

POLITICS AND THE PLEASURE PRINCIPLE

Carmel Shute

It is not surprising that it was a woman — and a woman anarchist at that — who uttered the immortal words, "If I can't dance, it's not my revolution". Male socialists have never waxed lyrical about pleasure in politics or the joy we might expect after the revolution. Altruism (saving the working class) and pleasure (having a good time) are mutually incompatible, or so we're given to understand.

Putting pleasure back into politics has been a bit of a hobby-horse for me over the last couple of years. Like all passions, all ideologies, it has a material basis — frustration with attending fifteen years of boring meetings on the left; exhaustion from attending these same boring meetings most nights and weekends; and despair about the diminishing influence of the left and the prospects for socialism in Australia.

Something must be wrong, I began to think, if we're all so tired and exhausted but getting nowhere fast. I became increasingly dispirited as I watched a number of my comrades-in-arms "burnt out" from too many meetings and not enough fun. Others got ulcers or retreated into their careers or middle-class lifestyles. Some have disappeared, never to be seen again, into the human potential movement, the Orange People. And who could blame them after so many years of mostly fruitless slog? I've been tempted myself by the idea of a more normal life — time to read, write letters or even articles, to see more of my friends, my lover, my lover's



Left Aloft: Order by Numbers

children ... my mother's admonition that I should spend more time on myself rings in my ears. Undoubtedly she's right, but how does one square the desire to see socialism in one's lifetime with the need for a saner life on the left in the meantime?

So far, I've concluded that the only solution is to build a New, Larger Socialist Party (more people, less meetings) and, at the same time, to inject more pleasure into politics so there'll be more people to join the NLSP. One of the reasons that the left in Australia is so small is that our whole culture, our whole way of operating, is alien and unattractive. It is based on the denial of pleasure — and, by pleasure, I mean pleasure in the popular, everyday sense, not in some highfalutin' definition from the academics.

The leninist heritage of discipline, tight organisation, self-sacrifice and denial has undoubtedly played a big role in determining current left practice, more than seventy years on. But, in other societies, such as those of Southern Europe and Latin America, the puritanical aspects of leninism aren't so evident in many respects, perhaps because of vigorous peasant traditions of music, song, dance and festivities.

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Unfortunately, we in Australia are saddled with a more repressive, Anglo-Saxon heritage. In Australia, the Irish perhaps came closest to meshing pleasure with politics — male drinking sessions in pubs, wakes, wonderful St. Patrick's Day festivals. However, this tradition was all but annihilated by the DLP split of the 'fifties and the rapid social mobility of the Irish in the post-war boom.

Most young activists "starting out" must find life on the left a bit strange. Our meetings are frequently characterised by harsh language and a



moralistic dogmatism. Often, we don't show a caring and supportive attitude towards our comrades. We aren't very understanding of comrades who can't make it to meetings for "personal" reasons. We often lack common courtesies like introducing strangers to each other. We don't go out of our way to make new activists feel at home. The gulf between the public and the private all too frequently becomes a chasm.

Activism on the left doesn't only mean little time for friends, family, and lovers, little time for sport, recreation, making love. It also means little time to do your share of the housework and child care. Of course, some male comrades still have their time on the left subsidised by women's labour in the home,¹ though feminism has made this more problematic. "My wife's not interested in politics", these comrades mumble defensively. Well, if she's not, we have to ask ourselves why? Is political activism on top of everything else (including perhaps financial support of professional revolutionary husbands) just too much? William Lane called women "the weary sex"² in his 1892 novel *The Workingman's Paradise*, and political women are often even more weary with the triple burden of work, home and politics — often with little assistance from the men in their lives.

Though child care has now been tacked onto the agenda of every left group and party, we rarely address the larger question now of the oppressive relations between men and women on the left.

It's not simply a question of child care, as Marilyn Lake points out so urgently in the recent volume *Moving Left: The Future of Socialism in Australia*. Child care at meetings or conferences is not an answer for kids who've already spend thirty or forty hours in institutionalised child care. Nor is it an answer for parents who want to spend more time with their kids. It's a question of time, Lake says, determined by both the capitalist system and gender relations, and she advocates a twenty-five hour week so that men can enjoy the equal right to child care and housework while women assert their right to paid work.

If men resumed their responsibilities as fathers, women might be freed to participate on more equal terms in politics. More importantly, the content and focus of our politics might shift considerably. John Halfpenny, interviewed over a pile of steaming nappies? Laurie Carmichael speaking to the media while stirring a delicious pasta sauce? Who knows, maybe we could really come to grips with "Accord Mark III" over a hot tub or stove.

The denial of pleasure in left politics is reflected in our public image. We appear, too often, as latterday puritans, as hostile, angry and oppositional — “smash ...”, “ban ...”, “oppose ...” — always against something and not *for* much at all. Of course, there is lots to be angry about — but what we stand for, what constitutes our vision of a better

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society, gets lost in the welter of oppositional politics. A friend recently remarked that the left speaks the “language of hate”. She has a point — we should be speaking the language of love for our fellow human beings, of love for our natural environment, our country, for the oppressed people everywhere. At a recent conference, a comrade of forty-nine years’ standing remarked that the Brotherhood of St. Laurence had a better public presence than socialists. She advocated a more caring attitude on the left.

The bourgeois media, of course, loves to focus on our confrontations, strikes, demonstrations and internal disputes, but it is only partly to blame for the public perception of us. We could, if we wanted, also use the media more effectively to say other things — to project a more positive and attractive image. Our iconography — banners, badges, flags, posters, symbols — doesn’t do us much good in the public eye either. Too often, we borrow our symbols and slogans from overseas and they appear alien, un-Australian.

Last year, I twice tried to organise a discussion weekend on the theme “How to Survive Politics and Live to See Socialism in Your Lifetime: A Stress Management Weekend”. The camp never took place, however, because everyone had too many meetings to attend! What was also revealing, though, was that one male comrade asked me twice, “Who’s

organising the group sex?” On another occasion, when I spoke about pleasure and politics, half a dozen male comrades made similar comments — which indicated that their only notion of pleasure was sexual pleasure.

Our notion of pleasure should, indeed, include the sexual. Eileen Phillips, who edited a book entitled *The Left and the Erotic in Britain*, quoted her friend’s reaction to the incongruous idea that there might be a relationship between the left and the erotic: “I can’t imagine anything less erotic than sitting on hard chairs in a smoky room trying to avoid the chairperson’s eye when they’re asking for volunteers for leaflets”.⁴ I believe we need to escape from that smoky room before we can properly discuss the left and the erotic — or, to put it another way, we need to work out who’s doing the washing-up before we ask if Lenin was correct to ask during his discussion with Klara Zetkin on free love, whether a normal person would drink out of “a glass with a rim greasy from many lips”.

If we’re going to convince more Australians that socialism offers a better future, if we’re to get a new socialist party off the ground, we have to abandon a politics where there are the speakers and the spoken to. We need more active, democratic forms of participation. In this respect, we have a lot to learn from the organising strategies of the environmental, peace and women’s movements.

While existing left groups and parties are increasingly moribund, these movements continue to draw in activists of all ages. I can’t speak from personal experience about the affinity groups which were the organising basis for campaigns — such as the successful action to save the Franklin — but, from all accounts, they were very effective. One of the participants at my Broad Left Conference workshop was an older leftie who confessed that he’d been initially sceptical about becoming involved in the Franklin campaign. At first, he said, he thought it was stupid for people to stand around in circles holding hands. Later, he found that



Whatever happened to sport on the left?

"relating to each other" did not necessarily mean a loss of politics. "We sang, danced, chanted our way through the confrontations in front of the bulldozers, with the police, and even in going to jail". He concluded that massage, touching and closeness were essential for combatting the "heavy" machinery of capitalism — police, violence and jail.

I can, however, speak from first-hand experience of the women's movement and, to a lesser extent, the peace movement. Without a doubt, the women's movement offers a lot more pleasure than the men's (left) movement. Women's meetings do, to some extent, bridge the gulf between the personal and the political. Women are more caring, warm and friendly, less likely to be hung up on their egos, less likely to make long, hectoring speeches. The meetings are less structured, more likely to involve the sharing of laughter, food and drink.

The work still gets done. Women, more so than men, are likely to

organise pleasurable things to do as part of a political campaign — dances, dinners, balls, film nights, raffles offering gourmet breakfasts in bed for one, two or three ... According to Cyndi Lauper, "Girls just want to have fun" and she's probably right. Before

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Lauper's song became a No. 1 hit, Doris Lessing spoke of the different behaviour of women when they're beyond male control: "... when the men go away, the women instantly create a kind of hedonistic, permissive world where they try on dresses, cook gossip and have a lovely time ..."⁵

Lessing's point was admirably supported by one workshop participant who compared the divergent experiences of attending a Victorian ALP Socialist Left meeting

and a meeting which celebrated the Women's Social and Political Coalition's first anniversary. The SL meeting, held, as always, on a Sunday morning — the same time as mass — was, in fact, quite like mass. There were several priests, rather than one, but the fundamentals were the same — the word was given from the pulpit, there were ritual incantations at various stages, and then the money was collected (though not in velvet bags on the ends of sticks).

In contrast, the WSPC meeting's rituals were a lot less formalised and more friendly — discussion, films, a specially printed anniversary T-shirt, a cake decorated in purple, green and white, cups of tea, singing ... and no high priestess!

What was clear from the workshop discussion is that women derive pleasure from a wider variety of sources in politics than do men. Men definitely get pleasure from a good fight, a good argument, a good win and getting drunk. Women are not immune from these pleasures but also enjoy other things — friendships (as opposed to mateship), exchanging confidences, and so on. I am reminded of Rosa Luxemburg's plea from the heart to her lover, Leo Jogiches: "Your letters contain *nothing but nothing* except for The Workers' Cause ... When I open your letters and see six sheets covered with debates about the Polish Socialist Party and not a single word about ... ordinary life, I feel faint".⁶

We could well do with some small-scale hedonism in the left in Australia. Where are our festivals, our celebrations on a large or small scale? In much of Western Europe, the left parties maintain a rich and vibrant cultural life. They possess a long and

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dynamic tradition of music, dance, theatre, film ... The Spanish Communist Party's Fiesta in Madrid attracts over a million people each year. Even more attend the Italian Communist Party's Festa dell'Unita in Rome and regional centres. Music, song, theatre, dance and film can be an extremely powerful means of politicisation. When it is actively

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involving, music, song or theatre can be a great way of creating solidarity.

Singing *The Internationale* with 50,000 people — even if you don't speak Spanish — transforms you into something greater. Music played a crucial role in drawing me and thousands of others into the left in the late 'sixties and early 'seventies. More recently, the songs of Midnight Oil have probably won more people to the anti-nuclear cause than a thousand well-intentioned speeches. Go to a "Stop the Drop" concert and listen to all the kids — they know all the words.

Of course, you'll say, Australia used to have more of a leftworking class culture until it was destroyed by the suburbanisation and anti-communism of the fifties. This is true — but while we lost hundreds of thousands to the suburban wastelands, we gained millions of migrants from Southern Europe, the Middle East, Latin America and Asia who brought with them different political traditions. Not all these traditions are of the left, but many are, and they offer a lot to Australian left culture.

The Italian workers' and families' organisation, FILEF, is organising a conference in Melbourne about the future of soccer. FILEF expects over a thousand to attend. Where is the Anglo-Saxon left conference on the clouded future of Aussie Rules as it

succumbs to market forces? Why aren't we concerned enough to discuss what's happening to sport? If we can interrupt conferences for progress reports on the Grand Final, surely we should be discussing it politically? And why don't we have organised sport on the left any more? The Workers' Sports Federation of the 'thirties and, later, the Eureka Youth League, attracted thousands to the left by their organised sporting and social activities. We would do well to emulate them — and we might get fitter in the process.

The Palm Sunday rallies are the only vaguely leftist events to be successful in Australia's recent past. This year's Palm Sunday rally in Melbourne was a joyful, life affirming event — lots of street theatre, wonderful banners and costumes, anti-nuclear dogs, punks for peace, songs and music — all culminating in a festival near that monument to the dead, the Shrine of Remembrance. There were speeches for those who miss the ritual of mass and lots more besides — stalls, music, dancing, and lots of soft, green places to sit and talk with friends.

The peace movement can teach the left a thing or two about penetrating the outer reaches of suburbia and even country towns. Despite what some of the more elitist may think, it is possible to politicise the honest burghers of Glen Waverley and the disenchanted youth of Broadmeadows. The success of groups like People for Nuclear Disarmament rests precisely on its suburban network because this allows women to participate more actively. The left needs to concentrate less on overthrowing the state and more on building the grassroots organisation which, one hopes, will one day create a movement strong enough to tackle the state.

Palm Sunday rallies are positive, too, because they foster the equal involvement of men, women and children. If the left is really to encourage the greater participation of women, we have to organise more activities which children (and their parents) can attend — that is, less night meetings in the city, more picnics, festivals and recreational

events. We will also need to reclaim some festivals like Melbourne's Moomba, which was originally a labour movement celebration of the eight-hour day, but which has now been appropriated by the ruling class.

If we're going to build a new broad-based socialist party and live to see socialism in our lifetime, let's put some pleasure back into politics now, or, as they used to say in the days of my youth, "Keep a smile on your face, and a song in your heart, while you're fighting the state".

NOTES

1. Writing about her past in the Communist Party of Great Britain, Zeldia Curtis says, "Some of the women in the party knew their place only too well. One such said she knew her role in the party was to make sure her husband, a leading comrade, was best able to perform his party responsibilities. She made sure, she said, he had good hot meals and clean clothing." Z. Curtis, "Private Lives' and Communism" in E. Phillips, ed., *The Left and the Erotic* (London, 1983), p.154.
2. Cited in M. Lake, "A Question of Time" in D. McKnight, ed., *Moving Left* (Sydney, 1986), p.135.
3. *ibid.*, p. 144.
4. Phillips, p. 11.
5. J. Rigg and J. Copeland, eds., *Coming Out! Women's Voices, Women's Lives* (Melbourne, 1985), p. 179.
6. E. Ettinger, ed., *Rosa Luxemburg: Comrade and Lover*, (London, 1979), p. xv.

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DROP US A LINE ...

In our next issue, *ALR* will introduce a letters page to stimulate debate and to give readers a chance to air their thoughts and feelings about the articles they liked, the articles they hated, the "hidden agendas" they may have discovered, or the issues they feel are being ignored.

The deadline for letters for Issue No. 99 is January 31, 1987. As a general rule, letters should be no longer than 250 words and, preferably, should be typewritten. The author's address should be included, although this will not be printed.