Women and class

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Abstract
Views of society based on a contrast of the position of 'women' with that of 'men' have a different way of organising our understanding of social life than do views which rest on a notion of class division. In current political terms, feminists and socialists have different starting points. Yet socialists have had to come to terms with issues of sexual inequality, while feminists are faced with the problem that while they posit a common 'oppression of women', they must recognise also the very great differences between women according to their social class. This problem is not a new one for feminism. It bedevilled First Wave Feminists, especially those attracted to socialist ideals and organisations. It bedevils modern feminism. No matter how exhaustively and endlessly feminists discuss it, the issues raised under the heading 'women and class' continue to emerge as important and worrying.

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Until about four or five years ago, I did not, actually, find it especially worrying myself. I would argue that women’s oppression and class exploitation were both deeply embedded in our society, and that one had to take both into account, seeing a complex interrelationship. In practice my analyses concentrated on working class women, for here both systems of domination could be seen to be operating. In the area of the sexual division of labour, for example, one could suggest how the identification of women, and not men, with childcare formed a basis for a sexual division in the workforce which in turn reinforced that identification.

But around 1981 I began to find these formulations inadequate. The often-heard charge — that the women’s movement is essentially a middle class phenomenon — which I had earlier dismissed as a basically sexist attempt to dismiss the importance of the women’s movement and the issues it raises, I now began to take more seriously. I was influenced, I suppose, by my changing social environment. As I grew older, and gained greater job security and a higher level of pay, I saw my feminist friends around me experiencing the same process. We were the baby-boom generation, the first post-Hiroshima generation, who had experienced the educational expansion and the plentiful job supply of the
1960s. Now, by the early 1980s, we were in our mid to late thirties, had completed our education and training, gone through the difficult early years of uncertain employment, and had become established. We became public servants, journalists, teachers, academics, librarians, social workers, and so on. We published magazines, saw the correct films, attended the correct meetings, and had consciousness-raised ourselves to think correct thoughts. We were more often than not mortgaged to the hilt buying houses, and many of us had travelled for a time overseas. We became the kind of people who were asked to give papers at conferences, and had at last acquired sufficient confidence to do so. The women's movement which we had helped to build had given us much — a perspective, moral support, friendships, and an avenue through which we could act for social and political change.

The women I'm speaking of were, then, in terms of the society they lived in, highly privileged people. They had been born at the right time, had had access to education, and now had a relatively high degree of job security and material comfort. Yet how did this group, these friends of mine in the women's movement, see themselves? They saw themselves as oppressed, as victims, as underdogs. They would complain bitterly about the pain of being women, about the men they worked with or knew, about relationships. They would go to all-women parties and conferences, and complain. My God how they whinged! Life was a dreary round of problems and defeats, pain and disillusion. As they drank their pretty good wine (no more of the red rot-gut of student days) and helped themselves to magnificent food, they told themselves how much they were suffering the pain of being women. They recognised their material advantages in some ways, but at bottom identified themselves as part of an oppressed group — women. As their conversational diet moved from relationships and exams and lectures, through to relationships, children (or alternatively how horrible children were), and divorces, and through again to relationships, mortgages and renovations, operations and female diseases, their underlying theme was their own oppression.

Around 1981, the contradictions in all this suddenly overwhelmed me. How self-indulgent this all was! How closed, how spoilt, how pampered! These women might ironically refer to themselves as the 'spoilt generation' but they seemed unable to recognise how spoilt they were. And I began to wonder how this was possible. For the people I'm talking about regarded themselves as socialists of some kind, as opposed to capitalism, to Fraser (Australia's conservative Prime Minister at the time), to imperialism, to the nuclear arms race. If most were not Marxists in any very serious sense, then most were at least aware of class exploitation and
the ways it is produced under capitalism. How could socialists so easily identify themselves, the relatively privileged, as oppressed? How could socialists have become so blind to the exploitation and struggles of working class and colonised men? How had they come to identify the relative privilege and power of the middle class men they combatted in their working lives with the position of all men?

One answer, of course, is feminism. Feminism, even in its most class-aware pro-socialist varieties, had enabled these women to blind themselves to where so much privilege lay. It enabled them to locate themselves on the side of the oppressed, and working class men as at least the collaborators with, but more likely as themselves among, the oppressors. And so I began to think that some very basic questioning of feminist propositions was needed. I began to think that the categories ‘women’ and ‘men’, as so commonly used in feminist discourse, needed some deconstructing. It seemed to me that what had in the early 1970s begun, for us, as a very necessary analysis — namely that the individual problems many of us experienced were in fact products of social distinctions and structures — had developed into an absurd level of generalisation. Women feel or think such and such, men don’t, and so on.

But if the categories needed deconstructing, then there was the problem of not throwing out the baby with the bathwater. I didn’t want to go back to the earlier Left sects’ denial of the importance of the issues feminism raised. I didn’t want to reject feminism on the grounds that it split the Left, that all would come good after the revolution. I didn’t want to return to a situation where issues like rape, domestic violence, abortion, sexuality, sexual exploitation and harassment, the sexual division of labour, notions of masculinity and femininity, housework and childcare, and all the rest were legislated back off the radical socialist agenda. Not that they ever had been entirely absent from it, especially in the cases of equal pay and childcare, but they hadn’t been very firmly on it either. I recognised that the women’s movement had achieved something of profound importance in creating all these as issues, and in pursuing them through trade union, state, and other institutional, ideological, and cultural channels. So the problem was, for me, how to retain these very real gains and insights, and yet restore a more truly socialist awareness of the manifest and hidden injuries of class. How, that is, could we return to that older socialist problem of the possibilities for middle class support of a working class revolution?

The issues seemed complicated for a particular reason. This was how to understand the changing class structure, and nature of capitalism itself. One strand of thought was to argue that the people I’ve here been
referring to as ‘middle class’ are actually the upper layers of the working class. They earn a wage, they have nothing, more or less, to sell but their labour power. If they lose their jobs, they face poverty (perhaps after a time) like anyone else. This seems to me useful, for there is indeed no basis for these salaried members of the ‘middle class’, or in some arguments the ‘new middle class’, being regarded as structurally distinct from the working class. Rather, what we have is a large working class, internally stratified. Yet if we accept this form of analysis, we need also to accept that within this large working class, the differences in job security, rates of pay, and access to positions of institutional power, are absolutely vast. It is politically important, I think, for teachers, academics, social workers, journalists, and public servants to define themselves as workers, and to develop a trade union and political consciousness accordingly. It is equally important, though, not to lose sight of the fact that such groups of people are significantly privileged in contrast with the bulk of the working class. While it is true that many groups formerly thought of as ‘middle class’ — such as clerical workers — have been proletarianised, it is also true that the having or not of the kind of skills which can earn a secure and interesting job and a reasonable wage is still an important and profound source of differentiation amongst the non-owners of this society. Educational qualifications, in particular, still count a great deal. And this differentiation is made even sharper by the fact that unemployment hits the unskilled by far the hardest.

A second common way of thinking about how the class structure of advanced capitalist societies has changed has been to say that, given the post-war advances in the pay and conditions of employed working class people, the real oppressed are not the working class per se, but special categories, sometimes referred to as the marginals. These groups include women, Aborigines, non-English-speaking migrants, prisoners, the unemployed. Any employed Anglo-Australian male is thereby deemed as not to be exploited, no matter how tedious, insecure, or low-paying his job may be. The argument is that this male employed working class has been bought off, and no hope for radical change can be found there. The institutional creations of this group — the trade unions — are to be dismissed as conservative, racist, sexist, etc. without any real reference to whether they are Left or Right, or what kind of politics they pursue. In this view, quite well-established women, and migrants of non-English-speaking background, are to be seen as more oppressed, and more politically trustworthy, than unskilled working-class Anglo-Australian men.

Such a view has certain strengths. It points to the ways the working class is divided, and to bases for social inequality and domination other
than class. It recognises the degree to which trade unions lie in danger of incorporation, co-option, and collaboration. But it has some key weaknesses too. It fails to see how many of these specific oppressions are tied in with the class nature of capitalism, that they acquire the character they do as a result of: colonialism (in the case of Aborigines), of the uneven distribution of capital bringing forth a necessity for the international mobility of labour (in the case of migrants), the repressive role of the capitalist state (in the case of prisoners), the inability of capitalism in periods of recession to provide jobs for all (in the case of the unemployed), and the fact that capitalism rests on a particular family structure whereby domestic labour and childcare are only partially drawn into the wages system (in the case of women). This analysis fails to see that many of the so-called marginals are in fact working class, whether they are employed or not. It fails to see also that some people within these special categories — such as middle class women and migrants of non-English-speaking background — have considerable resources with which to combat the specific discriminations and inequalities they experience. What it does is to move from a very necessary recognition of conflict and diversity within the working class and within other classes to a denial of the validity of class itself. It forgets how capitalism works, how it is based on fundamental distinctions between capital and labour, owners and non-owners, managers and workers, and secures its hegemony through the provision of grossly differential material rewards and degrees of control and power to the populations who sustain it.

There is another factor affecting degrees of privilege and perceptions of it. And that is age, especially as it affects those I have described as in the upper strata of the working class. Life for the young members of that group is not a bed of roses. Students are very often exceptionally poor. Many of the students I teach do not eat properly, and live in grossly overcrowded and run-down shared houses. Entering the job market is not easy, even when you have marketable skills. It is only after a period of time that the benefits incurred from having those skills start to be realised. It is partly for this reason, I think, that so many radical movements depend for their troops on young people in the process of acquiring professional skills — people who experience immediate difficulties but who have the freedom which flows from an awareness of a long term future. For young people not undergoing this process of preparation for salaried secure jobs, the spectre and reality of unemployment, and the knowledge that any long term security will be an exceedingly long hard battle, very often militates against organised political radicalism. For women what this difference means is that whereas young women in the
less privileged sections of the working class devote enormous energies to establishing a marriage, and saving for a house and so on, young women from its privileged sections devote similar energies to acquiring skills, resisting marriage, family, house-buying and so on, and seeking a lifestyle which allows space for alternatives, and in many cases for political and cultural activity.

And so I get back to feminism. Why do the relatively privileged women I began by discussing become blinded to the fact of their own privilege, and the lack of it in many working class men? Why are sexual inequalities seen not so much as complicating the effects of class exploitation but as replacing it altogether? I've suggested several answers — first, the concept of 'women's oppression' allows us to define ourselves as victims, however relatively privileged we may be. Second, the extension of the category working class to include salaried, higher-paid workers, allows us to forget the very real differences in material rewards and access to power within that working class. Thirdly, the politics of special categories of oppression obscures a recognition of class differentiation within some of those categories — especially women and non-English-speaking migrants — and so obscures an understanding of capitalism as resting on class exploitation.

We need to recognise that the differences in class and sub-class position between women deeply affect responses to feminism. These differences are, I think, based on women's differing perceptions of the position of men in their own class, or sub-class. Women from the more privileged sections of the working class see their male equivalents as having levels of wealth and power which are denied to the women on the basis of sexual discrimination and the realities of a sexist society generally. They battle with these men for a more equal share of the cake — job opportunities, career paths, levels of pay, and influence in policy-making within public and private organisations. Women from the rest of the working class do not, on the whole, see it this way. They see the men of their own section of the working class as exploited, as not earning enough to support a family at the desired level, if they are earning at all. Such women frequently seek work opportunities and greater rights and remuneration in the workplace and thus a greater measure of material comfort and financial independence for themselves where possible. They also seek greater negotiating power within a family context. But they do not perceive themselves as locked in a battle with men for these things, and will, when questioned, assume that men have greater rights to a full-time secure job than they themselves have. They see themselves struggling for husbands to get secure jobs, themselves to work where they can and be
sufficiently supported if they cannot, for a reasonable material level, and for alternatives if the everlasting battle for secure family life is temporarily or permanently lost. To the extent that feminism provides them with the weapon to achieve their aims they welcome it, but a feminism which describes ‘men’ as the enemy, as Sydney feminism in particular so often does, does not speak to their situation. I do not think the feminist critique of the family is attractive to these less privileged working class women; what most of them seek is adequate conditions for securing family life. It is for more privileged women, on the whole, that rejection of family life has proved an attractive option. And the reasons, though complex, have one clear element: such a rejection is more feasible if you can expect, on the basis of recognised skills, to earn a reasonable wage throughout your adult life. There may, of course, be periods of unemployment, especially now and especially for younger women, but by and large your chances of self-support — and thereby your interest in transient (communal) rather than semi-durable (family) households — are heavily conditioned by your class position.

So feminism needs to come to terms more than I think it has with several basic features of social life under capitalism — with the differing positions and therefore relation to feminism of women in different classes and sub-classes, with the very real exploitation of less privileged working-class men, with the problems of building working-class unity in a society which hands out its benefits and rewards so grossly unequally. Socialist feminists need, I think, to remember more strongly than many of them do, the production of inequalities other than those based on sex or gender. It is only when these issues are grappled with seriously that feminist critiques and analyses and demands — most if not all of which I regard as profoundly important — will be able to be fought for in a way which not only reorders gender relations within classes but also reorders class relationships altogether.

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