THE RED AND THE MAUVE

In our last issue, we printed a provocative assessment from Britain of the state of socialist feminism — "Sisters And Slogans" by Melissa Benn. Below we print two Australian contributions to the debate: an assessment of the recent books, by Lynne Segal and Anne Phillips, which prompted the initial article; and a personal view of the current state of socialist feminism in Australia by two well known activists.

Essential Desires

Marilyn Lake

Feminism is confronted with the issue of "difference" on two fronts, with possibly contradictory political implications. On the one hand is the insistence on the difference between men and women, between men's values and women's values, men's ideas and women's ideas.

On the other, there are the differences between women — an emphasis on the diversity of women divided by class, race, ethnicity, nationality. In the first, "woman" is a unified category; in the second, the unity dissolves in the face of the separate, even opposed, interests of the different classes and races of women.

The resurgence of the belief in women's separate and special experience and capacities gives rise to the "troubled thoughts" expressed in Lynne Segal's Is the Future Female? She sees cultural feminism as having replaced socialist feminism and validated a new "essentialism" — which she defines as the denial of the possibility of change — and which, she argues, constitutes the public face of feminism in the 1980s. (One wonders, in Australia, whether "femocracy" might not be the public face of feminism.) Segal identifies Dale Spender and Mary Daly as the real villains in this process, characterising both as elitist idealists and linguistic determinists who scorn the material realities of women's subordination in the workplace.

Essentialism is Segal's bete noir and a wide range of writers on quite different subjects — for example, Nancy Chodorow, Susan Griffin, Luce Irigaray and Juliet Mitchell — all seem to share the fatal flaw. Segal recognises that the new positive valuations of women's capacities and experience are, in part, an understandable reaction to the earlier misogynist strain of much 1970s feminism ("childbirth is
barbaric", etc.). Feminism does indeed face intractable dilemmas in its "appraisal of women". But the championing of women's nurturing skills, women's morality, the espousal of women's difference is, according to Segal, a strategy of despair, a consolation of the powerless. I think Segal is wrong here: on the contrary, this new "feminist chauvinism" (to adopt a phrase of Katherine Susannah Prichard about an earlier movement) proceeds from confidence, from a record of achievement. Women no longer wish to be assessed on men's terms, will no longer adhere to masculine models.

Segal worries about the hegemony of cultural feminism because of her equation of assertions of sexual difference with essentialism, defined as above. I would agree that feminists need a theory and politics which is transformative, but it seems to me we should not confuse recognition, even celebration of difference, with statements of determination or explanation. In other words we should be able to accept difference (whether biological or socially induced) without affirming it as the "cause" of inequality. We should be able to recognise the particularity, the specificity of female experience, without losing sight of male dominance as a social fact, a social construction.

It is precisely the denial of difference, and the promotion of sameness, which has fuelled the excesses of Spender and Daly. Their excesses stem, in part, from their trivialisation of class and racial oppression. Such is their enthusiasm for the unity Woman confronting Man that the real barriers and differences between women, women's oppressive relationships with each other, disappear from view. Segal's characterisation of Daly as an elitist, oblivious to the material barriers preventing the majority of women from embarking on her journey to the Otherworld of the Race of Women, is well founded. Such a denial or trivialisation of class as a shaper of the lives of women must be able to accept those who would criticise and dismiss feminism as a privileged middle class movement.

It is these criticisms, and the more general relationship between feminism and socialism, which Anne Phillips discusses in her engaging account Divided Loyalties: Dilemmas of Sex and Class. For it is quite evident, as she notes, that the unity of women is continually disrupted by conflicts of class. Conflicts of race have the same effect, but they are not equally the subject of her book.

Phillips notes that "class" has often been used to put feminism in its place, to undermine its pretensions to being a radical movement. Rather than retorting with claims about the primacy of the sex struggle and the masculinility of the class struggle, Phillips is concerned to trace the intersections of sex and class in shaping British people's lives in the past and present. It is significant that the problems of priority, of competing loyalties, of schizophrenia, seem to have been felt most acutely by women: "women have continually tussled with problems of priority, dragging ourselves first in one direction and then another as different oppressions have come to the fore".

Phillips shows with astute historical analysis how gender has structured people's experience of class and how class has structured people's experience of their gender. Indeed, in the nineteenth century, as "femininity was being constructed as a class ideal ... gender was not so much a separate structure as something incorporated into the meanings of class". Phillips argues that in the twentieth century the lives of women became much more homogeneous: marital status supplanted class as the key determinant of a woman's role and work. "In the nineteenth century, social class had dictated whether or not a woman went out to work; by the early twentieth century the key question was whether she was married and had children". By the latter half of the twentieth century, however, most women went out to work. But as there were convergences in women's experience across classes, so there were new divergences. "As women are drawn more and more into paid employment the gap between the kinds of jobs they do has inevitably grown". One cannot help but wonder, in the Australian context, to what extent some Affirmative Action strategies are facilitating the "inevitability" of this hierarchy.

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Against the background of these changes, Phillips suggests how the attention of feminists has shifted backwards and forwards, first spotlighting the distress of the spinster gentlewoman, then the plight of the overburdened working class mother. There are significant divergences here between the Australian and British experience — with the latter confronting the problem of "redundant woman". But by the 1970s paid employment had become a key issue in both countries. In her conclusion, she advises that, when confronted with the complexity of experience arising from class divisions, we resist the temptation to polarise, to stipulate either/or choices, to simplistically condemn ("typically middle class", "so very workerist"). Different women inhabit different positions and need different things at different times. At the same time, socialist feminists must learn how to bargain with the men in the socialist movement, for socialist feminism must continue to grow.
How to act upon the diversities of difference? There are no easy answers, no longer a list of imperatives. Phillips advises that we become more sensitive to the differences engendered by class. We should heed the fact of class exploitation. But, in building a socialist movement with men based on that recognition, we must also, as Segal says, preserve our autonomy as women, lest the specificity of women again be rendered invisible by the "objectivity" of men. Fears of "essentialism" should not divert women from the truly essential project of asserting our female needs, desires, priorities and visions.

Marilyn Lake teaches history at Melbourne University.

Different Struggles

Jane Martin and Marilyn McCormack

Melissa Benn's article "Sisters and Slogans" (ALR 100) raises some provocative questions about British socialist feminism and, by implication, socialist feminism in general among them that the feminist side of socialist feminism has loitered; that the debate over sexuality within socialist feminism has largely been dropped; and that there's been a failure on the part of socialist feminists to build up a network of alliances based on a real recognition of "women's different histories".

This is a hasty response from two socialist feminists involved in organising the September Socialist Feminist Conference in Sydney — a hasty response because, at the time of writing, we're still up to our ears in organising the conference.

First, we agree that it is difficult, in the face of the current rightwing assaults on the gains made by progressive coalitions of feminists in the past, to keep adequately drawing out the importance of sexuality politics within socialist feminism. The politics of sexuality — including the understanding of women's desire as it is, with the spotlight on how it came to be that way rather than on how it "should be" — has vitally important implications for our political work in general.

Socialist feminists in this country have long pointed out that sexuality and sexual oppression are not given "unchangeables", but are determined both historically and culturally — and that the possibilities and limitations around sexual desire are often both race- and class-specific. To make progress within these possibilities and limitations is to make progress with our relationship to political change.

We agree with Melissa Benn that "there has been [a] transformation of the notion of woman as the "object" of
oppression/discrimination to something more complex — to ideas of woman as subject — an active agent of change and holder of power”. We also feel that this shift is the result (in this country at least) of the contributions of socialist feminists, among others, to the sexuality debate — a contribution which stressed that sexual practices can’t be seen in isolation from social structures and social context. Likewise, we argued for a shift of emphasis from assessing sexual activity as “good” or “bad” in and of itself, to assessing it in relation to other historical forces such as state intervention and the power differences between gender, race and class.

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At various times in the 1980s, the sexuality debate has been taken up as a major and, at times, the major priority, of socialist feminism in this country. What needs to be stressed in this regard is that, while the priority accorded to this debate waxed and waned, the debate over sexuality both within and outside the Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM) is a permanent one. It seems difficult to believe that, in Britain, “the majority of socialist feminists have been completely absent from such discussion”. In Australia, socialist feminists have, in fact, sought out and introduced to left debate a range of controversial challenges in the field of sexual politics — for example, the relationship between power/powerlessness and domination and submission in sexual practices to wider personal and political relationships. Nevertheless, Melissa Benn’s article does serve as a reminder that, while political priorities will always be heavily influenced by the prevailing ideological and political climate, they must not be allowed to become wholly determined by it.

It is difficult, too, to judge the claim that the feminist part of socialist feminism has loitered in Britain, but not so difficult to refute it in terms of the Australian experience. One problem, however, is that, while recognising the complexity of the issues facing the WLM, and putting them in an historical context, she seems to attribute negative consequences of these complexities to socialist feminism — without placing it in an historical context. This makes it difficult to respond in a manner which can both avoid the “Ra, ra, let’s defend socialist feminism” approach and clarify the confusion.

The article suggests, for instance, that British socialist feminism is dominated by membership of political parties. Again, this is difficult to judge. However, it is useful to note that one of the reasons why Australian socialist feminism has been at the cutting edge of the WLM is because it has been composed of consciously non-aligned women; party women who have constantly maintained the autonomy of the WLM as a political imperative; and, on occasion, coalitions of party and non-party women, as well as between radical, cultural and socialist feminists, in highly significant campaigns such as those against the Pine Gap and Cockburn Sound nuclear bases.

The development of women’s services in Australia has likewise been achieved by something of a coalition between feminist activists from a range of political positions, united by the aim of widening women’s personal and political power. This is not to say, of course, that such feminist collectives have not had huge political differences between and within themselves. Various collectives have taken up both socialist feminist and lesbian separatist positions at different times, and during different debates and campaigns.

The fight against the Fraser government’s dismantling of federal funding structures for women’s services earlier this decade was mobilised primarily by radical feminists. The campaign for adequate wages and conditions and the unionisation of women’s services, on the other hand, was taken up by socialist feminists. The marked difference in strategy in each case reflected the different philosophical and political bases of the two groups. There have been numerous coalition campaigns over issues of shared priority — for instance, the fight against volunteerism and unpaid labour, child-care funding in women’s services, the right to free,

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safe abortion, to affordable housing, and so on. Coalition work is not, however, based on a simple formula of $a + b + c = unity$. Such campaigns have, at various times, been paralysed by political polarisation, as well as by the all-pervasive shift to the right, as evidence, for example, in the conservative drift of the refuge movement as church and charity-based women’s services have gained increased funding.

In recent years, this rightward shift has also contributed to the increasing difficulty of raising questions such as the politics of sexuality, the imperative need for coalition work, and the importance of the principles raised by this work, in the left as a whole. Increasingly, it is seen as wishy-washy to continue asserting the need for an ongoing anti-racist and sexuality politics on the left. In the face of the right’s ideological and economic assaults, some sections of the left appear to feel more secure in taking up the ultra left position of arguing that socialist feminism should, in effect, be feminist socialism — so that the “primacy of class issues” can remain
constantly on the tips of our tongues. This sort of static politics contents itself with repeating the catechism of the primacy of marxism, and abjures from the vital debates over the continuing contradictions facing socialist feminists who do venture beyond such an ultra left framework.

In recent women's movement debate, radical feminists have repeatedly argued the need to employ and support only working class, migrant and Aboriginal women in the women's services industry. Likewise, they have argued that the left's focus on wages and conditions has tied the industry into government dependency, and entailed a conservative shift dictated by the limitations of "femocracy". Socialist feminists outside the ultra left framework, on the other hand, have argued that strategies based upon the identification of women according to their class and race (the identity of difference) rather than to a broad strategy lead to an individualistic politics.

The main point is that the debate goes on. While various issues take precedence over others at different times, we don't agree that this means that those which appear to have lost priority have been abandoned. We do agree that there has been a lack of forums for debate and strategy development in the WLM in this country in the '80s — which is something socialist feminists are hoping to rectify with the September conference. We also agree that the insights created by the politics of difference has been the key development in the thinking of the WLM in the '80s. As socialist feminists it has had radical implications in all our areas of work. On the one hand, it means, in Anne Traynor's words in a previous issue of ALR, status and resources. In order to place political priority on the demands of least powerful and least resourced — in Australia this is most obviously the Aboriginal people — we are constantly confronting the contradictions arising from our commitment to a broader class, race and gender politics.

Finally, we were pleased to see Melissa Benn's opinion that socialist feminism is more present within the socialist part of its own politics than it was in the '70s and earlier. The fight for meaningful proportional representation and women's participation in the structures of the left in this country has been a long and arduous one. It should be said that, in the main, it has been the cumulative result of the dedicated work and example of a relatively small number of women who have been at it for decades. In our own personal experience it has also been fostered by a close socialist feminist political network within the structures of the left.

Needless to say, the job is never done. To meet family commitments, to earn money, to raise children, to have pleasure, to find time to speak confidently, to argue coherently, to feel comfortable, to overcome intimidation and self-doubt, to assert difference and work with contradictions, all remain a large and demanding part of ongoing socialist feminist struggle.

NOTES

1. We would like to thank Jenny Proctor and Barbara Cameron for their contribution to the writing of this article.


3. "Reproductive Technology and Feminism": interview with Rebecca Albury and Anne Traynor, ALR 89, Spring 1984, p.55.