

Feminism and the Socialist Alternative

Wendy Clarke

This article is an attempt to evaluate from a socialist feminist perspective the impact and importance of the women's movement – not only how feminism has affected the lives of women over the last decade, but also how it has contributed to, altered and been assimilated into the political landscape.

Sometimes it seems almost pointless to try to integrate feminism and socialism into a homogeneous theory and practice, because of the many basic antagonisms between the development of feminism and male dominance, as well as capitalist exploitation. However, it is also clear that we must continue to argue for the best elements of feminism to be included in our ideas about socialism, to remain clear and positive on the need for an autonomous women's movement and to recognize that the autonomous women's movement is central to revolutionary strategy and the development of socialist alternatives.

The article argues that socialists should take more responsibility in examining what they can learn from feminism and the women's liberation movement rather than bemoaning the lack of socialism in the women's movement. Feminists and socialists are going to need to find more positive ways of working together in the coming decade if all our small gains are not to disappear in the face of the Tory onslaught.

The emergence of the women's liberation movement as a political force in the late 60s has had a fundamental effect on British life and politics over the last decade. The economic and political climate in which the early women's liberation movement blossomed – a period of boom and political optimism, when we acted as if anything was possible, and that international capitalism was being shaken to its foundations – has obviously vastly altered. But the women's movement has proved itself to be an enduring political and social force. It is international and feminist ideas have taken hold with women all over the world. The women's movement, in Britain, although changed since the early heady days of sisterhood, has endured successive governments, attempted appeasement and co-option through such measures as the Equal Pay Act and the Sex Discrimination Act, and is now faced with a Tory onslaught of increasing ferocity.

The movement has widened out, developed in different directions, and means different things to different women. In the organised women's liberation movement there are differing tendencies, and women involved in the



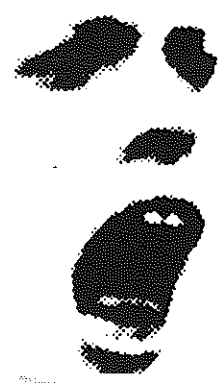
Victory in the Equal Pay dispute at Trico in 1976 (Chris Davies, Report)

movement concentrate their energies on different and less obvious aspects of women's oppression. But as well as those women who consciously and actively define themselves as 'women's libbers' these is a whole movement of women outside the loosely organised network of women's liberation movement groups. Women on strike for equal pay, women fighting for the right to be in a union, women who leave their husbands/lovers because they are no longer prepared to be battered and sexually abused, lesbians insisting on their right to define their own sexuality, women, like nurses, challenging the notion and acceptance that they are low paid because their caring dedication to the job should be enough. The ways in which women are trying to break out of the restriction which capitalism and male domination erect around our lives are varied and infinite. Women are no longer hidden from each other nor from history as before.

Thousands of women's lives have changed through an involvement in the women's movement. Many thousands more have been affected by the ideas of equality and women's liberation, even though they would not necessarily regard themselves as part of the women's movement. But despite all this, women's position has not improved. Women are still unequal and oppressed. Some changes have been made, some concessions won, but the battle is far

from over. We must try to take the gains and insights developed in the 70s into the new decade and strengthen and consolidate them.

The capitalist system and successive governments have shown their ability to coopt and defuse the struggles of women, and subtly restructure the system and initiate changes in women's position in response to women's demands. The introduction of the Equal Pay Act is an example of this complex inter-relationship. Equal Pay has been a demand of militants and feminists for over a century. The TUC has had it as one of its aims for nearly a hundred years. Yet it was not until the mid-60s that it became a political and economic option which was taken up – not only by militant workers like the women in Fords in 1968, but also by the government. The Labour government wanted to involve more women in the workforce at a time of expansion and a relatively tight labour market, in which women, particularly married women, were identified as the new source of labour and the fastest growing section of the workforce. But the government did not just see equal pay as a means of improving women's status at work because of an objection to the sexual division of labour and women's inferior status within that. They also saw it as a way of making capitalism function more effectively and competitively. Barbara Castle's opinion was 'This is a bill designed not only to end injustices but to



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stimulate efficiency. As long as women are paid below their economic value there is no incentive to put their work and abilities to their best use. Sweated labour is a soporific to management, not a stimulant.'

Employers, however, interpreted the Equal Pay Act differently and had plenty of time before its implementation to work out ways of restructuring their workforces so that women no longer worked in jobs directly comparable to men's. This has led to an even greater segregation and stratification of jobs so that women's work cannot be directly compared to men's. And when thousands of women in a multitude of workplaces throughout the country did try to enforce the law in their own factories, they often had to go out on strike to get anywhere. Women's consciousness of their own worth and their rights under law gave substance and focus to their anger and frustration, but all too often the male workers blocked attempts to improve conditions. And the government's changes in industrial procedure effectively channelled legitimate grievances into individual not collective action, by forcing complainants to make individual representation at tribunals.

So unfortunately it is not as easy as making demands for equality and getting them, nor is it as simple as hammering against the wall of capitalist oppression and exploitation to make it fall down. But one of the most vital contributions that feminism has made to the attack against the existing social order, is to delineate areas in which it is essential and valid to organise, arenas which had previously been deemed non-political and irrelevant. The women's movement politically legitimised the experiences of those traditionally written off both by bourgeois political parties and the left. Women's experience is important. Theory built on that experience and the development of a feminist politics are essential to any notion of revolutionary change, and cannot be ignored.

The women's movement has, by posing as central the question of women's oppression, laid bare the division between men and women. In uncovering this, and reclaiming our experiences as politically valid, the theory and practice of autonomous organisation has emerged as the essential method of overcoming and challenging these divisions. The examination of men's power over women has revealed the concept of patriarchy, the history of women's oppression and the fight against it, and the inadequacy of traditional Marxist theory. The importance of women's personal and subjective experience of oppression and exploitation, the anger and the pain, have developed as powerful weapons in the process of reclaiming a self-identity and existence, challenging the former abstracted differentiation between the personal and the political.

Women and Marxism

For many women the changed consciousness that the women's movement has brought about has resulted in an

involvement with the left or with socialist politics. The origins of the women's movement were closely related to other political traditions, particularly libertarianism, flourishing in the late 60s, so there has always been a relationship between feminism and socialism. But the relationship has often been uneasy and unequal — 'marriage' and 'courtship' are words currently used to describe the often traumatic relationship.

There is a substantial belief in the notion that women's liberation cannot be achieved without socialism, and socialism cannot be achieved without women's liberation. But then we are stuck — what kind of socialism, what does women's liberation mean? And how are we to achieve either? What is the relationship between autonomous movement and party? What kind of women's movement do we want?

To many women there seems to be no necessary link between feminism and

socialism — precisely because there are many feminists who do not believe that Marxism or socialism enriches or clarifies their experiences and actions. Equally there are socialist women who do not recognise the validity of feminism, but they are no less a part of the socialist movement because of that. There is of course much possible disagreement about



July 1977: Jayaben Desai argues with senior police officers on the day of the first Grunwick mass picket (Andrew Wiard, Report).

the definition of these terms – a fundamental dilemma over goals and ideas and how different words can mean different things.

There are also great difficulties surrounding the current attempt to establish the relationship, or interrelatedness of patriarchy/male supremacy and capitalism. Much of Marxist theory is inadequate to the task of understanding women's oppression, and it should be recognised that Marx and Engels are not the ultimate arbiters of revolutionary rectitude. One major impact of the women's liberation movement into the realms of Marxist debate has been to point to the one-sidedness of Marxist analysis, focussing exclusively on the question of production and ignoring the issue of reproduction. This does not just mean the actual biological process of procreation and birth, but the question of the reproduction of the future workforce – nurturance, socialisation, education and the reproduction of the social relations in which capitalist production operates. It means that Marxist discourse has omitted a section of theory which cannot be tagged onto it as an afterthought.

Since Marxist theory has, until the intervention of feminists, ignored a detailed examination of the interrelation of production and reproduction, the subordination of women and the ways these have changed historically, it has been partial and incomplete. And this has inevitably affected the political practice and strategy of sections of the left – leading at its worst to a gross economism. Most of Marxism is an *economic* analysis of capitalist production, although it does provide some pointers towards ways of understanding outside of the purely economic. The major concept which has emerged from the work of the women's liberation movement to begin to grapple with the question of the subordination of women is of the necessity to look at the history, and mechanisms of enforcement, of men's power over women as a *separate and distinct* phenomenon from capitalism's oppressive yoke. By and large this has been defined as patriarchy, although there is much dispute as to the validity of that term (literally meaning rule of the fathers) for present-day male dominance. There are probably as many different understandings and definitions of patriarchy as there are political persuasions in the women's movement (see Veronica Beechey's article 'On Patriarchy' in *Feminist Review* No. 3). While it is clear that we do not know enough to offer any definite analysis of the origins of women's oppression, nor the precise mechanisms which maintain it now, we must still begin to unravel the tangled relationship of capital's and men's oppression of women.

Marxism and patriarchy

Marxists from Marx and Engels onwards have been aware of the sexual (and racial) division within the working class, and pointed to this as an obstacle to the development of a united anti-capitalist offensive. Engels' solution,

which is the one still advocated by many Marxists today, has been to encourage women to enter the labour force offering the wage as a passport to liberation. What this perspective fails to realise is that oppression by gender, race and age *precedes* entry into the labour force and therefore determines what happens to those who enter it, what place in the hierarchy they fill, what type of job they do, and how much they earn.

The interrelatedness of sex, gender and class oppressions are complex. Their precise manifestations emerge in different forms at different times. There are biological differences between men and women; there is a sexual division of labour; there are marked differences in expected social behaviour and the socio-economic and political rewards (and relative status). But these manifestations are not inflexible, they are not ahistorical absolutes; they can change, they can be

manipulated. The constant is that women's status is inferior. For example, in this country doctors are paid more than nurses and have a higher social standing. The majority of doctors now are men, the majority of nurses women. But in the USSR where the majority of doctors are women the status and pay of the profession has altered from the days when it was a male preserve, and is now much lower relative to professions in which men dominate. Another example: in early 19th century Britain bricklaying was often a woman's job but in a gradual process of excluding women from some 'heavy' work, men organised in skilled unions and specifically excluded women (and children) from them, as a way of attempting to push wage rates up. By excluding women and children from some waged work men claimed higher wages on the basis of the need to support a family. This contributed towards changes in



Sue Shearer, a member of 'Women in Manual Trades', on a building site at the Elephant & Castle, London, where she works as a carpenter (Carlos Augusto, IFL)

family structure as the economy changed into a more fully-fledged capitalism. This happened at the expense of women, whose realm was defined as home and hearth, and whose role was defined as housewife, mother and her husband's possession.

It's not just status differences in the workplace or the family which have been examined by feminists. More fundamental is the questioning of assumed gender definitions, and the breakthrough in challenging the 'natural' femininity of women and the masculinity of men. As Liz Mackie's cartoon says 'If I get my feminine instincts biologically, who are you to tell me what to do as a woman?' Femininity and masculinity are socially constructed, learned sets of behaviour attached to different biological entities — there is little that is 'natural' about either. Within the constraints of socially acceptable gender roles the whole of both women's and men's sexuality is distorted — and any change in society which attempted to reorganise relations between and amongst the sexes on an equitable basis would require a revolution of an astonishingly wide-ranging nature. A change in the ownership of the means of production seems easy compared with a change in social and sexual construction and reproduction of women and men! But it is just as necessary before any kind of liberation can be achieved.

In a recent article in the *New Statesman* (Feb. 1 1980) Barbara Taylor and Sally Alexander make an assessment of the usefulness of the socialist feminist concept of patriarchy, which summarises neatly some of these points:

The concept of patriarchy points to a strategy which will eliminate not men, but masculinity, and transform the whole web of psycho-sexual relations in which masculinity and femininity are formed. It is a position from which we can begin to claim for political change precisely those areas of life which are usually claimed biological or neutral. It allows us to confront not only the day to day social practices through which men exercise power over women, but also the mechanisms through which patterns of authority and submission become part of the sexed personality itself — 'the father in our heads,' so to speak. It has helped us to think about sexual division — which cannot be understood simply as a byproduct of economic class relations or biology, but which has an independent dynamic that will only be overcome by an independent feminist politics. Finally it has allowed us to look past our immediate experiences as women to the underlying processes underlining and shaping that experience, for like class, sexual antagonism is not something which can be understood simply by living it: it needs to be analysed with concepts forged for that purpose. The theories which have developed around 'patriarchy' have been the first systematic attempts to provide them.

If the concept of patriarchy has been used by the women's movement as the

Liz Mackie



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'tool' to begin to pick the lock on the door which holds us in subordination, then the autonomous women's movement has provided the power and structure that has wielded the 'battering ram'.

Autonomous organisation

Whatever disagreement there is in politics and policies between different tendencies in the women's movement one thing is agreed — and that is the necessity of autonomous organisation, of organising against our oppression separately and independently from men, of trying now to take control ourselves of every aspect of our lives. Disagreements abound as to how far, if at all, sex and class oppression and exploitation feed into and off one another, but one thing is clear: sexual oppression is not just another aspect of economic class oppression. *All* men benefit from women's oppression for however exploited they may themselves be, there is always a woman lower in the hierarchy providing some service which *materially* and psychologically enriches his life.

Women's liberation is more than changing your consciousness, it's about being able to change the power relations which dominate our lives. To do this, we have to rediscover our power, redefine our lives and develop our politics. Essential to this is an autonomous women's movement. It is our power base, and it is only from this power base that we can begin to make changes. No one else can (nor will) do it for us. Not the revolutionary party, not the state, not willpower. To be able to participate in the political process we had to find some kind of power and we had to find a self-identity which was not the weak version of inadequacy we had been taught to live with.

The way through this was to recognise the importance of the personal experience of oppression, the pain and frustration and havoc that this wreaked with our lives. The assertion that the personal is political does not mean that however an individual acts personally can

be justified politically (though some people have chosen to hide themselves behind this slogan). It is an insistence of feminists that the subjective experience of living in a male dominated capitalist society results in a justified anger and resistance to oppression and exploitation. It's a demand to recognise women's subordination as a day to day lived reality, the fight against which is valid and political, not irrelevant and individual.

The women's movement not only introduced the notion that the personal is political, but also began to redefine the whole arena of what had traditionally been seen as legitimate concerns to discuss and organise around. Sexuality, male violence, abortion, contraception, childcare, marriage, the family, the structure and functioning of the welfare state, the control of our daily life. Some of these ideas and concerns had been raised within the new politics of the student and anti-Vietnam war movements and libertarianism, but they came to maturity and gained a wider audience with the emergence of the women's movement. It is essential that they retain a prominence in our politics in the 80s, for the greatest strength that any fight against the existing social order can have is to show to people that life can and should be different to how it is now, and that it's possible to organise collectively to change it. Not just as waged workers in trade unions, but as consumers, as housewives, as tenants, as wives and mothers and lovers and sisters and daughters, as users and workers in the welfare state, as women.

Sexuality

We have been so effectively colonised and alienated from our bodies and our sisters that we experience guilt and shame, and feel that it is *our* fault when we are abused and assaulted.

The exploration of sexuality and women's lack of control over our bodies opened up for the first time in a mass

way, an awareness of just how colonised women were — not even able to control our own fertility or sexual expression. The struggle for the full implementation of the 1967 Abortion Act, for improved contraceptive provision and against the various proposed bills to restrict access to abortion, turned what had been a taboo subject, and one which had proved inimical to earlier socialists, into a mass movement. Organised around the slogan 'A woman's right to choose', the campaign for abortion has reached thousands of women and has clarified for women how little choice we have over our lives — and just how isolated and privatised our sexual experiences are. For the first time numerous women have been able to talk to other women of their experiences at the hands of back street abortionists, or of sexual harassment or rape.

Sexuality and abortion have obviously been the concern of earlier feminists and socialists, and their campaigning has been one of the reasons why limited provision has been made for women's needs within the welfare state. Stella Browne, an active socialist-feminist, was involved with organising a group of feminists within the Labour Party in 1924 called the Workers' Birth Control Group. They wanted birth control and abortion to be provided by the state. They campaigned for nursery provision, a national health service, maternity provision, better housing, legal changes regarding divorce and separation. They looked for inspiration particularly to revolutionary changes then taking place in Russia.

Some of these demands have now been met. All forms of contraception are available free on the NHS (although plenty of people still don't realise this). There is a limited provision for abortion under the '67 Act. Women have maternity allowances, social security benefits, a still largely free national health service, and improved divorce laws. We have the Employment Protection Act, the Equal Pay Act, the Sex Discrimination Act. But this hasn't been enough. Basically, the post-war capitalist state has been modifying itself so that some of women's demands could be met and incorporated within the system. The establishment of the welfare state managed to integrate changes in attitudes to women within its social planning and use them to its own advantage. Smaller more mobile family units suited the needs of post war economic development. Sex without procreation became acceptable and a distorted form of sexuality was openly promoted to encourage the consumer goods boom.

We now have a women's movement which those of us who have developed through it almost take for granted. But there have been feminist movements in the past which have arisen and disappeared. How can we ensure that the same does not happen to our women's liberation movement? Is it happening already? There has not been a national women's conference since 1978. Conferences are certainly not the be-all and end-all of the women's movement,

and part of the problem is the success and diversity of the movement. Whereas in the early days of the movement conferences were gatherings of relatively small numbers of the initiated and committed (and were rightly criticised for being elitist) conferences of 3,000 women are confusing and alienating.

The outlook today

This article has attempted to point out some of the essential contributions which the women's movement has made to the political area in which Big Flame and many socialist feminists situate themselves. The Tory onslaught has to be seen not only as a monumental assault on the working class but very specifically a denial of everything that the women's movement stands for. And it's not just the Tories. The last Labour government should never be let off the hook for paving the way for the Tories' policies, and by being so bankrupt that the electorate saw the Tories offering us something new and radical. Yet the whole Tory policy of public spending cuts and the dismantling of the Welfare State (nurseries, free school meals, maternity grants, family planning clinics) rests squarely and firmly on the assumption that women will cope with the extra workload at home for free. It is from the women's movement, with the backup of the left, that this has to be confronted.

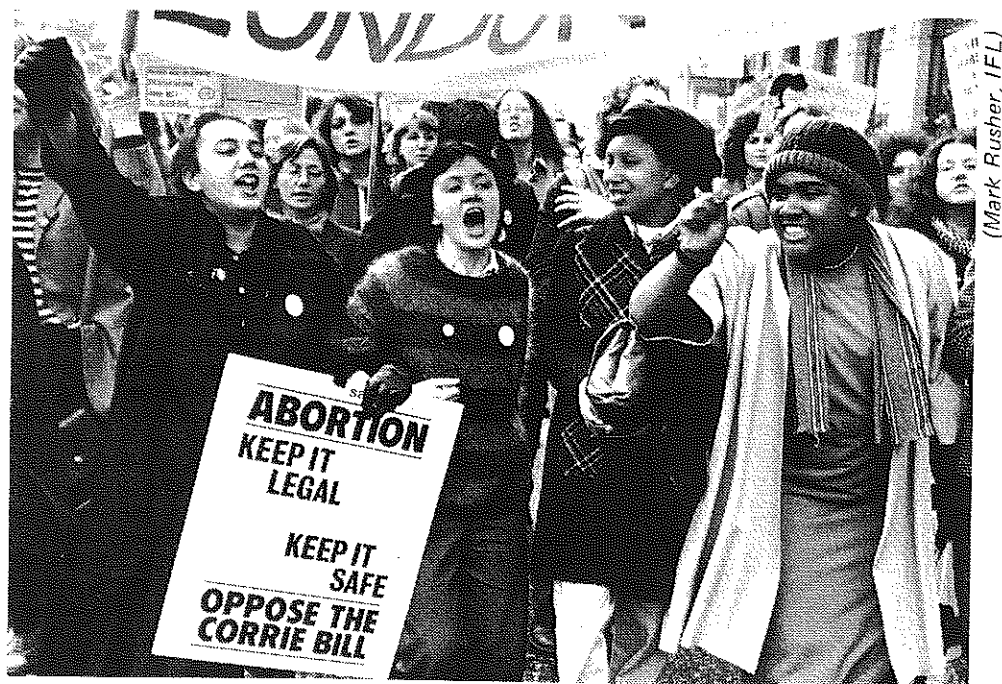
We are not yet, and never will be, in a situation where the revolutionary left can substitute itself for feminism. That is the function of an autonomous women's movement. Patriarchy and capitalism are twin evils and they have, at times, to be fought with different weapons and tactics. But where patriarchy and capitalism coincide, so there do feminism and socialism meet. Socialists can and must have a role to play in supporting and organising around feminist issues, and instead of worrying why the women's movement is not socialist the concern



should be — why is socialism not feminist? An organisation like Big Flame could not exist without the autonomous women's movement to constantly act as a reminder of the need for a feminist politics, and many of the ideas outlined in this article were formative for the type of politics and organisation on which Big Flame has sought to develop. But let's not kid ourselves. The 1980s are going to be tough for feminists and socialists, and we will be under pressure to abandon some of our positions in the face of the Tories' pressure. But the autonomous women's movement and its political and organisational integrity can only be abandoned or challenged at our peril.

Reading list

- Veronica Beechey: 'On Patriarchy', *Feminist Review* No. 3, 1979
- Elizabeth Wilson: *Women and the Welfare State*, Tavistock, 1977
- Heidi I. Hartmann, 'The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism', *Capital and Class*, no. 8, Summer 1978
- Batya Weinbaum, *The Curious Courtship of Women's Liberation and Socialism*, South End Press, 1978
- Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright, *Beyond the Fragments*, Merlin, 1979
- Sheila Rowbotham, 'Patriarchy', *New Statesman*, Dec. 21/28, 1979
- Sally Alexander and Barbara Taylor, 'In Defence of Patriarchy', *New Statesman*, Feb. 1 1980



The NAC/TUC demonstration against the Corrie Bill in October 1979

(Mark Rusher, IFL)