

# CONTEMPORARY FEMINISM and SOCIALIST MOVEMENTS

Barbara Ehrenreich

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This paper is concerned with the potential insights which contemporary feminist movements have to offer socialist movements in two areas: (1) socialist theory about women's liberation which I take to be a key concern of socialists world-wide; and (2) socialist theory and practice more generally, apart from the question of women as a social group. Finally, I would like to speculate on the practical possibilities of a synthesis of socialist and feminist politics. Though the issues I will raise have broad applicability to the industrialised countries, my thinking is naturally based most heavily on experience limited to the United States.

## **Feminism and the socialist approach to women's liberation**

The traditional socialist program for women's liberation, passed down basically unchanged from the nineteenth century, is two-fold: First, women were to be granted full democratic rights, including the right to divorce and possession of property; and, second, women were to be integrated into

social production. Through the combination of democratic rights and integration into production, it was thought that no obstacles to women's full participation in political life would remain, and sexual equality would be achieved. Now, there is no question about the central importance of these measures to women's liberation: Feminist movements themselves have focused heavily on the legal rights of women and on access to jobs and education. The feminist movement in the United States is currently investing major energy in a campaign for a constitutional amendment which would eliminate legal discrimination between women and men as workers and citizens.

But a major insight of contemporary feminism, if I may state it first in purely negative fashion, is that a program of democratic rights plus integration into social production is *not sufficient* to establish full equality between the sexes. It is this insight which most strikingly distinguishes contemporary feminism from historically

prior waves of feminist activity and which distinguishes the feminist political perspective from the traditional socialist program for women's liberation.

There are several reasons for the late twentieth century feminist perception of the inadequacy of the traditional socialist program. The first reason is that, in 1970, as opposed to 1870 or even 1920, the program of democratic rights plus integration into social production had, in fact, largely been achieved for long enough to make some kind of evaluation possible. The magnitude of this achievement cannot be underestimated: Socialism has universally brought civil equality for women, mass entry of women into social production (hence the possibility of individual economic independence from the family), supportive social services such as child care - not to mention the obvious improvements in material security which have accrued to both sexes. It is thus with considerable envy that feminists within capitalist societies have regarded their socialist sisters: Socialist women are not "second class citizens" in the eyes of the law; they are encouraged in their education or vocational training; they are free to contribute to social production knowing that their children are well cared for.

At the same time, however, the situation of women in socialist societies can hardly be described as one of full sexual equality. There are shortcomings in the progress of socialist women which, persisting as they do after many years (and in some cases, more than one generation), cannot easily be explained as mere vestiges of capitalist or pre-capitalist society. To generalise, without reference to particular countries, there are three major kinds of evidence of the persistence of sex inequality into socialist society:

1. Occupational segregation by sex. Of course, this exists in varying degrees in various countries - nowhere approaching the extreme occupational segregation characteristic of capitalist society. But the basic pattern of the sexual division of labor has tended to persist, with women occupying relatively low-paid positions and/or performing stereotyped functions such as nursing, child care and personal services of various sorts, while men occupy, on the average, better-paid positions which are more likely to involve decision-making and

to confer prestige. There is some evidence that when women have entered a characteristically male occupation, such as medicine, the social prestige of that occupation tends to decline.

2. Sexual objectification. This again is highly variable, with no socialist society approaching the decadent extremes characteristic of capitalism. One example of sexual objectification which has tended to persist is the differential adornment of the sexes: The cultural requirement that women use clothes and cosmetics to create an appearance of youthfulness, fragility and/or sexual availability is something so universal that it almost seems "natural". Yet in a feminist analysis, the emphasis on an objectified type of "beauty" for women is a clear cultural hallmark of male domination, and a disturbing thing to note in socialist society.

3. Low representation of women in positions of political leadership. This is undoubtedly the most striking and serious shortcoming, at least as seen from a distance. The levels of socialist leadership which achieve international visibility are almost without exception occupied by men. Where is there a female head of a socialist state, or a woman serving as first secretary of the party? How many women can be counted on the politburos and legislative bodies of the existing socialist countries? What does the near-absence of female leadership at the national level suggest about women's participation in political life at provincial and local levels?

These areas of shortcomings in the achievement of sexual equality by no means outweigh the tremendous advances women have made in socialist society. Nor is there any real basis for believing that sexual inequality is a fixed, structural feature of socialist society, as it has become in capitalist society. It may well be that a static critique omits significant progress which would be evident in a historical survey of women's status within socialist societies. (Or, to take a pessimistic point of view, it may be that sexual inequality will tend to increase in the European socialist countries with the spread of consumerism and consequent influence of Western capitalist culture.) But the point is that the traditional socialist answer to the "woman question" -

democratic rights and integration into production — has not proved to be a sufficient condition for sexual equality: A necessary condition, no doubt, but not a sufficient one. For a feminist movement emerging in the 1970s, this observation was inescapable.

Another reason for feminist dissatisfaction with the traditional socialist program rests not on the shortcomings of socialism, but rather on the “successes” of capitalism. It is striking, almost incredible, that the birthplace of contemporary feminism was not a society such as Spain, still dominated by rigid patriarchal forms of family life and religion, but the United States, a society in which women were widely considered to have already been “liberated”. Well before the advent of the current feminist movement, women in the United States enjoyed a level of democratic rights and workforce participation well beyond that of women in the most “advanced” European capitalist countries, not to mention the poorer capitalist countries, former colonies, etc. Divorce was legal and easily attainable; female suffrage had been achieved fifty years earlier. Moreover, women were entering the workforce in unprecedented numbers, particularly in response to the rising corporate demand for female clerical labor. In 1950, 33.9 per cent of American women were employed; in 1960, 37.8 per cent; in 1970, 43.4 per cent; and the proportion today is 48 per cent. In 1970, the United States surpassed Sweden, France, Canada, the United Kingdom, Italy, Switzerland and the Netherlands in terms of the proportion of the labor force which is female. (Though of course the labor force participation of US women still lags behind that of women in most industrialised socialist countries.)

So, at the time of the emergence of a feminist movement in the United States, the socialist program of “integration into social production” had been achieved to a significant extent *within* capitalism, although hardly on feminist terms. The great majority of women who entered the workforce in the 'sixties and 'seventies entered relatively low-paid clerical and service jobs, and this is reflected in the fact that the median income for full-time working women in the United States is only 57 per cent of the median income for men. Thousands of women have been drawn into

struggles around workplace issues — discrimination in pay and promotions, lack of child care, health and safety issues, etc. But in a situation where nearly half the adult women are already employed, most in relatively unsatisfactory jobs, a political program offering “integration into social production” would be irrelevant, if not ironic.

It is these two factors — disillusionment with the political economic “advances” of women within capitalism, combined with a certain disappointment about the progress of women within socialism — which led contemporary feminism to reject the traditional program of democratic rights plus integration into production as an adequate basis for women’s liberation. Thus contemporary feminism, the feminism of the 1970s, began with the realisation that the solutions to sexual inequality lay not only in the realm of political economy, but in an area which had so far received little attention from political movements — the realm of “private life”.

### The politics of private life

The existence of a sphere of “private life”, as distinct from the realm of political economy, is a characteristic feature of industrial capitalist society, and perhaps industrial society in general. In a pre-industrial “natural” economy, the family was not only a biological unit but a productive unit. Work, play, birth, child care, food consumption, etc., were all activities occurring in the same physical space and involving the same group of household members. With the advent of large-scale socialised production, the household was stripped of most of its productive activities and left with the personal biological functions of eating, sexuality, child care, rest, etc. Patriarchal restrictions, combined with women’s traditional centrality in child raising, dictated that the home, rather than the socialised workplace, was woman’s “proper” sphere of activity. Private life became the major focus of women’s work (usually even for women in the paid workforce); it was, furthermore, the major locus of “sex role reproduction”: the place where small children learn the forms of behavior deemed appropriate for their sex. Inevitably, then, feminist analysis would have to investigate the realm of private life,

and a feminist program would have to address the issues arising from it.

With some significant exceptions, the terrain of private life has been largely omitted from the mainstream of marxist theory. Lenin, for example, saw the home as a sort of backwater, left behind by industrial progress but still capable of breeding conservatism even within modern socialist society (hence, in part, his insistence on women's full integration into social production). The most serious attempts in the West to analyse the relations of private life have come from Freudian-oriented marxists and marxists associated with the "critical theory" school. If I may summarise their concerns rather sketchily, they have tended to focus on: (1) The "ancient" aspects of family relations — the system of patriarchal authority which survives from a pre-industrial mode of production. Reich and others saw the patriarchal authoritarianism of the family as the psychological basis for authoritarian relations within the entire society, as between classes. (2) The most "modern" aspect of private life — its penetration by advertising, consumer goods, external "expert" authorities, etc., to the point where the distinction between "private" and "political economic" realms of social existence begins to be a dubious one. Marcuse, for example, relates the corporate penetration of private life to the diminished political autonomy of the working class in advanced industrial countries. Thus, the neo-marxist analyses of the real of private life created by industrial capitalism emphasise the importance of the private realm from a political economic point of view: It is the locus of the reproduction of the personality types (and, of course, actual human beings) required by class society, and it is one of the latest frontiers for the expansion of the capitalist market.

However, as the American historian Eli Zaretsky has argued, it was not until the rebirth of a feminist movement in the last ten years that issues related to private life were projected out of the realm of theory and into the arena of political struggle. Feminist analysis tended to differ from that of the (male) neo-marxists in that it focused on private life not merely as an influence on, or appendage of, the political economy, but as a realm of human experience having intrinsic importance if we are to comprehend the

situation of women and how to change it. Thus the feminist movement highlighted a series of issues which had been largely neglected by marxists, either because they seemed to be too trivial, divisive, or perhaps simply embarrassing to discuss. These include:

— the biological subjugation of women within the family and within personal relationships generally: subjection to unwanted pregnancies, to physical abuse and coercive styles of male sexuality (of which rape is only the extreme).

— relations of domination and submission between women and men. These relations are nurtured within the patriarchal family, but extend into public interactions between women and men, for example, in the workplace and even within political organisations. The expressions of male domination may be overt, as in the common assumption that in a mixed gathering women will do the more "menial" work of serving food and drinks. Or they may be subtle, taking the form of disparaging remarks and patronising attitudes, or the use of modes of discourse which tend to exclude women's participation.

— the social devaluation of domestic labor. With the development of socialised production, women's work in the home was by no means abolished. In fact there is evidence that over the last hundred years rising standards of cleanliness and rising expectations about the mother's role in early childhood socialisation have actually increased the housewife's hours of labor. Yet the only recognition of women's domestic labor afforded in most capitalist countries is of a purely sentimental nature. There is no economic security for mothers who are deserted by their husbands; there are no pensions for women who have spent their lives as housekeepers and mothers.

— the corporate penetration of private life, which has depended primarily on the manipulation of women as consumers (often through advertising which presents insulting and stereotyped images of women) and leads to dubious improvements in the quality

of women's lives. (To give a few examples: Certain feminine hygiene products introduced in the United States with considerable advertising have turned out to be hazardous to the user's health; recent studies show that the introduction of "labor-saving" devices over the last 50 years has *not* led to a decrease in women's domestic work; prepared baby foods contain unhealthy quantities of salt and sugar, etc.)

To say that these issues related to private life have been opened up by the feminist movement is by no means to say that they have been resolved, or can easily be resolved, even within the realm of theory and analysis. In fact, these issues raise serious questions of relevance for both socialist and feminist movements.

Take the issue of women's domestic labor: There can be no question about the social value of domestic labor, despite the fact that it is unwaged and performed in the *privatised setting of the home*. In certain capitalist countries (Italy, the United States, England) some feminists have argued that the women's movement should focus on a demand for economic recognition of domestic work, or "wages for housework". Such a demand would recognise the strategic position of women as workers and their productive role in society. On the other hand, it has been argued that state subsidisation of women's domestic labor would (1) reinforce the prevailing notion that this is a uniquely female form of labor, and (2) add nothing to the material well-being of the working class, since the wages for housework would undoubtedly be drawn from the general wage of the class (e.g. by higher taxation). Within socialist society, there remain questions about the social valuation of domestic labor and the best strategies for dealing with it. Too often, women's "integration into social production" has only meant that most women have two jobs — one in social production and one in the home. Should this situation be recognised with reduced hours for working women and perhaps formal payment for their domestic work? Or should the situation itself be changed, for example, by pressure to increase male participation in domestic work or by further socialisation of

this work? What solutions are most consistent with the needs of children, and, if possible, with long-standing cultural traditions?

Underlying these questions about domestic labor is an even more fundamental issue: the question of the family and its role as a basic social unit. Within the United States there has been considerable debate over whether left and feminist groups should concentrate on criticising the traditional family or defending it. The analysis which reveals the family as the key site in the reproduction of hierarchical relationships (between women and men, and between people in general) has led some to conclude that the abolition of the family as we know it is essential to women's liberation. In this view, an important task for radical movements is the creation of alternative living arrangements which will meet people's needs for companionship, sexuality, etc. in the absence of traditional authoritarian relationships. Others argue that the family, for all its faults, is the only refuge for the human values of affection, nurturance, etc., within capitalist society, and represents the only security most women know. Rather than building alternatives, which are unlikely to survive within capitalist society anyway, the movement should focus on improving women's position within the existing family structure. (From either point of view, the persistence of the conventional family structure within socialist societies, and the failure of these societies to encourage the development of alternative living arrangements, has been puzzling to American feminists.)

However, if there is debate over the specific resolution of these issues — both as issues which must be confronted within capitalism, as issues facing socialist societies, and, ultimately, as questions facing future communist societies — there does exist a feminist consensus on certain principles which can be summarised as follows:

That in addition to reforms in the political economic realm giving women full democratic rights and the opportunity for participation in social production, women's liberation depends upon -

1. The establishment of women's reproductive freedom and physical integrity

as inalienable rights. This means the right to contraceptive measures and abortion regardless of national population policy, and the right to protection from sexual coercion (within or without marriage).

2. A social commitment to the eradication of male domination in all its manifestations — authoritarian relations within the family, the sexual objectification of women, stereotyped images of women in media and culture, and so on.

3. A reappraisal of women's domestic labor, aimed at (a) increased social valuation of women's necessary and productive work within the home, which should be recognised, for example, with economic security for housewives, (b) increased sharing of domestic labor between the sexes, and (c) the socialisation of functions which can be more effectively and satisfactorily performed outside the home.

4. Democratic control over the commodity ensemble produced for domestic and private consumption, with regard to quality, intrinsic use value and ideological content.

#### Implications for socialist movements

Insofar as women's liberation, as an issue which transcends class, is one of the fundamental projects of socialism, then it goes without saying that the conclusions of contemporary feminism should be of intrinsic interest to all socialists. But I would like to turn now to some implications of contemporary feminist thought quite apart from the "woman question". First, by analogy, feminism offers important insights into relations of domination and submission which exist between other social groups, such as classes and ethnic groups. Second, by its insistence on a politics which embraces both the "private" and the political-economic sphere, feminism points the way to a more comprehensive socialist politics for the industrial capitalist countries.

To take first the insights which feminism may offer by analogy. As I have stressed, contemporary feminism insists that sex inequality exists not only at the level of political-economic structures, but at the level of personal interactions, within the family, within social life, and within political and working relationships. Thus the problem of inequality, or male domination, must be attacked not only in the sphere of public life,

but in the sphere of deeply rooted attitudes, expectations and patterns of behavior. The same can be said for relations between classes or strata: The significant interactions here do not only occur between actual members of classes, on a daily basis, and in such a way as to reinforce the prevailing patterns of class domination. When such interactions carry over into progressive political organisations, the results can be crippling.

The first example of this sort of phenomenon in the US left occurred over the issue of male-female relations within the radical movement of the 'sixties. Despite verbal commitment to egalitarianism and "participatory democracy" there existed enormous barriers to women's full participation in the movement. Meeting independently of men, women were able to identify some of the barriers to their participation, ranging from such obvious things as a lack of women in visible leadership positions to more subtle issues of male "style", a tendency to long-winded polemics, a competitive manner of discourse, etc. The resulting efforts to eliminate male dominant tendencies within the movement were far from uniformly successful (in fact many women simply left the "mixed" movement to work independently as women). But these efforts did lead to a widespread consciousness of the problem of "sexism" (as it came to be called, in analogy to racism), and to a great unleashing of women's political energies and leadership capabilities.

Today the US left faces a somewhat analogous problem in relation to class. Coming as it does out of a largely student base, the left is disproportionately middle class in composition, by which I mean it contains a disproportionate representation of people in professional and managerial-type occupations, as opposed to those in blue-collar and lower-level white collar occupations. Since the early 'seventies, the left has been preoccupied with the problem of expanding beyond its present class base into a broader working class constituency. There are many obstacles to this effort, which belong more properly to a discussion of US working class history. But from our limited experience so far, it is becoming clear that some of the obstacles lie at the level of day-to-day individual interactions, such as those

uncovered by feminists in the case of male-female relationships in the movement. These include: stereotyped expectations of roles (e.g. that people from middle class backgrounds will do the theoretical and analytical work), subtle attitudes of elitism and condescension on the part of middle class people, the persistent use of terms and modes of discourse which are familiar to educated people but uncomfortable to less educated people, etc. The results of failing to address these problems can be passivity among working class members, resentment, and sometimes even disillusionment with left politics.

To generalise a little: The task of building a socialist movement within a heterogeneous society such as the United States requires building co-operative efforts and common organisational forms spanning women and men, middle and working class people, and people of diverse ethnic backgrounds. In this project, the feminist insight that inter-group antagonisms and systems of domination are expressed not only in political-economic structures, but at the level of individual interactions, is a lesson which political movements can ignore only at their own risk. The emerging feminist movement of the late

'sixties demanded that political ideals be matched with high standards of interpersonal conduct and mutual respect. Without a continuing commitment to the feminist principle that "the personal (the ways we behave and treat others on an individual basis) is political" there is little hope of building a socialist movement which will span the divergent and often antagonistic social groupings which comprise the broad class of working people within a country such as the United States.

The other major contribution that contemporary feminism has to offer to socialist movements lies simply in its affirmation of the realm of private life as a significant arena for political attention, analysis and struggle. Socialist politics has conventionally focused on class relations as they are expressed in the "public" realm of socialised production and state functions, with secondary attention to culture and other elements of the "superstructure". The political consciousness of the working class was assumed to be shaped overwhelmingly in the experience of production and through interactions with a repressive state apparatus. The nature of private life was assumed to be determined by the workers'



needs for biological self-reproduction and less importantly by customs and attitudes remaining from pre-capitalist social formations. With these assumptions, the nature of private life could be safely ignored in favor of concentration on the visible and dramatic class struggles over political and economic issues.

But two developments in advanced capitalist society suggest that these assumptions are no longer completely adequate, and that a politics based on them will fail to address monopoly capitalism as a total system. First is the capitalist penetration (in response to the continuing problem of economic stagnation) of private life as a *market*. This process, beginning in the United States in the 1920s and going into full swing in the post-war period, affects, directly or indirectly, all strata of society. It has required an enormous ideological campaign (carried out by individual corporations in the form of advertising) to "sell" a way of life based on individual consumption, and it requires ever more refined efforts (marketing techniques, etc.) to predict and regulate consumption. To the extent that this corporate penetration of private life has been successful, the very distinction between "private" and "public" (or political economic) realms of existence ceases to be a meaningful one. The internal expansion of the capitalist market within the industrialised countries, leaves fewer and fewer "backwaters" of social existence, and capitalism presents itself at last as a unitary system, embracing what were formerly the most intimate personal aspects of life.

A second and related development which challenges the traditional socialist assumptions about the proper sphere for political endeavor is the process which the American scholar Harry Braverman has called the "degradation of labor": the removal of productive skills from the working class and their concentration in a stratum of technical and managerial workers. This process, necessitated within capitalism by the class struggle in the early 20th century and often emulated within socialism as an "efficiency" measure, has the effect of reducing work to a mindless, repetitive series of routines. Rather than being a source of collective strength, social production becomes an experience of dehumanisation. Thus working class

aspirations tend to shift to private life as a possible arena for the expression of the creativity and autonomy which is so thoroughly repressed at the workplace. This shift, this psychological privatisation originating at the point of production, only reinforces the dominant drift of late capitalist culture towards the social atomisation characteristic of a consumption-centred economy.

The left in the United States, where these trends are most advanced, has yet to formulate a political approach which fully comprehends these trends and the resulting social and cultural conditions. But it is clear that a truly relevant politics can no longer confine itself to the sphere of the political economy as it has been understood, but must extend its analysis and activities into the sphere of "private life". Is it in fact so thoroughly colonised by corporate priorities and commoditised relationships, or is it a potential breeding ground for resistance? What autonomous forms of popular culture are emerging and what is their relationship to commoditised mass culture? What forms of political activity can break through the social atomisation of working class life? To dismiss such questions - to abandon the terrain of "private life" as irrelevant or apolitical is, in fact, to cede it to the capitalists. If feminism in the industrialised capitalist countries has done nothing else, it should at least have alerted left movements to the necessity of a socialist politics capable of addressing the totality of human experience within the culture of late capitalism.

### **The prospects for a socialist-feminist synthesis**

In the coming years we may expect the emergence and continued growth of feminist movements within the industrialised capitalist countries, for several reasons: (1) Over the long run, industrialisation and the spread of market relations inevitably undermine traditional patriarchal relationships, which (in the West, at any rate) had their material basis in an agrarian economy. The gradual erosion of patriarchal authority within the family increases women's possibilities of organising independently; (2) Recent advances in the technology of contraception are offering women a degree of biological self-

determination undreamed of by previous generations. Even where this technology is not easily available because of restrictive state policies or high prices, women are becoming aware of the material possibility of controlling their own reproductivity. This awareness was an important factor in the growth of the US women's movement; (3) The increasing cultural integration of the world, with the growth of the mass electronic media, etc., makes it impossible to contain feminist ideas within the boundaries of a few countries. Interest in feminism — or, at the very least, a new consciousness of women as women — is spreading on a world scale.

The feminist movements which emerge will continue to challenge the traditional socialist formula for women's liberation and to insist on a new kind of politics embracing both the "public" and the "private", the economic and the cultural. The question is: will the contemporary and emerging feminist movements find common ground with existing socialist movements — or will they become a dissident stream detached from the struggle for socialism? I have argued that a socialist-feminist synthesis would greatly enrich socialist politics (and, of course, feminist politics). What are the prospects for such a synthesis? I will end with some brief speculative comments on this question.

The United States presents, at least at this time, an exceptional situation and one that is historically unprecedented. Namely, a situation in which the feminist movement, despite its organisational disarray and internal disunity, is far larger and more broadly based than anything that could be called a socialist "movement". Left organisations may denounce feminism as "petty bourgeois" or they may court it as an essential extension of the "new left", but their impact is relatively minor. The direction which American feminism chooses — whether socialist or accommodating to capitalism — depends largely on developments within the feminist movement itself and its reaction to the political opposition it faces. On the discouraging side, the growth of an anti-feminist "movement", opposed to abortion and equal rights for women and unabashedly linked to the far right, has pushed major feminist organisations like the National Organisation for Women (NOW) towards a

more 'moderate' political position. In the face of the rightwing attack, NOW has been eager to dissociate itself from socialist organisations and from more sweeping demands for social justice. On the encouraging side, however, feminism continues to expand — as a state of mind if not an organised movement — among working class women, creating a militancy which spills over and interacts with militancy on class issues. Particularly striking at this time is the growth of a black feminist movement, highly conscious of the "double jeopardy" of black women within racist society. Any rebirth of mass radicalism in the United States will be heavily shaped by, and perhaps in part generated by, the contemporary feminist movement.

Within the other industrialised capitalist countries, a more historically "normal" situation prevails at the present time. Socialist movements are strongly and deeply rooted in the working class. It is feminism which is relatively weak — a newcomer on the political scene. Here the possibility of a synthesis of socialist and feminist politics depends most heavily on the reaction of the existing left to the demands and issues raised by the emerging feminist movements. The crucial question is not whether existing left organisations will welcome feminist movements as they would any other progressive force, but how they will respond to those concerns of feminism which go beyond traditional socialist views on women's liberation. The response may be to dismiss these concerns as trivial, divisive, or even "ultra-leftist". Or the response may be to seek to incorporate feminist insights into the historical body of socialist thought and practice. As I have tried to argue here, what is at stake in these alternatives is much more than the left's relation to a particular constituency (women), but its ability to formulate a meaningful program for women's liberation within socialism, and its ability to comprehend the emerging contours of late capitalist culture.

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