TRANSFORMING THE SOCIALIST MOVEMENT

I want to talk about the problems that we face in the women's movement, the problem of our demands that were formulated on the basis of certain material conditions which no longer exist because of the recession.

I also want to talk about the differences between the tendencies within an increasingly dispersed women's liberation movement and not for sectarian reasons but to clarify the objectives of the socialist feminist movement. One of the contradictions that women face in relation to marxism is that on the one hand we have an experience of a political practice and political theory that demonstrates the ways in which the capitalist economy produces the means initially, the occasion for, if nothing else, of the combination of workers. But the unpredictable element in that experience of combination and if you like the alchemy by which workers' organisation gets produced is the problem of women — for us and for the workers' movement itself. We have to think about the ways in which the marxist theory of the operation of the laws of the capitalist labour market, have to be modified, potently, by the evidence of the resilience of patriarchy in that capitalist economy and in capitalist social relations. Once that modification is secured what becomes clear is that the economism of the western workers' movement which is part of its crisis and the crisis of socialism today, can be understood, not wholly but certainly partially by reference to an analysis of the patriarchal origins of the workers' movement. And so what we have really is two spheres that we have to look at as marxist feminists. One is the theatre of struggle in the enterprise and the way in which the position of men as breadwinners has been fought for and demanded and reproduced the subordination of women. The other is the struggle in society, at the level of politics. Here we see the development of the state, part of whose function is to intervene in social life and the sexual division of labour. It has become clear that any analysis of the state has to involve an analysis of the state's relation to the sphere of reproduction and the function of women, which is an increasingly unstable function in western societies.

What's important about all this is that feminism joins with the endeavour to renew the marxist movement itself. It seems to me inevitable, but difficult, to find some means of uniting the attempts of the men's movement, the men's marxist movement, to critically renew its old traditions and the development of a women's movement which exists partly as a criticism of the way in which the men's movement has developed. So the women's movement finds itself in an odd position vis a vis the men's movement which is that it is both part of the politics of the left and is a critique of the politics of the left. I think that there is a sense in which over the last decade that relationship of critique and presence has become clearer and clearer. My experience of the early days of the women's liberation movement was that it was terribly difficult for socialist feminists to relinquish a primary allegiance to the socialist movement. And there was a sense in which we constantly affirmed, its not men, its the system, that is the issue, and so the socialist feminist presence within women's liberation was often bereft of many of the political initiatives which in the end radical feminism was able to mobilise. This was because of the difidence we had in addressing the problem of men, and the construction of masculinity.

Beatrix Campbell spoke at many meetings in Australia during her visit last April. The visit was sponsored by Australian Left Review as part of the Marx centenary. In this paper, based on the topic "Marxism and Feminism", Beatrix Campbell challenges socialists to think of the ways in which class struggle had demobilised the socialist imperative. In one sense, she asserts, socialism has been spoiled by men. In a critical survey of women's movement she polemizes with various strands of the movement and suggests that a problem for women is that it is a very unusual experience for them to fight to win or to win.
and what the terms would be of an alliance between men and women in the socialist movement, given that, in a certain sense, the socialist movement was a men's movement. Historically it has been a movement that was in the image of men and in its practices affirmed a cult of masculinity. But it also was that the men's movement was the socialist movement, so our relationship to it was extremely problematic. And I think that our reluctance to explore the problem of men and masculinity was a function of socialist feminist attempts to remain within the pale of the socialist movement.

Here I want to say something about the ways in which feminists related to the attempts by the socialist movement to develop a theory of alliances in the post-war period, because I think that theory of alliance is extremely important to the way that we think socialist feminism. And its only now that feminism is able to confidently assert its critique of that theory of alliances. What was being tentatively explored in European communist parties and in the left in general was a crisis within the movement itself. What the movement was having to cope with was the development of a massive labour movement struggling directly with capital in the work-place and the gap between that and the development of mass socialist consciousness. This has preoccupied the marxist movement since its inception, certainly since the bolshevik period and the development of mass reformist non-revolutionary parties.

Now for feminism that problem has only more recently become clear, and we've brought our analyses to this gap between class struggle and socialist struggle. Feminism is now able to insert its critique of the ways in which class struggle demobilised the socialist imperative, because there was something about the way in which the men's movement articulated the interest of men and those interests always involved the subordination of women. That relationship, the compulsion to produce the subordination of women, demobilised and detonated the socialist imperative. So there's a sense in which one wants to suggest that socialism has been spoiled by men.

Now it would be easy to say we are the saviours of socialism, and if life was that simple we would save it and we would all live happily ever after, but the fact is that we still have to negotiate and relate it to that men's movement. When I'm talking about the men's movement, I think that the whole thing about alliances is clarified because the limits of the theory of alliances are revealed in the way that alliances are postulated. What you have is alliances between the working class and a catalogue of other categories — youth, blacks, women, the disabled, criminals, house-breakers, the discontents, right? Now what that formulation assumes is that this lot are not this, right? The working class remains given, and what has to be added to the mixture is this lot over here, who are not in the working class. Thieves are not in the working class, women are not in the working class, blacks we know are not in the working class. As it happens you then have the majority who are not in the working class but are on this side. And what can be an offence is that the panoply of discontents are all represented over on this side, and in a certain sense the real rebellions are represented here, but on that side we have this given category which is not problematic, which is the working class.

At its worst this particular formulation of a theory of alliances says that this lot should shape up, and associate themselves with that lot, who are grown up, completed and who are really engaged in the real struggles with the real enemy. Now of course the problem with that is that the working class movement is problematic and in a sense the other groups represent a critique of this vast category, but this vast category doesn't know it yet.

The feminist movement has most clearly articulated the critique of this vast sector because in a certain sense it is saying the problem is with this group, which the socialist movement hasn't problematicated. The women's movement is the first which comes along and says, that the kind of politics which are created here aren't a problem for us, because we cannot participate in it, even if we are allowed to, which for a very long time we haven't. We cannot participate because these politics are not in our image. There are no commodious places for us in these forms of class struggle. And yet clearly there's a sense in which this kind of class struggle does articulate some of our interests, but does it?

What is brought to mind is the history of women's critique of this kind of class struggle. It's expressed in the words of a veteran
"No cause can be won between dinner and tea, and most of us who were married had to work with one hand tied behind us." Hannah Mitchell

A meeting of members of the Women's Social and Political Union which fought for women's suffrage in England. Hannah Mitchell was a member in the early days.

A socialist feminist, a working class socialist feminist who says: "The revolution is not created between dinner and tea". The awful thing is the many ordinary banal complaints that women have about the conduct of political practice on the left which necessarily banish the means of women's participation in politics. So its not simply a matter of women inserting themselves into politics, it is a matter of them transforming the ways within which that struggle is conducted, because if it is conducted as it has until now it will always be conducted in the interests of a group that has historically and in practice reproduced the subordination of women. So one's left with the question, when thinking about alliances: what's in it for us? And its a rude question, and people think that you're rude for asking it. But the time's long gone when we don't have the right to ask it, and also it seems to me that the very conditions of the recession demand that we ask it because something has to be done to reconstitute what is now shattered in the movement.

Now another brief word about alliances. For a start we have this problem of the way in which the alliance is formulated and what is regarded as the centre of the alliance which is the male working class. I think that the way that theory of alliances has been formulated actually clarifies who thinks that its a men's movement. Its not just feminists, men don't admit it, but they think it too. Historically they have lots to draw on that confirms the kind of righteousness and piety of their position, because there's a sense in which there are many responses of women to the way that the men's movement conducts itself that relegate women to a state of political backwardness. We are the primitives as it were in the political spectrum whose reaction against the masculinism of the movement characteristics as recidivists, as backward, as, in some way, incomplete without I think, ever requiring that anyone make the effort to find out why it is that certain kinds of reactions are reactionary. It seems to me that this is something that the labor movement has always had the bad habit of looking at women's complaints against its ways of going about things as being necessarily conservative.

So what we're faced with in terms of the socialist movement is to review as
feminists what the balance of power is in those relationships of allies and alliances. An imperative for us is to find a way of making a socialist movement in which feminism is a distinct and autonomous part, making that movement in some way produce an authentic voice for women. It is clear, amidst the crisis of the left throughout the west, there is a fatal confusion about who its constituency really is, who it really represents, and there is a failure of popular resonance at the same time as a sense that the socialist movement is bigger and stronger than it ever was. What it doesn’t understand is that there is one fallow field left open for it and that is women, and what is also clear at this time as disarmament emerges as the political weapon par excellence of the left, that women are now being constituted willy nilly and often in quite arbitrary ways, as fallow but progressive political force in a way that wasn’t clear before.

There is something else that I think we have to look to when we’re considering the history of these two different groups within the history of class struggle, and the kind of movement that feminism has built for itself. There is a sense in which the habit of opposition and oppositionism is essential to the habits of class struggle. This is because there is a sense in which as long as you feel that you’ve got a clear set of objectives, a clear enemy our side is clear. All our side then has to do is struggle, bash away and demand things which the other side can always give and may be is prepared to give. One of the things that this form of struggle never does is demand that we take responsibility for recreating our collective self outside the determinants of that relationship. What I mean is that there are forms of class struggle which can recreate the working class as always subordinate, as always powerless, as never having the means within itself of becoming a ruling class. Historically that is the problem of the socialist movement which is that we, the working class, have never become, in the developed western world, a ruling class.

It is not our habit, and one of the reasons why its not our habit is that the very form of our struggle constantly reproduces the working class as subordinate. It is in a relation of appeal, albeit aggressive appeal, but it is a relation of appeal to the enemy. The form that feminism historically has taken is quite the opposite, because in a further sense feminism starts from the belief that being subordinate is a problem, its horrible, its desperately damaging, and feminism well understands the nature of the contract between the subordinate psyche and the dominant psyche. It was in the very fibre of our being so much so that it was inescapable a part of the way in which feminism created itself as a political movement. It always had this investment that part of the function of the movement is to enable women to survive the condition of subordination and come out of it on the other side as the kind of person who is not subordinate. So feminism is about transforming the human subject in a way that the habits of class struggle really have forgotten. I don’t think that was always the case with class struggle but certainly that is one of its characteristics now. It doesn’t take the collective self of the working class as a problematic from which it starts. Its way of being a class is a problem to it and its got to do something about itself in order to not be that any more.

So feminism, in its very form takes responsibility for the collective transformation of women’s way of being women, and it starts from the premise that femininity itself is a problem. So really feminism starts from a completely different place in every possible way from the working class movement and what it has to do is always to draw on and to recruit an experience of personal, often immobilising, discontent. But what’s also clear is that simply relying on experience to produce politics isn’t enough. And to rely on a format of organisation which facilitates that development is not enough to secure our presence in politics. So feminism is faced with an awkward dynamic, which is that the thing which has been the engine of our subordination is not the engine or not necessarily the means of our presence in politics. And it is not necessarily the engine of another of our imperatives which is to transform the socialist movement so that it represents us. Other forms of intervention are demanded of us.

I want to invite you to have these matters in your mind, because I think that the kind of political instruments that articulate frank discontent are very, very important, they’re also very problematic, and whatever it is that we do, we have to find political means that continue to honour workers’ discontent. I’m saying that partly on the basis of an insular experience of England, where it seems to me that the tragedy of our recent history is that workers, on a massive scale, have lunged into action motivated by the most powerful feelings of commitment to their industries, particularly in the public sector, and commitment to certain kinds of work, and commitment to certain feelings of discontent which have never really found expression on the political plane. They have always been translated into another kind of demand, which dissolved the originators of the discontent. What’s happened is that we’ve had massive waves of militancy, for wages, which were often motivated by strong thoughts about life and about the meaning of life, but these motivations never had a political expression. So there’s a sense in which there’s a chronic gap between people’s feelings of discontent and how they’re represented at the political level.

What I’m driving at is that what’s important about feminism is that it is always about a kind of politics that sees us as the subjects of class formation, we are not simply the agents of social transformation, we are also the subjects of that transformation. So feminism has to hang on to that form of representation of itself, but is clear that that is also very problematic when it comes to dealing with the institution of politics.

Now I want to move on to talk a little bit about the problems that the women’s movement faces. For a start its clear that you can’t just talk about the women’s movement, and that we’re going to have to learn that there is a women’s movement and that there isn’t. It doesn’t all meet in the same place, we don’t all go to the same things so we can recognise ourselves as a movement, and that can be an awful problem because it means we are not always sure if we’ve still got the movement. But really it is clear that there is a movement and that its alive and well and kicking in all sorts of different places, doing different things. I’m not sure whether you have experienced that kind of anxiety but we certainly have had it and it is mixed up with the critique of femininity, the relationship to heterosexuality and the relationship to men, and it is the relationship to men which most significantly strategically, divides us.
Feminism takes responsibility for the collective transformation of women's way of being women, and it starts from the premise that femininity is a problem.
What seems to me problematic now is that we have within radical feminism a form of politics which claims all that anger about men and heterosexuality. It builds an existential politics which bases itself on one of the primary features of feminism, which is that the personal is political. There is a sense in which radical feminism is only a politics of the personal. At the same time, of course, radical feminism has always kept alive very boldly, that personal dimension. It will never relinquish those feelings of anger, but it does work on the assumption that anger is the energy that you need politically, and there is a sense in which it seems to me, that in that respect the anger of radical feminism is both powerful and influential but has all the same problems that I described earlier in the habits of class struggle because it depends on always being in opposition. It depends on a sense of being powerless and in the end, despite the fact that it attempts to produce a powerful argument from a position of powerlessness, it depends on a sense of powerlessness. Strategically in the long term that's an orientation which is doomed to find itself always cast in the role of the victim. In fact it is dependent on victimisation.

It is also a fact that it does represent a kind of remobilisation of anger about many of the right things and it keeps alive and constantly re-ignites an anger which does belong to the tradition of feminism.

I won't go into all the argument which no doubt you're all familiar with about how sexual politics are personal politics and are the politics of radical feminism. That tradition is something which I would never in the end wholly want to dishonour, or disclaim because it is a very important feature of feminist life. The thing that is worrying about it however is what is now happening to it. Because it is a politics which depends on a feeling of terror, something happens to the relationship to women in that politics. In the end what it does is to make men always, absolutely, immutably powerful. The only people who can be addressed influentially (within that scenario) are women. What we're now seeing is a concomitant to that first phase of radical feminism, which is a kind of representation of politics as powerlessness, victim and victimisation. But now a new dimension is added to it which is of betrayal and treachery. And there is a sense in which one arm of that tradition is now obsessed with the treachery of other women. So it becomes a politics which implodes against women. It is not a politics which attempts to represent the anger of all women. What I mean is that in the end it is doomed to be divisive.

And that is already emerging in the writing or the work of people like Mary Daly and Andrea Dworkin who has written a book about the mass of women being rightwing, being the traitors to feminism. It reproduces all those bad habits of blaming the victim that we're all so familiar with. And I don't know how we cope with it. Maybe we don't have to.

On the other hand, where does socialist feminism take itself, given that it has become very evident that the feminist experience, the production of a critique of normal life and of men's relationship to women, is difficult to represent politically, or to find strategic expression. Very often it also casts you in a relationship of exile from the mainstream of popular consensus and popular politics. I think therefore that an urgent objective for socialist feminism is to safeguard that experience of personal anger and personal discontent and the critique of personal life and secure its representation in the mainstream.

And here is where I come up to generalities really, because I don't know how you do that, but it seems to me that it has to be done. We have to think of both our responsibility for safeguarding an autonomous women's movement, which must be the reference point for women's participation in the world without which we do not participate in the world, while finding a form for our politics which allows intervention at multiple levels. On the one hand we must protect that dispersed autonomous movement but at the same time (and this makes us very busy and worn out) secure our intervention into socialism to save the socialist movement from itself. And we must also secure our intervention in the culture and in the institutions of politics which are crucially related to the condition of women and the transitions in the conditions of women.

So what we are left with as socialist feminists is that we've really got to get our act together when it comes to thinking strategically. We are engaged in, as it were, a civil war There is a war between men and women and I don't mean that in the sense of heterosexuality has been death for women since it began. We have to assume actually that relationships between men and women are available to transformation. Women are not powerless. Men are not absolutely powerful. The relationship between the two can be interfered with and transformed. The question is, what will be the forms of political intervention that will secure that?

But at the political level, I think we have to imagine the movement as a strategic movement, and not as the piecemeal thing that we have so often experienced. What we have to go for, is a kind of emotional terrorism, and then actually think strategically about the battles that we have to fight because we can win them. And that is something that is very unusual in the experience of women — fighting to win and winning.

Ironically, the recession is both the best and the worst condition in which we have to place ourselves in politics, because it both clarifies the way in which that kind of intervention is necessary to us and is necessary to the socialist movement, but also endangers our demands. So there is an urgency in trying to think ourselves into a state which sees the kind of battles which we now wage in that civil war as being part of a war of both manoeuvre and position and that it is very important that we pick our fights very carefully, and go to win.

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