The conventional political picture has a spectrum Left to Right, 'collectivism' to 'individualism'. Carol Bacchi claims the picture is of little use for feminists. Both 'collectivism' and 'individualism' have their problems and their possibilities.

The events in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe have dominated political analysis for the last year. Seldom is it mentioned that these dramatic events may be experienced by women in ways not experienced by men. A few feminist voices have drawn attention to the difficulties faced by women who have lost social supports such as paid maternity leave and reliable child care, but these voices attract little attention. The fact that the arrival of democracy in Poland and East Germany has also meant the removal of or diminished access to abortion is also seldom discussed.

The major organising principles for political analysis, both in Australia and overseas, are based on economic categories. Our 'ideologies' (used descriptively here to refer to packages of political beliefs usually portrayed as fixed and consistent), revolve around disputes about whether 'society' is better served by allowing 'individuals' to compete, or whether some form of collective provision is desirable. In one or other countries at different times, the pendulum is said to have swung towards the 'individualist' or 'collectivist' end of the spectrum. And we all know that 'collectivism' is on the wane worldwide right now.

The major political actors in this drama (and I am using 'acting' metaphors deliberately, knowing Shakespeare would understand) have historically been 'classes', though everyone admits these are becoming harder and harder to identify. More commonly, there is reference to 'employers',...
'unions', and the 'state'. In 'liberal' countries the 'free market' reigns and in socialist ones we used to have 'administered economies'.

I am not disputing some correspondence between these terms and the economic systems described; I am emphasising how this way of describing social and political life has formed the background of political analysis to date. The dominant ideological categories have been liberalism or socialism or something in between. The ends of the ideological spectrum have been labelled individualism and collectivism, and regimes are characterised along this continuum.

Women's needs then have been interpreted within this ideological spectrum. And, in certain cases at certain times, women have made some gains. It is clear, for example, that middle-class women at the end of the nineteenth century in countries which espoused a commitment to 'individual rights' (i.e. most Western democracies) were able to claim access to these 'rights' as 'individuals'. It took time and the battle was necessary and worthwhile.

There were sticking points, however, which indicated the kinds of problems which came up when women demanded access to existing categories. Some could see that single women certainly had a claim to political representation. But married women? Were they not already represented through their husbands? Since representation had been tied to property and since married women's property became their husbands' on marriage, on what grounds could they be enfranchised? We now know that the resolution was to extend individual property ownership to married women and so the vote was won.

Women now possessed individual 'rights' identical to men. The fact that most women continued to fill the role of wife and mother and that this meant less time to exercise these 'rights' was not addressed. Nor was the fact that the threat of physical violence within and outside the home imposed constraints on any meaningful exercise of 'rights'.

On the other side, in regimes where the state assumed greater responsibility for the economic welfare of its citizens, women had other successes. The most obvious here have been social supports for maternity, in particular paid maternity leave of some variety. Women gained these benefits as a by-product of an approach to community welfare which emphasised national health and efficiency. Here they were not 'individuals' but 'reproducers' of 'manpower'. Where this has been the case, the claim by women to some form of independent existence has been difficult to make. Women are either 'individuals' and their maternity is ignored, or they are mothers and their 'individuality' is downplayed.

The next point, and it is a key one, is that these ideologies are more ambiguous in their implications for women than the theory contends. It is a too easy assumption that a country with a more progressive political ideology, committed to a greater social equality, will necessarily deal successfully with gender inequality. In fact, the commitment to the former can undermine the latter. The conviction that the only important social groups are classes and that social equality means only a redistribution of wealth among them leaves women and some of their problems, in particular their stigmatisation and terrorisation, invisible.

None of this is meant to imply that countries which hesitatingly grant women group status and admit through legislative recognition that violence impedes their individual
growth offer an ideal world. As stated at the outset, the problem is the way in which women are offered either/or choices where neither on its own is adequate.

Moreover, these contrasting ideologies are themselves tools in political debate and as such actively construct the conceptual terrain within which political battles take place. The conceptual territory has been occupied and women are forced to wage ideological skirmishes on that terrain (the military metaphors are here intended). When ‘sexual equality’ comes onto the political agenda, therefore, it is always already delimited in particular ways.

This proposition needs to be pursued by identifying the approaches taken to sexual equality in different political regimes and circumstances, teasing out the meanings behind these approaches and the way in which they are actively pursued in policy. Why did sexual equality come onto the political agenda, what explanations were offered to explain the problem and what were the repercussions of adopting each particular explanation? A few examples of the kind of analysis I am suggesting will be offered here.

The most common and widespread explanation of women’s disadvantage to emerge in the 1960s with the resurgence of Western feminism was sex role theory. In brief this was an adaptation of socialisation theory which said that people behaved in particular ways because they were brought up to behave in those ways. The education system, representation in the media, and the attitudes of parents combined to encourage boys to pursue careers and girls to plan on motherhood. People were more or less ‘trapped’ within these roles and the way to offer women more opportunities was to challenge them through non-sexist literature and a more open education.

Now this explanation of affairs was eagerly accepted by many feminists of most ideological persuasions. The reason was obvious. Until that time women had had to contend with the proposition that their destiny was biologically determined. Sex role theory at least opened up the chance for change!

What is interesting here is to see how this theory came to be understood in contrasting political regimes—regimes, that is to say, at very different points of the ‘spectrum’ between collectivism and individualism. Here my examples are America and Sweden. What is most significant, perhaps—and will hopefully become apparent as my analysis proceeds—is the way in which many of the same problems occur in the sex equality and other professedly pro-women’s legislation and institutions in the two countries, regardless of their different ideological underpinnings. At the same time, while the ‘more individualistic’ approach has severe drawbacks in terms of social provision and welfare for women, the ‘more collectivist’ approach, with its emphasis on social solidarity and cooperation, tends to blur over the real sites of conflict between men and women as individuals. Neither ideology, in other words, is unambiguously ‘good’ or ‘bad’ for women.

In America, sex roles were described as unnatural constraints on ‘individual’ behaviour. This, it was explained, could not be a good thing since each woman should have the ‘opportunity’ to explore her ‘individual’ ‘potential’. It was assumed that most men already had this ‘opportunity’. The understanding then was that no evil was involved in women’s inequality and there was no real need to address women’s problems as a group. All that was required was to loosen up the ideological constraints to allow women to follow their individual paths to ‘success’.

Sex role theory was and continues to be even more popular in Sweden, a country which until recently has been dominated by social democratic governments. Social democracy, many would agree, is a little difficult to place on the individualism-collectivism continuum. It is certainly clear, for example, that alongside the willingness to use the state to provide an extensive system of welfare, social democracy makes a strong rhetorical commitment to individual development. Sex role theory was popular therefore for reasons similar to those in America since it promised to free people to explore that potential.

There was an added twist to the way in which sex role theory came to be discussed there, however. The Swedish model has been described as one based upon consensus, not conflict, co-operation, not confrontation. Here, appropriately, it was emphasised that men as well as women were trapped in constricting roles—that men should be freer to choose to spend more time with their children, for example. The broadening of sex roles, it was explained, would benefit everyone.

The tone in the explanation is conciliatory. There is no suggestion that men would have any reason to oppose the eradication of sexual equality since there would be no losers. The message was nicely captured in the title of a government publication endorsing sexual equality—Side by Side (1985).

In America, sex role theory was interpreted as a means of releasing individual creativity; in Sweden it was seen as contributing to solidarity. In neither place were the specific problems faced by women and the complex reasons for these given adequate attention.

The logical flow-on from sex role analysis was gender-neutral language, and this appeared both in America and in Sweden. In America the promises of formal, procedural equality were extended to women as well as men, through the introduction of civil rights legislation which meant that the law would now be race and sex ‘blind’. In Sweden, equality legislation was pushed through by the bourgeois parties, stipulating that ‘...the aim of this Act is to promote the equality between men and women in respect of employment, conditions of employment and opportunities for development in employment (equality at work)’ (1980). Attempts by feminists to have some verbal acknowledgment in the legislation that women were the ones facing discrimination failed.
Sex role theory and gender-neutral language allowed women’s issues to be seen to be dealt with, while severely limiting the kinds of reforms which were proposed. In America, individualistic rhetoric left women as ‘individuals’; in Sweden, the rhetoric of consensus and solidarity left them ‘side by side’ with men.

In America, women as a category were tacked onto civil rights legislation designed originally to placate civil rights activists campaigning on behalf of blacks as a category. The amendment to the 1964 Civil Rights Bill extending its provisions to women was proposed by a southerner who felt that the addition of gender would lead to the bill’s defeat. The defence of legislation targeting groups, which became grounds for the introduction of affirmative action, was mounted within the constraints of an ‘individualistic’ commitment to equal opportunity. The argument was that the offer of equal opportunity was meaningless if a group is stigmatised and that group identity clouds their individual chances of success. More recently, the political climate, determined by particular political actors, has swung against that interpretation.

In Sweden, demands for positive action for women are vigorously resisted, despite the theoretical presumption that a more interventionist/collectivist regime would be more willing to institute reforms aimed at ‘equality of result’. The strength of the corporatist model there, with employers and unions the primary social actors, meant that, when equality legislation was introduced, it specified that requirements for positive action for equality only be monitored and evaluated by the government if no collective agreement on the matter existed. Positive action is also described as confrontational, undermining the consensus model. And these arguments are often supplemented by a claim, familiar to those of us in less ‘collectivist’ regimes, that merit is what counts and that merit is easily, objectively ascertainable. Arguments are hauled out from different and seemingly opposed ideologies to protect the social sexual status quo.

‘Sexual liberation’ was another catch-phrase popular in the 60s. In both America and Sweden there was a diminishing of the taboo against sexuality, though Sweden was reputed to be making the running in this domain. In both places the notion was tied to the idea of individual development. In Sweden, by contrast, the emphasis on consensus and co-operation has created an environment where it is difficult to broach the subjects of sexual harassment and domestic violence. These issues have also been given a low priority because sexual equality is seen primarily as a labour market issue, given the need for an increased birth rate and increased female labour force participation.

On one side of the ocean ‘classical liberalism’ is used to curtail a whole range of reforms which women need; on the other side ‘social democracy’ throws up a different array of obstacles. In each case ideological principles become tools to shape the discourse in ways which put out of bounds issues which have to be addressed.

What does this mean insofar as strategy is concerned? Clearly, women need to take their chances where they find them, exploiting the cracks and fissures in the respective political settings. And, as in the past, this will include the tactic of demanding reforms which fit within the declared ideological commitment, be it to individual rights or community welfare.

There is also a conceptual battle to be waged, however. Feminists need to point out how women’s demands illustrate the inadequacy of available analytic precepts. They also need to recognise and remember that, when feminists appear to be in dispute or in disagreement, or when they find themselves puzzling over why it seems impossible to decide between the pursuit of ‘rights’ or recognition of maternal needs, it is not feminists or women who are at fault. As long as women remain an afterthought in political theory and in the political arena, these sorts of dilemmas will arise. The chief demand therefore is for a reworking of the conceptual landscape to include women as social actors.

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