workers in struggle, as part of the fight to "bring down this government ahead of its time". The GLC was geared to, and focused on, class struggle.

But it began to veer away from that focus very soon. At the beginning of 1982 the GLC decided to obey the courts over the 'Fares Fair' issue — the GLC 'went legit'. From then on, Livingstone's GLC slid away from its commitment to the working class. Socialist politics were abandoned for a variant of radical liberalism. It was *after* the GLC had capitulated to the government that the turn towards women, lesbians and gays, and equal opportunities took place. These causes did not figure largely in the 1981 manifesto. They were adopted in the search for ways of being radical that did not mean collision with the

Tories in the courts.

Hackney councillor Hilda Kean pointed out the problems with this in an interview in 1983: "How can the GLC on the one hand make all this propaganda about having a GLC Women's Committee and supposedly take notice of the interests of women in London, while at the same time it draws back from the fight for adequate resources for such facilities? This is to miseducate people about the nature of women's oppression, which is seen on the level of ideas in people's heads rather than the economic way in which women are discriminated against."

Now decentralisation, women's committees, and access to local government resources for new groups, can be good. But they are not inherently socialist. And, as Hilda Kean pointed out, they do not tackle the real roots of women's oppression, and they do not touch the lives of most working class women. The women in the GLC typing pool still had to raise their hands to ask permission to go to the toilet!

In her book, *Labour, A Tale of Two Parties*, Hilary Wainwright, who worked for the GLC, is fairly explicit about her views: "Looking back, the Labour Party manifesto for the 1981-5 GLC was nothing like as radical as the policies for which it later became known." What Wainwright sees as radical is the extension of pressure-group politics, not a fight against the government. In terms of women's politics, the GLC experience and the model it provided for other Labour left administrations was crucial. Equal-opportunities pressure-group politics, combined with a variant of cultural feminism, has become the dominant form of women's politics. It has replaced real campaigns and real attempts to organise women to fight here and now for their liberation.

The GLC did act positively in providing money for women's projects, groups and centres. It had a huge budget which enabled it to do so. But feminist publications such as *Outwrite* and *Trouble and Strife* have expressed ambivalence about the whole funding experience. Many groups found that it limited what they were able to do politically. Some found that it militated against real involvement: "You get paid workers in, and, in a sense, what you're doing is removing the need for the involvement of dozens of women who used to put in the effort to produce newsletters, organise conferences, contact the press, keep the whole thing going. I think across London there were very few campaigns left, just offices and workers."

Now, of course, the party is over. The cuts which local authorities made — and are still making — seriously affect women both as workers and as consumers of services. They have also blown apart the whole project of achieving equal opportunities by positive discrimination measures from above. What use is positive discrimination in hiring when you are cutting jobs?

In many ways the local government experience exacerbated the disorientation of feminism. The gains which *could* have been made at ground level in the labour movement were given up for the limited gains available through working the system. All too often feminism in the labour movement is little more than a figleaf for fake leftists to hide behind.

Ideologically, there is an analogy between the watered-down radical feminism to be found in the 'rainbow coalition' left and its Third Worldism. Among modern neo-Marxist theories of imperialism Arghiri Emmanuel stands out for his clarity and consistency in opposition to class politics. Imperialism is about rich nations exploiting poor nations through unequal exchange, he says; therefore working class internationalism is an empty myth, and we must look to the struggle of the poor nations. Just as not many feminists go all the way with the radical separatists, so also not many leftists go all the way with Emmanuel. But many influential writers have tried to splice a view of the world economy as based on a rich centre draining a poor periphery together with class-struggle politics. There results a sort of socialism which is little more than ultra-radical nationalism. In the same way, the rainbow coalition version of socialism is little more than radicalised liberal pressure-group politics. The humanism, the 'whole people' approach of the first revolutionary exuberance of the modern women's movement is replaced by a conglomerate of sectionalisms.

From a working class point of view this is obviously harmful, since it aims to divide the working class into segregated camps — women and men, and maybe blacks and whites, disabled and able-bodied, Jews and gentiles, lesbians, gays and straights, etc. Each camp has its own 'autonomous' struggle for 'self-determination' or the struggle ascribed to it by its self-appointed representatives. The coalition or alliance can be established only by mutual deference and agreement on spheres of influence, in other words by horse-trading.

These politics are no good for women either. Horse-trading, machine politics, demagogy, reliance on status, are the weapons of the powerful. Reason, science and arguing to convince are the weapons of the dispossessed. Whatever short-term advantages women may gain in narrow radical milieus by the play of feminist demagogy, they will be vastly outweighed by the closing of channels to the reasoned arguments of authentic feminism. And the 'rainbow coalition' perspective diminishes women. In such a coalition, women necessarily have to concede spheres of influence to other groups and confine themselves to a set range of 'women's issues'.

For socialism to be possible, a rational plan for society must be possible — a perspective meaningful to all. It must be possible to debate different programmes on a basis of common communication. It must be possible to create a cohesive social force which can carry through a conscious, rational plan. In other words, the working class must become a 'universal class', in the terms defined by Marx: "...a sphere of society having a universal character because of its universal suffering and claiming no particular right because no particular wrong but unqualified wrong is perpetrated on it; a sphere that can invoke no traditional title but only a human title...a sphere that is the complete loss of humanity and can only redeem itself through the total redemption of humanity" (Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*).

The working class must be able to embrace within itself and within its programme all the liberation demands of the various oppressed, of

women, of black people, of lesbians and gays, and so on. If the working class can do this, it will of course be in large measure due to the specific activity of the women of the working class (and, partly, to the enlightening work of the best middle class feminists); but that sort of specific activity by women is quite different from a feminism which proclaims a different sphere of politics for women.

If no coherent, unified working class programme is possible, then no socialism is possible. How can the economy be planned democratically? The best you can hope for is some relatively fair and flexible arrangement to balance different perceptions and interests of different groups — in other words, liberal capitalist pressure-group politics. Remember: the idea of a coalition of various disadvantaged groups is no innovation of the GLC or of present-day socialists. It is the traditional scheme of the US Democratic Party. Tammany Hall originated from a populist movement among Irish immigrants — the poorest of New York at the time — against an oligarchy which controlled the city.

As long ago as 1979, it was said in criticism of the pamphlet *Beyond the Fragments*, which helped pioneer rainbow-coalition politics on the British left, that: "All the stuff about learning from experience, cosiness, love, hides a hard reformist kernel. Eurocommunism can adapt to feminism and to the ideas of the autonomous women's movement because it dismisses completely the central and revolutionary role of the working class. The working class becomes just one of the allies of the women's movement and part of the broad democratic alliance." (Pat Longman, *Workers Action* 149).

## Two systems, two struggles?

In many of its fundamental ideas, the feminism now fashionable on the Labour left is closer to radical or cultural feminism than to theoretical socialist-feminism. But socialist-feminists did provide the idea of multiple, overlapping but independent, liberation struggles.

Not seeing an overall vision which could encompass both sex and class issues, some writers resorted instead to the notion of two parallel systems, capitalism and *patriarchy*. Thus they met with radical feminists who had used 'patriarchy' as their *overall* explanation but who, in the face of complex reality and of challenges from black and working class women, had become less confident about the all-embracing ambitions of their theory.

The trouble with 'patriarchy' as a concept was well summed up by Sheila Rowbotham. "It implies a universal and historical form of oppression which returns us to biology — and thus it obscures the need to recognise the multiplicity of ways in which societies have defined gender...The word leaves us with two separate systems in which a new male/female split is implied. We have patriarchy oppressing women and capitalism oppressing male workers... 'Patriarchy' implies a structure which is fixed, rather than the kaleidoscope of forms within which women and men have encountered one another. It does not carry any notion of how women might act to transform their situation as a sex...We have stretched its meaning in umpteen different ways, but there is no transience in it at all. It simply refuses to budge" (*No Turning Back*, p.73).

Michele Barrett makes the same point: "The resonance of this concept lies in its recognition of the trans-historical character of women's oppression, but in this very appeal to longevity it deprives us of an adequate grasp of historical change...What we need to analyse are precisely the mechanisms by which women's oppression is secured in different contexts, since only then can we confront the problem of how to change it" (*Women's Oppression Today*, pp.249-50). But it seems that Barrett has changed her views since then: see *Feminist Review* no.23.

The rational core to the search for the root of things in some structure so long-lasting that it must follow fairly directly from human *biology* is the fact that women's subordination has continued for so long, under so many different material circumstances. It is reasonable

to feel doubt about whether the analysis of women's oppression as rooted in the economic structure of the family and the household (which in turn is shaped by the wider economy) captures all the reality. After all, family and household economic structures have been shaken profoundly, and for long periods, by industrial revolutions, wars, slumps. Why does male domination always emerge alive from the tumult?

This question demolishes the cruder versions of radical feminism, which see male domination as a male conspiracy, imposed on women by brute force and/or calculated dupery. If it were so, then great social upheavals would regularly be followed by civil wars between men and women to re-establish patriarchy. But — whatever the violence used by *individual* men against individual women — they are not. In fact (and only a crudely economic version of Marxism can fail to register this) the male-dominated structures of the family have all sorts of self-stabilising mechanisms, relatively independent of the usefulness of the family to the ruling class. Men do benefit materially; and many women do find the mother role profoundly satisfying — it puts them centre-stage for the first time in their lives. Before cheap, reliable contraception, women had very strong motives to seek the security of marriage. Ideas keep an influence even when their material roots have decayed. In capitalist prosperity, there are few disturbances to shake up old structures; in slump, people are forced back onto more reliance on the family to survive.

Juliet Mitchell and Ann Foreman, in different ways, have tried to extend Marxist-feminist analysis deeper than this, with a psychoanalytical theory of 'femininity'. Simone de Beauvoir also tried to dig deeper, using existentialist philosophy and some ideas from psychoanalysis. It may well be that the women and men of the future, having demolished the present economic obstacles to women's equality, will more clearly discover deep psychological structures which distort the way we live. But first we must demolish those economic obstacles! To base political strategy now on what we can discern about the 'deep' structures would disorient us.

## The Unhappy Marriage

The most influential statement of the 'dual system' theory is Heidi Hartmann's article, *The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism* (printed, together with other articles responding to it, in a book of the same title, 1981). "The 'marriage' of Marxism and feminism has been like the marriage of husband and wife depicted in English common law; Marxism and feminism are one, and that one is Marxism. Recent attempts to integrate Marxism and feminism are unsatisfactory to us as feminists because they subsume the feminist struggle into the 'larger' struggle against capital."

Marxist theories, according to Hartmann, just slot women into the working class. They analyse how women relate to capitalism rather



Asian workers on strike for better pay

than how women relate to men. And even if they construct a detailed picture of the household and its place in the economy, they do not explain why it is *women* who are oppressed in the home rather than men. "The categories of Marxist analysis, class, reserve army of labour, wage-labourer, do not explain why particular people fill particular places. They give no clues about why *women* are subordinate to *men* inside and outside the family and why it is not the other way round. Marxist categories are sex-blind."

So we have to define present-day society as a dual system, both patriarchy and capitalism. "There appears to be no necessary connection between changes in the one aspect of production and changes in the other. A society could undergo transition from capitalism to socialism, for example, and remain patriarchal" — though upheavals on one side would probably, in practice, shake the other side. Indeed, society is more than a dual system: "It might be most accurate to refer to our societies not as, for example, simply capitalist, but as patriarchal capitalist white supremacist." (Or patriarchal capitalist white supremacist anti-semitic disablist homophobic ageist....?)

Hartmann concludes that "a struggle to establish socialism must be a struggle in which groups with different interests form an alliance... struggle between men and women will have to continue along with the struggle against capital" — and not be subordinated to it. She objects to views which see "women's struggles as revolutionary not because they are feminist but because they are anti-capitalist." Is Marxism 'sex-blind'? In about the same way as it is nation-blind or race-blind.

It is not possible to make a Marxist analysis of national or racial oppression just by juggling with the concepts of wage-labour, capital, value and so on. We need to bring in facts, starting with geography and going on to look at why capitalism developed first in Western Europe, how West European capital sought to draw profits from the rest of the world, and so on.

Likewise, no analysis of sex oppression can be got from any amount of dialectics with the abstract categories of capital. We start with the biological facts that permitted the first subjugation of women, go on to the role of the household headed by the father and owning private property, and finally trace the development of the household in capitalism. *Some* biological facts must enter any account of women's oppression — or else how do you tell men and women apart? — but women's oppression under capitalism is not due to biology any more than imperialism is due to geography.

Only the very crudest versions of Marxism simply dissolve women's oppression into the general oppression of the working class. Engels, in his *Origins of the Family*, tried to trace women's oppression from the earliest times, through many different classes, and concluded that *bourgeois* women in his day were, in some ways, more oppressed as women than working class women. The sexual double-standard was applied more strictly to them because of the need for legitimate heirs of property.

Nor are Marxists only interested in women's struggles because they may be anti-capitalist. We are interested in national liberation struggles for more reasons than that they may weaken capitalism; we are interested in workers winning higher wages not just because the struggle may radicalise them. We do not concern ourselves with attaching moral priorities to different struggles, but with soberly analysing which struggles present-day society inevitably generates and their dynamics. We see working class struggle as central not only because of a moral choice, but because we believe hard facts say that class struggle has the scope and force to draw in all other liberation struggles and to change society in a revolutionary way.

Hartmann's conclusion, that feminist struggle must keep at least a certain distance from class struggle, is not a deduction from facts, but a restatement of her original assumption: she started out by protesting at any attempt to "subsume the feminist struggle into the 'larger' struggle against capitalism." The route from original assumption to final conclusion is only a detour through trying to prove that Marxist theories do worse than subsume or integrate feminist struggle, as a distinct element, into an overall picture of the dynamics of capitalism and its revolutionary overthrow — that all Marxist theories in fact *dissolve* feminist struggle into class struggle and lose sight of it as a distinct issue.

Just how much the conclusion means, however, is another issue. Hartmann sees capitalism and patriarchy as acting in partnership, and believes that, whatever the abstract theoretical possibilities, it is impossible in practice to overthrow patriarchy before overthrowing

capitalism. Conversely, a struggle against capitalism not linked to a struggle against patriarchy will, she believes, fail. And the tumult and upheaval created by the overthrow of capitalism will provide the best circumstances to vanquish patriarchy. Sometimes she defines the role of feminists as fighting for a fully 'humane socialism' as opposed to what she sees as a patriarchal form of socialism in the Stalinist states. She thinks that the overthrow of patriarchy may be in the long term interests of men as well as women. How drastic is her difference, in practice, from a Marxist who agrees that the struggle for women's liberation will not end with the socialist revolution, but must continue long after?

Iris Young, in the same volume, puts her finger on the problem here: "I have some trouble conceiving what struggle against patriarchy as distinct from the struggle against capitalism might be at a practical level." Even the most 'feminist' issues like fighting for abortion rights and against sexual harassment at work, are inseparable from the general struggle for democracy and socialism.

What is the specific women's struggle which must be waged *separately* from the class struggle? Even the radical feminist campaigns against pornography and sex shops are not (whatever you think of them otherwise) pure women versus men struggles — many men want pornography and sex shops suppressed, and a few women produce pornography or run sex shops. Perhaps the only pure women's struggle is the struggle to get more women into Parliament and various other positions. But either that struggle is a struggle for equal rights and for drawing women into the labour movement — in which case it is 'subsumed' in the socialist struggle — or, if it goes beyond that to be a pure women versus men exercise, it is a hopelessly blind alley from any point of view.

Heidi Hartmann gives no examples of the independent struggle of women against men. She does, however, give an example of independent struggle of men against women. In the late 19th century, she says, protective laws for women labour, and the 'family wage' for male workers pushed women into the home. Capital would have preferred to exploit both men and women as wage-workers. But it compromised with patriarchy, as represented by the male workers' wish to have women serving them at home.

It is true that some male trade unionists in that period argued for getting women out of wage-labour and back into the home, and some women workers protested. But Hartmann's analysis is skewed. That was also the period of laws against child labour — laws which went against the immediate interests of both working class women and men, because they would no longer have income from their children's wages. Under pressure from the labour movement, industrialists were forced to concede safeguards for the health of the next generation of workers — in the same way, as Marx put it, that farmers had to spread fertiliser on their fields.

The labour movement's attitude was not always sexist, by any means. In Germany, the fight for protective laws was led by a socialist



women's movement. The Marxist women believed that capitalism would inevitably draw women into industry, but they should try to intervene to win as much protection as possible. And, even if the trend has been slower and more erratic than they expected, the Marxist women were not far wrong. The changes of the late 19th century did not stop women entering industry; the general tendency has been for women's wage-work to increase.

So what is left of 'patriarchy' as an independent system, quite separable from capitalism? Hartmann criticises radical feminists because of the abstract and un-historical nature of their concept of patriarchy; but she cannot escape the same criticism herself. If the analysis of capitalism, or feudalism, or slave society, or whatever, tells us what 'places' there are in the social division of labour and it remains only for patriarchy to tell us that women get the worse places and men the better, then what is this 'patriarchy' which is a common content to so many forms? It is simply the assertion, stripped from any social context, that men dominate women. Why? What is the reason common to feudalism, capitalism, Stalinism, etc., but quite separable from any of them? It can only be some inherent drive to dominate in men, and some inherent weakness in women which makes them allow domination. If so, why should patriarchy be overthrown today rather than 2000 years ago, or 2000 years into the future?

Hartmann comments in passing: "We know that patriarchal relations gave rise to the feminist movement and that capital generates class struggle." But she is wrong. *Capitalism* gave rise to the feminist movement. And socialism will give rise to women's liberation.

## Autonomy

Autonomous women's movements exist and have existed. No matter how much sectarian socialists denounce them as a 'diversion' they will continue to exist. Working class women are oppressed more than, differently from, and in part *by* working class men. Middle class women are oppressed too. Capitalism generates a *democratic* revolt against this sex oppression: women fight back. That revolt interlaces with the general class struggle; but it has its own tempo. Women will not *wait* for the labour movement.

But these autonomous women's movements are limited. However much radical feminists may want to deny the fact, sizeable women's movements have always arisen as part of a wider radicalisation (before World War I, in the late '60s) they have not waxed and waned exactly in time with the wider radicalisation, but an across-the-board setback for the left and the working class has always taken the women's movement down with it.

And women's movements have been limited in size. The number of women active in special women's movements has never been more than a fraction of the number of women active in trade union and

socialist movements.

We well know the shortcomings of the existing labour movements. Nonetheless, they do often cover the whole working class in the sense of having *some* organisation in every important workplace and every working class community. No women's movement has ever 'covered' the whole female sex in its area in the same way, or anything like. Labour movements only occasionally mobilise the entire working class as a class. Nevertheless, such things as the French general strike of 1968, or the Polish workers movement of 1980-1, do happen. Apart from quirky events like the Icelandic women's general strike, feminist movements have never been able to mobilise the entire female sex as a sex.

Bemoan them or applaud them, such are the facts about autonomous feminist movements. Why is it like that? Simone de Beauvoir tried to explain (*The Second Sex*): "Proletarians say 'We'; Negroes also. Regarding themselves as subjects, they transform the bourgeoisie, the whites, into 'others'. But women do not say 'we', except at some congress of feminists or similar formal demonstration; men say 'women' and women use the same word in referring to themselves.

"Women lack concrete means for organising themselves into a unit which can stand face to face with the correlative unit...they have no such solidarity of work and interest as that of the proletariat. They are not even promiscuously herded together in the way that creates community feeling among the American Negroes, the ghetto Jews, the workers of Saint-Denis, or the factory hands of Renault. They live dispersed among the males, attached through residence, housework, economic condition and social standing to certain men — fathers or husbands — more firmly than they are to other women.

"If they belong to the bourgeoisie, they feel solidarity with men of that class, not with proletarian women; if they are white, their allegiance is to white men, not to Negro women. The proletariat can propose to massacre (or, perhaps more to the point, expropriate) the ruling class...but women cannot even dream of exterminating the males. The bond that unites her to her oppressors is not comparable to any other..."

Sue Himmelweit analyses the question in terms of Marxist economics: "The sort of society in which we live is one in which production provides the direct arena of class struggle and only an indirect one of sex struggle, because the activities of production are separated from those of reproduction, the direct arena of sex struggle. But more than that, capitalist relations of production are not only separated from reproduction relations; the former also ensure their own dominance over the latter. The pursuit of profit through production has no limit. Activities which satisfy other needs are highly constrained by, and dependent on, those which can be harnessed to the production of use-values...which can be sold for money, money which can be accumulated as capital. So the dualism between production and reproduction is both a specific product of our society and, if the



priorities of society are not challenged, imposes a solution to that dualism: production *does* dominate in our society over all other activities." (*The Real Dualism of Sex and Class*). This is the answer to those, like Christine Delphy and Shulamith Firestone, who argue that male/female relations in the home are the central, defining, economic relations of society. The fact is that society is dominated by social production outside the home.

Himmelweit's own conclusion from her observation is: "to accept the priority of production-based struggles over reproductive struggles, or class struggle over sex struggle, is to accept the priorities and separations of capitalism, rather than of the society we are trying to create." But fighting capitalism is not just a matter of counterposing an ideal of how we would prefer things to be. The relative size and impact of different struggles is not determined by our feelings about them, but by hard facts. It is not because of 'economism' by socialists that the miners' strike brought a challenge to sexism in miners' families in its wake, rather than the strike being an offshoot of an independent rebellion of women in miners' families.

We have to fight capitalism on the terrain of capitalism. We are against the wages system; but we promote battles for higher wages. We are against violence; yet we seek to prepare the working class to defend itself arms in hand against the ruling class. We are against all national divisions; but we support the right of nations to self-determination. Likewise the class struggle, centred in production, has to be our main focus; and that choice does not imply any devaluing of feminist issues within the household and the family.

From this flows our policy. We expect a mass autonomous women's movement to emerge. We want it to emerge, because we reckon that its emergence is a necessary part of the liberation of women. We will help it emerge, so far as we can, though the emergence of mass movements is not something that can be engineered by Marxist minorities.

When a mass, or sizeable, autonomous women's movement emerged, we should intervene constructively, attempting to build the movement and to learn from it. We should also, however, seek to orient it to and root it in the working class — to argue for a mass working-class based women's movement. We should do that because we know sisterhood does not override class differences, and middle-class women's movements can swing to the right. A mass socialist party might seek to build a socialist women's movement organisationally autonomous from the party, though politically linked to it, and to rally all the best militant working-class feminists and a good many feminists of middle-class background too, to that movement. For a relatively small Marxist group such an endeavour would be pure self-proclamation.

'Autonomy' is not really a *slogan* or *aim*, or it should not be. Marxists may well intervene in movements *respecting their autonomy*, but they do not intervene in order to make movements autonomous! Further, the *form* of autonomy is of no necessary value without the

*substance* of mass mobilisation. A small group or clique claiming to speak with the authority of 'women's autonomy' is practising charlatanism, not feminism.

## Positive discrimination

'Autonomy' was never a *demand* of the women's movement in the early '70s. Feminists did not demand 'autonomy', they just *did* it. One chief reason why they did it was that the labour movement was male-dominated, often inhospitable to women and slow to respond to their demands. So were the revolutionary socialist groups: the more sectarian groups were even worse than the mass movement. Feminists kept a certain distance.

Marxists wanted to reduce that distance. They wanted to turn the women's movement towards the labour movement, and to transform the labour movement on feminist lines. For that purpose they raised the call for positive discrimination. The labour movement, they said, should enact special, emergency measures to counteract entrenched male bias. Women should get special assistance in efforts to enter traditionally male-dominated jobs and to secure representation on traditionally male-dominated committees. Positive discrimination, in that perspective, was a measure *against* autonomy, or at least against excessive autonomy. It was an attempt to reduce feminists' distance or autonomy from the labour movement. Today, however positive discrimination and autonomy are the twin battle-cries of a certain sort of feminism in the labour movement and the student movement. Why?

It was not only Marxists who wanted to channel feminists towards established structures. Other and bigger forces had the same aim, but in a different way. Marxists wanted to turn the women's movement to the labour movement, take up a fight for the demands of the women's movement within the labour movement, and thus link both feminists with the class forces that can win women's liberation and make the labour movement more revolutionary. Middle class reformists wanted to turn the women's movement into pressure group politics.

The middle class reformists have succeeded to a substantial extent. In some areas, notably of local government, positive discrimination has become a veritable racket. This sort of positive discrimination is not progressive. It is, to be sure, no bad thing if a better proportion of women appear in top jobs. But if that is at the price of transforming feminism into a pressure group within a politics of radical liberalism, then the cost outweighs the benefits. Remember: the US Democratic Party has an elaborate structure of positive discrimination, but has no political improvement to show for it. Official positive discrimination in the US, and to a smaller extent in Britain, has introduced a small minority of blacks to top jobs, but meanwhile under the pressure of

capitalism's decay the position of the mass of black working class people has got worse. A. Sivanandan has written on how this sort of pressure group politics has undermined and blunted black militancy.

We do want more women Labour MPs. But not at the price of transforming feminism into a career stepping-stone for a tiny minority of women! And the comparison with black politics shows that the danger is not just a matter of fancy. Compare the attention given by official Labour feminism to the business of getting more women MPs with the lack of attention to the needs of the fast-expanding army of women part-time workers, now about 20% of the entire labour force.

The rational kernel of positive discrimination must be rescued from the mess of careerism. Anything that helps to integrate women into the labour movement on equal terms should be supported. Anything that breaks down democracy based on reasoned argument and majority voting into horse-trading between token representatives of different 'autonomous' oppressed groups should be opposed.

Back in the early '70s, a famous feminist pamphlet identified 'The Tyranny of Structurelessness' as an obstacle to mass participation, especially by working class women, in the feminist movement, and encouragement to cliques. The rise in the labour movement of structures based on horse-trading can exercise the same "tyranny". No special provisions or rules are more important for enabling the participation of women, or the socially weaker in general, than the principles of democracy and orderly functioning, and of transparency and clarity of debate. The principle that arguments should be considered objectively, according to their logic and factual evidence, irrespective of the status of their advocates, is most important for those with established status. Yet it is easy for positive discrimination to slide over into politics where people claim consideration for what they say not because of its cogency, but because of the status (woman, black, gay, Jewish, whatever) of the speaker.

In the US now revolutionary left organisations generally have a majority or near-majority of women among their members — not because of any special gimmicky structures, but simply because more women want to be revolutionary activists. In France, Lutte Ouvrière, without any gimmickry, regularly has 50% of women on its electoral slates (of several hundred candidates). Throughout the advanced capitalist countries there is a trend for the long-standing differences where women always, on average, voted more right-wing than men, to be abolished or even reversed. If we keep the channels of democracy clear and unfouled, then women will come forward to take the equal role that is theirs by right in the socialist movement.



One of the Grunwick strikers speaking at the Working Women's Charter rally 1978

## The failures of the left

To sum up: what does the changed focus of the new radical feminism mean? Does it reflect feminism becoming more confident, bolder, less willing to accept superficial accounts which may be more comfortable for men, readier to go to the root of the matter? Or does it signify the women's movement disintegrating, with one section becoming more absorbed in reformism and another going in for sectarian excesses? Has the women's movement become more revolutionary, or less so? The very fact of the failure of the new radical feminism to mobilise many women — even on the issues which it says are central to all women — suggests the second explanation. A detailed critique of ideas produces the same conclusion. But there is another side to it.

Under the best of circumstances, a broad spontaneous movement like the women's movement of the late '60s and early '70s would fragment seriously as views and positions became more defined. The

possibility of keeping a large fragment of it as a coherent, progressively-developing revolutionary movement depended on the ability of some fraction within it to produce an outlook which would integrate different concerns into a coherent political whole. Since feminists were not just women, but also working class or middle class, black or white, lesbian or straight, etc., such a coherent political vision would have to embrace other issues beyond immediate women's issues.

Radical feminists could not produce such a vision. Only a small minority of women could be convinced by a stern instruction not to wander from a pre-defined feminist range of issue; and attempts to construct a whole theory of society (class, race and national relations included) pivoted on female/male relations failed. And socialists failed too. The early women's movement was quite decidedly aligned with the left. Many groups on the organised left were slow or sectarian in responding to it, and crude interventions by the Maoists in the early years caused resentment, but the group which managed to respond best, the IMG (now Socialist Action/International), had quite a strong and respected position in the movement. In the mid-1970s they were able to lead two of the biggest active campaigns in the women's movement, the Working Women's Charter and the National Abortion Campaign.

Theoretically, some of the early socialist writing in the new women's movement had tended to the line that women's oppression was "ideological" as opposed to the "economic" oppression suffered by the working class. This paralleled the middle class feminist view (of Betty Friedan, for example) that the problem was prejudices, attitudes, a "mystique", that must be dispelled by rational argument. The rational argument and the ideological disputation was, of course, important; and by and large it was successful. Attitudes did change. Women's equality became as accepted a value in Western societies as democracy or freedom. Yet real women's equality, for the majority, remained as elusive as real democracy and real freedom for the majority.

An off-beat socialist-feminist group, round Selma James, argued that women's subordination in the home was the core of oppression. Their solution, 'Wages for Housework', was, however, manifestly sectional and never got any wide support in the women's movement. Spurred on by this challenge, between 1973 and 1977 many Marxist feminists set about working out a more comprehensive theory of the social and economic roots of women's oppression in modern capitalism. They too based their accounts on women's subordination in the home, but linked them to a programme of socialisation of housework rather than wages for housework.

The "domestic labour debate" was productive. It opened the way for explaining that "in the capitalist wage-labour economy of today, childbirth and associated reproductive activities are excluded from the socially defined activity of production...Historically, the development of separate arrangements for production and reproduction has

taken place by assigning the latter to the family, associating reproduction relations with those of 'personal' life and individual consumption. The family is not so much what was left behind when production was 'removed' (from the old patriarchal household) but the simultaneously created counterpart of the relations of production." (Sue Himmelweit, 'The Real Dualism of Sex and Class'). Thus, historical capitalism is not just a system of production through wage-labour, but a system of production through wage-labour with reproduction through the housewife-based family.

This overview, however, was slow emerging. Some of the earlier contributions to the debate skewed their vision by focusing on the contribution of the housewife's labour to capitalist profits in social production. And "most of the skirmishes of the 'domestic labour debate'...degenerated into arguments about pure semantics or...disputes about the meaning of Marxist categories. For the most part, all that could be done with existing categories was to take each in turn and say whether it did or did not apply to domestic labour..." (Himmelweit).

On the terrain of day-to-day politics, the downfall of the left within the women's movement was signalled by the decline of the Working Women's Charter and the National Abortion Campaign in the late '70s. The IMG was politically erratic and riven by factional dispute on a whole range of issues; and the majority faction insisted on the "mass single issue campaign" of NAC as the key to advancing the women's movement. The IMG women in the WWC were with the minority faction. Other left groups in the WWC criticised the IMG's great concern with keeping the endorsement of left trade union bureaucrats; in hindsight, the critics exaggerated this valid point in a sectarian way. The net result was the predictable decline of NAC once the immediate parliamentary threat to abortion rights declined; the collapse of the WWC; and the destruction and dissipation of the IMG's women cadre.

The left, however, had another chance in 1979-80, when the rank and file rebelled in the Labour Party and large numbers of feminists poured into the women's sections. Women's Fightback took the lead in this movement. Uncertainty of aims, lack of organisational consolidation, and the destructive effects of a faction fight with women from the old 'Socialist Press' group, lost WF the initiative. It was taken by reformists and by Socialist Action (the politically-degenerated successor of the IMG) through the Women's Action Committee. The general decline of the Labour left after 1982 consolidated this turn.

Some women see this sad history as proof that the factionalism of male socialists has been the main factor stopping women socialists from building a strong movement. In fact, the factional issues — attitudes to the Labour Party, questions of how and when to agitate for a general strike, class politics and world-power bloc politics — are in no way specially "male"; and, as the general history of the women's movement shows, women are no less capable of factional fury and

and even blindness than men. The job of building an organisation necessarily involves overhead costs — time, energy and nerves spent on disputes and organisational mechanics — but there is no other way of fighting for socialism. Only an organisation, not scattered individuals or cliques, can develop and fight for a socialist programme.


The failure of the left in relation to the women's movement is really part of an overall failure of the left in relation to the radicalisation since the 1960s. Thousands of workers, women and men, have passed through the revolutionary left in the last 20 years. Most of them have dropped out, disenchanted, and if they are active they are only trade union or Labour Party activists. Some of the women, instead of choosing trade union or Labour Party work as their fallback, have instead chosen the fragments of the women's movement. It is a sad story, and cause for self-criticism, but not cause for despair. The working class cannot come to revolutionary consciousness except through a whole series of defeats, false starts, and chastening experiences. The chances of shortening the painful process depends crucially on those who can survive the disappointments, learn from them, and keep organising.

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