

Extract from

Lindsey German 'Rise and Fall of the Women's Movement'

*International Socialist Journal* Series 2 N° 37 Winter 1988

Full article available here :

<https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/german/1988/xx/rise-fall.html>

## **The early women's movement in Britain**

The existence of women's liberation in Britain is usually dated from 1968. It was in that year that the first modern equal pay strike – by women machinists at Ford – took place. In 1968, too, a body with the unwieldy title of the National Joint Action Committee for Women's Equal Rights (NJACWER) was set up. This committee was based on the unions and in 1969 organised a demonstration in support of the demand for equal pay. Throughout 1969, a number of women's liberation groups sprang up. They were often comprised of women who were involved in some way with existing left-wing politics. But as Sheila Rowbotham has written,

It was really from the Oxford Conference in February 1970 that a movement could be said to exist. [26]

Over 500 women attended that first conference. It was generally considered an exhilarating experience. For the first time women in Britain were organising along the lines that American women had already been doing for over two years. There were, however, major political differences between the early British movement and its American counterpart right from the outset.

Those other movements, which in the US had exerted such a strong and often negative influence on the women's movement there, were much less influential in Britain, where the civil rights and black power movements hardly existed. Here, the student movement was important but limited in its impact, and the mass anti-war movement, whilst politicising many, did not have the same cutting edge as its counterpart in the United States – at the heart of the aggressor nation.

The mainstream political situation in Britain was also much more favourable. The second half of the 1960s saw the passage of liberalising laws on divorce, abortion, gay rights and equal pay. The very high rate of unionisation in Britain (about half of all workers as opposed to under a fifth in the US) led many of those on the left and in the women's movement to see working-class struggle – through the trade unions

– as a major feature of the fight for women’s liberation. This conviction was strengthened by the very high level of class struggle in the years of the early women’s movement. Many strikes involved women. The Leeds clothing workers (1970), post office telephonists (1971), and May Hobbs’ struggle to organise the London office night cleaners are all examples.

Sometimes socialists and women’s liberationists were instrumental in helping the disputes, as in the case of the night cleaners. As one contemporary report describes:

A combined picket was set up of cleaners, IS and Camden Women’s Action Group, Socialist Women and the Workshop, which was joined by cleaners of another building which came out in sympathy. As a result of these actions a representative of the TGWU negotiated with the cleaning company and it was agreed that the two shop stewards were to be reinstated; the company was forced to recognise the union, and to agree that there would be no intimidation against union members. [\[27\]](#)

It is hardly surprising that these sorts of results encouraged women to look towards the working class and to the unions as vehicles of struggle. In the same year as the night cleaners, 1971, International Women’s Day (originally organised by the socialist movement near the beginning of the century) was celebrated by a demonstration around the four demands of the women’s movement: free abortion and contraception on demand; equal educational and job opportunities; free 24-hour nurseries; and equal pay. [\[28\]](#)

So the movement in its early years had a lively and outward-looking orientation. One of its first major successes was the picket of Miss World at the Albert Hall in 1971 which caught the imagination of many women. But, as in America, the freshness and vitality of a few early activities were quickly drained by problems and difficulties.

The movement’s core idea was that it was capable of uniting all women to fight against their oppression. At first it seemed possible to win women to this fight through working-class struggle. But as the political differences inside the movement became clearer, this possibility became more remote. Major problems, unaddressed at the Oxford Conference, came out during the Women’s Liberation Conference at Skegness just over a year later. The conference has become somewhat notorious in recent years. Dissent started over the structure of the conference itself. Some women walked out of the Saturday plenary to discuss on their own. It was agreed that evening that there would be more small group discussion the next day. In the plenary the following afternoon, however, a row broke out involving some Maoists and separatists. A Maoist woman was removed from the chair, and a male Maoist ejected from the meeting for disruption. The conference then proceeded to vote to disband the Women’s National Coordinating Committee (WNCC) which had been set up at the Oxford conference, at least partly on the grounds that it was wracked by sectarian division. Skegness marked a turning point. From then on, men were not welcome at

such gatherings. And the already existing hostility to socialists was becoming more marked.

‘It is clear from the outcome of this conference that the apparent agreement in the Women’s Liberation Movement which was sometimes seen at WNCC’s does not exist in reality’, said **Socialist Woman**. [29]

Another report of the conference, in the Women’s Liberation Workshop magazine, **Shrew**, pointed to some of the problems:

We were worried by the widespread opposition that there seemed to be to any form of organisation ... Organisation and intellectual analysis are too simply seen as authoritarian and therefore masculine; hence bad. [30]

Even here, however, the authors agreed that men should in future be excluded from such conferences. This argument continued at the Manchester conference in March 1972, where it centred on whether men should be allowed to attend the conference social on the Saturday night. The next day the conference split for or against men. One delegate encapsulated the anti-men position:

If there is one woman present who would like to be with her sisters for two days of the year and not be oppressed by the presence of men, surely we could respect that sister’s wish and have a conference for women without men. [31]

The victory of this position was important in two respects. Firstly it showed that the movement was becoming far more internalised, and concerned with the structure and form of meetings themselves, rather than with what the meetings decided. Secondly, it marked a step away from any orientation upon the working class, from the notion that men, as part of the working class, can be part of the *solution* to the fight against oppression. Instead men were increasingly seen as part of the *problem*; by the late 1970s this idea was increasingly dominant in the women’s movement.

The argument about men was a reflection of much greater divisions – between those who wanted socialist change and those who subscribed in some way to a ‘women’s revolution’. An interesting report in **Shrew** tells of a public meeting held in Ealing, West London, in 1971 on women’s liberation – where the argument got round to whether changes in personal lifestyles were enough or whether social change was needed. A speaker from the Women’s Liberation Workshop stated:

there is nothing in socialism in which women are freed. If women are viewed as conservative they would be suppressed in a socialist system. [32]

These arguments were similar to ones being repeated in groups around the country. Increasingly socialist ideas were losing out. In some ways this was partly the fault of the socialists themselves. **Socialist Woman**, a magazine produced by the

orthodox Trotskyist International Marxist Group, stressed class issues but did so in a remarkably formalistic way. Increasingly their theoretical debates hinged round the question of women's domestic labour – a sometimes sterile and often obscure debate conducted at an abstract level. [33] Their concrete intervention was round the *Working Women's Charter*, a list of demands for women at work. This campaign was, however, aimed at influencing the lower levels of the union bureaucracy rather than at mobilising working women. The women's paper of the IS (forerunner of the SWP), **Women's Voice**, had a consistently working-class and activist orientation. But it tended to ignore any arguments taking place within the women's movement, and so in practice did not challenge the anti-socialist ideas which were coming forward.

But the main reason for the growing weakness of socialist ideas inside the movement lay in the distorted view of socialism which predominated. Most feminists' view of socialism was a completely eclectic variety of ideas, as one veteran feminist – late of the **Spare Rib** collective – articulates:

By the late 1960s the politics coming out of [such] struggles included observations, analysis and practice which women in turn seized hold of to help them define themselves ... Mao, black power, Fanon, Vietnam, Reich, libertarianism, sexual liberation. [34]

This political confusion coloured the new women's liberation movement, which adopted the voluntarism of Mao, the cheerleading of the oppressed from the national liberation movements, sexual radicalism and individualism from the libertarians. Because the politics were so unclear and eclectic, there were many things which these women could not begin to explain. If, following Stalin and Mao, one third of the world was already socialist, why were women in these countries still oppressed? Why did women's liberation not come about as a result of colonial revolution?

The questioning of 'socialist' theory grew, especially in the mid-1970s. The failure of the late 1960s and early 1970s struggles to shift anything fundamentally had its effects on many women. For them, the women's movement provided a convenient stepping stone out of organised socialist politics.

Involvement in left-wing groups was regarded as increasingly unacceptable to many feminists, and left-wing organisations were accused of sexism, as if they had been in any way comparable with the Tom Haydens and Stokeley Carmichaels of the US left. In reality many of the women articulating these ideas had always been hostile to left groups – and had at best been on the margins of them. There were even some who had shown little interest in ideas of women's liberation while in left groups, who now turned against the left. It was widely accepted that all left-wing men were the problem. Some left-wing feminists went along with this and some – at first tentatively – asserted that they were feminists first. **Red Rag**, produced by a collective of various left-wing women but increasingly under the influence of the Communist Party, stated in its first issue:

The organised labour movement – that is, the trade unions, the co-ops and the left political parties – is the decisive force in this country for social progress and for socialism. [35]

The language could have come straight from Stalin himself, but at least the commitment was to working within mixed working-class organisations. By the fourth issue of the magazine a change was under way: ‘our first commitment is to the Women’s Liberation Movement’. [36]

As the socialists moved closer to a cross-class feminism, so the non-socialist feminists became more confident. A *Women and Socialism* conference was held in Birmingham in the autumn of 1974. Even here radical feminists went on the offensive against socialist feminists:

socialist women were challenged to demonstrate their commitment to women, all women even ‘fascist’ women, and to put women above their ‘polities’. Violent statements about men have appeared in the [Women’s Liberation] Newsletter unsigned; women with boy children have been turned away from the Kingsgate women’s centre; women in the office have refused to speak to men over the phone. [37]

Although such antics were greeted with a sense of outrage, they became more and more common as radical feminists tried to impose much greater separatism on the movement. The politics of the socialist feminists was such that they were incapable of taking the radical feminists on. Eventually, as we shall see, they were to capitulate on a theoretical and a practical level.

But the political weakness of the movement did not lie simply in the politics of the individual women involved; it was shaped by the social composition of the movement itself, and of its underlying basis. Like its American counterpart, the British movement was not based on working-class women. It attracted women from that thin layer who were educated, aware, higher earners if they were in work. [38] Sheila Rowbotham describes one group:

They were predominantly American and in their mid-20s. Some of them had been active in Camden Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, most of them had husbands who were very deeply involved in revolutionary politics. Many of them too had small children and felt very isolated both as housewives and as foreigners. They started to meet in Tufnell Park and were later to have an extremely important influence. [39]

A survey in *Shrew* in 1972 gives a very similar picture. A student interviewed seven out of 12 women in a London group. Four were over 30, and only one under 25. They were all from middle-class backgrounds. Three had been born in North America and four in Britain. [40] Their political views were as usual diverse: ‘there was no one coherent radical ideology that was expressed. We had not sorted out the relationship between the class struggle and women’s struggle.’ [41] But this lack of

coherence was beginning to show a negative side. ‘Only one of us was optimistic about the future. The most pessimistic of us felt that the movement, because of its lack of concrete purpose, might fizzle out and felt it necessary for us to work for concrete, goals.’ [42]

This study, together with Sheila Rowbotham’s recollections of the Tufnell Park group, is impressionistic but fascinating. Two points are worth making: the women were not particularly young or new to the political milieu. They had been around the left and clearly looked to the movement to provide them with a political purpose greater than that of passive spectators. In this they were quite different from the people who tended to gravitate to the revolutionary left at the time. In addition, there was also a very high proportional involvement of Americans in the early British movement. This is evidence of the huge influence of the American movement on the British, and explains how many of the political ideas got carried into the women’s movement in Britain in a very direct way.

The nature of the movement – the fact that it was not linked to struggle, the fact that it could at best only relate to a very small number of working-class women on an individual basis, led to the sense of powerlessness and pessimism, experienced by the women above. Into such a movement, the central perspective of consciousness-raising fitted perfectly: middle-class women could spend endless hours talking about what was oppressing *them* as individuals. Inevitably the concept led away from class struggle. An article in **Shrew** in 1971 entitled *Organising Ourselves* described what a women’s liberation group was like. Each group would be small – 10 to 15 members – and locally based. The point of the group was to act as ‘a model for political work and a microcosm of a future good society’. [43] So the group was not there primarily to organise in the outside world but to raise the level of ideas of its own members – and therefore to create a pleasant, feminist consciousness regardless of the objective circumstances in the wider world.

This attitude had an effect on the practice of the women’s movement in more ways than one. The groups became more and more inward-looking. Some became closed to new members, which meant that the movement really was developing into an internalised, charmed circle. [44] Because ‘the personal is political’ became the accepted slogan, discussion of personal problems became as valid as fighting for social change. The orientation on the personal also meant the movement stayed small. It seems that there were never more than 60 women’s liberation groups in London [45] and given the optimum size of 10–15, these could only have organised a few hundred women. Conferences and demonstrations also tended to be small: the International Women’s Day demonstration in 1971 attracted 2,000 people – of whom a quarter were men. [46] The publications fared a little better. **Spare Rib** was launched in 1972 and quickly built up a large, though not a mass circulation. But even in December 1971, **Shrew** was bemoaning the fact that ‘we don’t even sell the 3,000 copies that are printed each month.’ [47] **Red Rag, Women’s Voice, Socialist Woman, Wires** and the others did no better.

By 1974 signs of crisis were everywhere. The initial enthusiasm of the movement had gone, many of the activists had run out of steam, the radical feminists were going on the offensive. That year **Socialist Woman** wrote: ‘most working-class militants do not turn to the WLM to centralise and coordinate their struggles’. [48] **Shrew** did not produce an issue for two years from late 1974 to 1976. [49]

Yet this period was one of significant struggles among women. Equal pay was the impetus for many: SEI and Wingrove and Rogers in 1974, Electrolux in 1975. But there was a long list of struggles which flared up over other causes: Asian women at Kenilworth Components; teachers in Hackney; Rolls Royce and Dunlop workers in Coventry. Individual members of the women’s movement related to the strikes as individuals. There was no sign of a mass movement of women committed to helping these women win their fights. Instead, where struggles were successful, it tended to be where fellow trade unionists had played a key role. [50]

## **The abortion campaign**

In 1975, surprisingly, a new struggle developed. If anything was a key ‘women’s issue’, this was. It provided the opportunity for mass mobilisation for the first time since the formation of the movement. But, when it was tested, the movement was found wanting.

The issue was abortion. In 1967, an Abortion Act had been passed which allowed for legal abortion for women if continuing with the pregnancy would affect the mental or physical health of the woman. Although this criterion obviously imposed restrictions, it also allowed far more women to obtain safe and legal abortions. The rate of abortions shot up. In 1969 there were 53,000 legal abortions. By the mid-1970s this figure had reached well over 100,000. [51] The anti-abortion lobby – unhappy with the original Act – attempted to restrict the law still further. A right-wing Labour MP from Glasgow, James White, introduced a private members’ bill reducing the grounds for abortion and attacking the clinics which provided essential back-up to the NHS in enabling women to have abortions.

A meeting at the House of Commons in April 1975 heralded the beginning of the National Abortion Campaign, set up to fight White’s bill and to defend the 1967 Act. From the start the campaign was heavily influenced by socialists, who carried a lot of the work. Members of the International Marxist Group in particular (then numbering several hundred) were involved in the national structure of NAC. The International Socialists were very active in the campaign, especially at a local level. The largest left organisation at the time, the Communist Party, supported the campaign, but was much more passive in its approach. The campaign had great success in its early months. The NAC petition was used to organise street meetings, factory gate meetings and local activities. Labour MPs were pressurised to oppose the White bill. Most importantly, the issue was taken up in workplaces and in union

branches. This line was particularly pushed by IS, who argued that the issue was essentially a class issue, since rich women always had the money for safe and legal abortion – it was the poor who were penalised by restrictive abortion laws.

The right to abortion proved surprisingly popular. Petitioners experienced a lot of support from many sources – that of middle-aged and older women (many of whom would have experienced illegal abortion) was particularly noticeable. Where the issue was raised among workers, it was clearly getting a good response. Even all-male workplaces or union branches could be committed to support for the campaign. In June 1975, NAC's first national demonstration in London mobilised 40,000. A further 700 marched in Glasgow and 100 in Dundee. On the London demo, banners included the Hull Docks Shop Stewards Committee, a couple of AUEW branches, and branch banners from the UPW (post office workers), NUJ, COHSE, NUT, ASTMS, NALGO and eighteen trades councils. [52] Beth Stone, a member of the NUT executive and of IS, got a good response when she told the demonstration that White's bill was 'part of a concentrated attack on working people'. [53] The demonstration was a great success. But divisions arose on the question of what to do next, which reflected the growing divisions in the movement itself. Women inside IS who attended the NAC steering committee argued that the June success should be built on and repeated as the most effective way of defeating White. Others in NAC put increasing faith in the capacity of sympathetic Labour MPs to win their case. Yet despite a Labour government, the abortion issue continued to be regarded as an issue of individual conscience by Labour, and a substantial minority of Labour MPs continued to support White.

At a NAC planning meeting in September 1975 a split opened. Representatives of the IMG, the Communist Party and Labour Party opposed the call for another national demo. As an article in **Women's Voice** put it, they were 'effectively arguing for the burial of the campaign'. [54] Similar divisions occurred at NAC's conference in October that year. Women grouped around IS and **Women's Voice** argued for and successfully won the adoption of the slogan 'Free abortion on demand – a woman's right to choose' as that of the campaign. But a mass demo by the anti-abortion SPUC was consciously ignored by the conference organisers. It was left to a **Women's Voice** initiative to call a picket of SPUC. Two hundred women left the conference and joined the picket. [55]

Revolutionary politics could clearly appeal to a minority of the activists. But the main direction of the campaign was going elsewhere. It tended to reflect a growing inclination for much of the left to look to the Labour Party for change. So the IMG put more and more faith in MPs like Jo Richardson (even though Labour minister Barbara Castle was already trying to restrict private abortion 'abuses' – thereby throwing a sop to the anti-abortionists). [56] The fact that James White's bill was ultimately defeated by parliamentary means – although very largely because of extra-parliamentary pressure – increased this orientation. The socialists in the campaign tended to be on the defensive. Individuals on the steering committee had



as much weight as whole political or union organisations, and the atmosphere was always against the socialists. Any attempts by socialists to raise the political level of the campaign were denounced as attempts to split the movement. The bulk of women in organisations like the IMG or CP tended to tail-end, and sometimes to encourage, these sentiments. So instead of NAC becoming a campaign which could genuinely involve large numbers of workers and so transform the nature and priorities of the women's movement, it became just one small – and increasingly marginal – part.

The movement itself had come a very long way. Its unresolved political problems were partially and temporarily concealed by the growth of NAC. But by the mid-1970s, the excitement of the new movement had died. Sisterhood was revealed to contain all sorts of contradictions and as many political differences. By the mid-1970s, too, radical feminists' attitudes were hardening. Their 'common sense' views were to crystallise around the theory of patriarchy – a theory which was increasingly adopted by the socialist feminists to explain women's oppression.

The hopes of the early years of women's liberation quickly turned sour. By the mid-1970s and into the 1980s, the women's movement and the feminist ideas which underpinned it were charted on a very different course. Yet it was precisely in the mid-1970s – and not in its early period – that feminism became a dominant idea on the left in Britain. Two separate trends – which reinforced each other as time went on – began to dominate the movement from then on. The first was the sheer respectability of much of the movement, which led to its incorporation into the system at all sorts of levels. The second was the development of radical feminism as the dominant trend within the movement as a whole.

Respectability became a hallmark of the United States movement, a thin layer of women moved up into top jobs or into newly created 'equality' posts. An interview with Robin Morgan, a leading US feminist, in 1978 showed the extent to which this had happened. She herself worked on *Ms* magazine, a mainstream women's magazine and saw no contradiction between this and her feminist politics. She spoke approvingly of the acceptance into mainstream politics of a friend of hers,

Eleanor Holmes Norton whom I first met almost fifteen years ago when she was counsel to the black women's liberation committee of SNCC. We have been teargassed together. She now heads the Equal Opportunities Commission, and I would stake my life that she is not selling out. [57]

American capitalism was well able to incorporate a layer of former radicals from the women's, black and student movements into working within the system, and set out consciously to do so. Private industry provided similar openings. Today 44 per cent of accountants in the US are women, compared to only 16 per cent in 1960. In 1986, 30 per cent of MBA degrees were awarded to women, as against 8.4 per cent in 1975. [58] This trend was accompanied by a level of ideological conservatism. In particular, some women returned to the traditional roles that many of them had

eschewed only ten years before. The feminist historian Linda Gordon described herself in 1978 as ‘very alarmed’ about the baby boom then taking place among many feminists. They seemed to be valuing all the things – marriage, the family and motherhood – which they had always believed were at least part of the causes of women’s oppression.

I know a million women here with babies, and I’m the only one who is working full-time. Everyone else is living in families with a restoration of straight sex-roles ... practically every one of them has got married. I’ve experienced the conservatising effect on myself; having a baby throws me in more and more on the little quasi-family that I live in. [\[59\]](#)

A sure sign of the incorporation of much of the movement lay in the designation by the United Nations of 1975 as International Women’s Year. As is the case with all the unfortunate causes singled out by the UN for special attentions, International Women’s Year did nothing to alter the unequal position of working women within society. It did, however, produce a massive jamboree – a conference in Mexico. The conference served only to highlight the massive class differences which existed between its different participants. These class differences were particularly accentuated by the presence of third world women, such as the wife of a Bolivian tin miner, Domitila Chungara. Tin miners in Bolivia worked in the most appalling conditions and died at an average age of 34. The main struggle of these workers and of their wives was against the mineowners and the government, not against each other.

Domitila was shocked at the priorities of the bourgeois feminists at the conference. Betty Friedan, leader of the National Organisation of Women, criticised her and other women like her for talking about politics too much. Discussion of politics clearly demonstrated too sharply for Betty Friedan’s liking the divisions which existed. Domitila answered the bourgeois women:

Every morning you show up in a different outfit and on the other hand, I don’t. Every day you show up all made up and combed like someone who has time to spend in an elegant beauty parlour and who can spend money on that, and yet I don’t. I see that each afternoon you have a chauffeur in a car waiting at the door of this place to take you home, and yet I don’t ... Now, señora, tell me: is your situation at all similar to mine? Is my situation at all similar to yours? So what equality are we going to speak of between the two of us? If you and I aren’t alike, if you and I are so different? We can’t, at this moment, be equal, even as women, don’t you think? [\[60\]](#)

Two years later another massive women’s conference took place, this time in Houston, Texas, in 1977. The Equal Rights conference was, like Mexico, hailed as a huge success by many feminists. Yet it marked the degree of rightward drift of the American movement. It was graced by the presence of three First Ladies (wives of American presidents): Rosalynn Carter, Betty Ford and Lady Bird Johnson. All three

were extremely rich members of the ruling class, who could know nothing of the problems of ordinary women. The conference attracted 15,000 people. But an estimated 20 per cent of delegates were 'pro-family' conservatives who were opposed to abortion, lesbian rights and the Equal Rights Amendment. An all-white delegation from the racially segregated state of Mississippi, which included four male members of the Nazi party, was admitted to the conference. [61]

The idea that politics could be forgotten as feminists celebrated the sisterhood of all women proved totally false. The conference, far from being a force for change, was able to become a reaffirmation of the most conservative and traditional values. This was something which most feminists didn't understand at all. So Robin Morgan could herald it as a breakthrough because it attracted so many women:

Women came who had never been involved in the women's movement, in politics or anything of the sort. They came because they were angry about a traffic island on the corner for their kids, or a job, or because they'd been raped. They discovered that feminists were against pornography, and that was a big shock. [62]

But the breakthrough was in fact going in the opposite direction from women's liberation. The mass of women Robin Morgan talked about were not adopting the ideas of women's liberation; instead one-time women's liberationists were making concessions to the right. The net effect was a shift to the right which has continued ever since.

Those who did not swim with the current tended, in the US at least, to move into lifestyle politics as an attempt to build a feminist culture and society in the here and now. This lifestyle feminism was often built around lesbianism as a political theory and practice. Women could build a lifestyle – at least in a few big cities – which cut men out of politics, of social life, of sexuality – sometimes even out of work. Jan Clausen's novel **Sinking, Stealing**, about a lesbian's fight for custody of her dead lover's daughter, paints a vivid picture of this separatist world in her descriptions of lesbian communes or of the political scene in New York:

Rather like someone embarking on a moderate exercise programme, I decide to start going to demos. A call comes through soon enough from Lesbians for Reproductive Freedom, a group on whose phone tree I remain an honorary twig even though I haven't attended a meeting in two years. A five p.m. picket and rally are scheduled three days hence in front of the Waldorf Astoria to protest the arrival of a certain right-wing Central American leader ... LRF feels it's particularly important to support this action given the US role in victimising women throughout Central and South America. [63]

Although this form of lifestyle politics was far preferable to the open careerism of some ex-feminists, it was essentially a retreat into a cosy environment which ignored the realities of the society outside. In Britain, it was much harder for feminists to go

as far as their American counterparts along the paths of respectability or complete lifestylism. But nonetheless the two developments were repeated in Britain, although in less extreme form. And the theory behind much of the lifestylism increasingly challenged and eventually displaced socialist feminism as the dominant set of ideas inside the women's movement. The most notable feature of the British movement in the mid and late 1970s was, therefore, the rise of radical feminism.

This was not obvious at first. It was hidden primarily by the continuingly high level of class struggle, which helped those still arguing for socialist ideas within the women's movement to win an audience. There were, for example, major strikes involving women of which Trico – in 1976 for equal pay – and Grunwicks over union recognition a year later are the two best known. There were fights against cuts in public spending or against hospital closures, such as that over the Elizabeth Garrett Anderson hospital in London. And there was another attempt to restrict abortion – the Benyon bill – which had to be fought off in 1977. [64] But the direction in which the movement was going became increasingly clear. It had raised four demands – for equal pay, education and job opportunities, contraception and abortion, and nurseries. In 1975, the demand for legal and financial independence was added, and in 1978 an end to discrimination against lesbians and an end to violence. These new demands were the logical conclusion of the direction the movement was travelling: away from collective struggle, and towards individual and lifestyle feminism.

Violence against women first became an issue inside the movement in 1974, when Women's Aid came into being. By 1975 there were 90 refuges around the country. [65] They were mainly funded and run by volunteers. Women's Aid served to highlight a major scandal: that many women lived in fear of physical beating from the men they lived with, and that the capitalist state itself colluded in this situation. The police would not normally interfere in domestic disputes, and local councils would not rehouse women made homeless through violence. The idea of the refuges was that women would at least have somewhere safe to go where they could be safe from battering. Very quickly they became accepted, even by some Tory councils.

Similar arguments arose over issues like rape and pornography. There were a number of controversial rape cases at the time, and in 1975 the first Rape Crisis Centre was set up. The following year saw the establishment of Women Against Rape. WAR was dominated by the same people who had set up the Wages for Housework campaign two years previously. It therefore combined a strongly anti-men radical feminism, a location of women's oppression in the home and a level of activism which ensured that it gained some support. [66]

Pornography was provoking similarly strong responses. The movement to *Reclaim the Night* took off in 1977. Its aim was to reclaim the streets for women, especially in areas like Soho, where sex shops and porn cinemas abounded. Tactics were often extremely militant – and the women clearly annoyed the porn racketeers.

A demonstration through Soho in December 1978 was brutally attacked by the police, and sixteen women arrested. Many women continued to march in different cities around the country, however by the late 1970s, Reclaim the Night was one of the most dynamic features of the women's movement.

But this change in orientation – towards individual problems of race or violence, and away from collective struggle – was not an accident. It resulted from the increased adoption of a theory which saw not capital or class society as the enemy, but all men. So the women arrested for reclaiming the night were described as ‘the victims of men's defence of pornography’. [67] An extremely influential and cogently argued book, **Against Our Will** by Susan Brownmiller, stated as its main thesis that rape is ‘a conscious process of intimidation by which *all men* keep *all women* in a state of fear.’ [68] Theories of violence were ideal from a radical feminist point of view. They did not fit neatly into a class analysis; the ruling class was not obviously culpable; indeed a more direct guilt appeared to lie with individual men. Hence the need, so the argument went, for a separate ‘women's revolution’ against male power and dominance. A whole spate of radical feminist theory backed up these ideas. Women like Mary Daly and Dale Spender represented a new and forceful trend in radical feminist ideas, as they denounced all things male and recreated their own parallel of bourgeois history in the history of bourgeois *women*. [69] The socialist feminists, who had been in the ascendancy in the early days of the women's movement – at least in Britain – now found themselves pushed very much onto the defensive and challenged in every area of basic theory.

The development of the theory of patriarchy as a major force in the movement dates from this time. It marked the defeat of socialist feminism. The term patriarchy had always been in use, and ‘patriarchal’ has also been used to describe various sorts of feudal and peasant families, where the ‘patriarch’ (often the grandfather) dominated socially and economically within the family and oppressed all other members of it. (This sort of patriarchal family was, of course, unlike the capitalist family a productive one.) But the term came to take on a much wider usage. By 1979 Sheila Rowbotham could write:

The term has been used in a great variety of ways. ‘Patriarchy’ has been discussed as an ideology which arose out of men's power to exchange women between kinship groups; as a symbolic male principle; and as the power of the father (its literal meaning). It has been used to express men's control over women's sexuality and fertility; and to describe the institutional structure of male domination. Recently the phrase ‘capitalist patriarchy’ has suggested a form peculiar to capitalism. [70]

By the late 1970s it came to mean virtually anything to do with male domination. It had tended already to replace theories of the family as the root of women's oppression. But the conclusions from their theory were, however, fairly uniform: that male domination is not simply a product of class society or specifically capitalism, but is something quite separate which will endure after the overthrow of

capitalism. It is this which provides the theoretical justification for women's separate organisation.

The problem of how to explain patriarchy was at first simply wished away. Many feminists, subscribing in any case to the idea that women's oppression and its structures were quite autonomous from class society, regarded patriarchy as simply a separate sphere. 'We are dealing with two autonomous areas, the economic mode of capitalism and the ideological mode of patriarchy', argued Juliet Mitchell. [71] Two socialist feminist historians, Sally Alexander and Barbara Taylor, embraced this view in 1980:

It was precisely because a Marxist theory of class conflict, however elaborated, could not answer all our questions about sexual conflict that we tried to develop an alternative. If we need to keep the two areas of analysis apart for a time, then so be it. [72]

On this definition, the dominance of patriarchy was ideological, and therefore could be challenged simply through ideological struggle. This implied autonomous groups of women fighting against patriarchy through consciousness-raising and thus defeating it on the level of ideas. The strength of patriarchy theory among socialist feminists meant that many of them were already making major concessions towards idealist and non-materialist theories. But the theory still presented a problem for socialist feminists. Patriarchy did, after all, have to be rooted in some material reality, if socialist feminists were to retain any credibility as Marxists.

Marx himself had stated in the **German Ideology** that ideas did not have an independent existence, but were rooted in the circumstances in which men and women lived and worked:

Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse alter, along with their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life. [73]

Patriarchy could not therefore be explained simply as existing. There had to be reasons for those patriarchal ideas coming into existence and – more importantly – for their continued existence from feudalism to capitalism, despite the fundamental changes in society which had accompanied the transition from one mode of production to another. It was this essentially idealist and ahistorical approach that led to some socialist feminists to question the theory of patriarchy. Sheila Rowbotham pointed to various periods of struggle in history when women have acted together with men to achieve their aims, when

women's public political action has often challenged not only the ruling class, the invader or the coloniser, but also the men's idea of women's role. [74]

And she argued that at least Marxist theory took account of historical changes and their implications, whereas patriarchy was a static concept:

Within Marxism there is at least a possibility of a dialectical unity of transience and moment. But it seems to me that the concept of 'patriarchy' offers no such prospect. [75]

But she was already fighting a losing battle. A major and influential attack on Marxist ideas in the form of an article by the American feminist Heidi Hartmann, became the justification for a generation of socialist feminists accepting wholeheartedly the theory of patriarchy. Hartmann's thesis in *The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism* [76] was a persuasive one. She argued that patriarchy had a material base, which 'lies most fundamentally in men's control over women's labour power'. [77] So women are denied access to the economically productive resources of capitalism. In order to achieve this, men go into an alliance with capital, by raising and winning demands for protective legislation and the family wage. Hartmann was expressing what was to become a very common view among socialist feminists: that men, and especially male trade unionists, have colluded with capital to keep women down. This view was popularised by a number of arguments relating to the family wage and was used as a justification for some quite reactionary ideas such as support for a feminist incomes policy.

A number of serious historians have provided a challenge to this view. They have pointed to the fact that most working women and men accepted and welcomed protective legislation; that the family wage only applied to a minority of working-class families; and that the overwhelming majority of men weren't even in unions at the time. [78] But the dominant view became the crude and simply erroneous one outlined above. This had two serious implications for socialist feminists. It led firstly to a rejection of male workers as part of the struggle for women's liberation. If men were indeed in alliance with capital, then at least part of the struggle had to be against men. The second implication was an acceptance of more radical feminist ideas. After all, the early radical feminists in America had identified men as a major enemy, on the basis of biological differences. Here was a theory which once again stressed the biological difference between men and women as a major source of oppression, rather than the social system within which they existed.

From the late 1970s onwards, theories of the family as the root of women's oppression, which explained it in class terms, were increasingly replaced by patriarchal theories based not on class but on gender. By 1982, two socialist feminists could, while defending socialist feminism, demonstrate how far it had strayed from basic Marxist ideas. Beatrix Campbell and Anna Coote's **Sweet Freedom** pointed to aspects of women's oppression which 'cannot be accounted for

in Marxist theory of class exploitation'. [79] For them, 'socialist feminists have begun to develop an exacting critique of theories of class exploitation. They insist on the centrality of ideological struggle, which has been all too glibly nudged to the periphery of politics by much of the left.' Reproduction and family relations are placed at the heart of social and economic theory and strategy.

It is at this point that the gap between radical feminism (in its non-biological determinist form) and socialist feminism is at its narrowest. What distinguishes the two is that socialist feminists' politics entail neither a rejection of men nor a withdrawal from them, but an urgent necessity to fight both in and against male-dominated power relations. [80]

Campbell and Coote were right to say that the gap between radical and socialist feminist theory was growing narrower. But what they didn't understand at all was how the balance of forces between the two had shifted, and what the implications for the future were. The wholesale adoption of patriarchy theory only served to strengthen the radical feminist wing of the movement.

Things were in any case moving very fast. The national Women's Liberation Conference in Birmingham in 1978 was an indication of that. The conference is remembered – somewhat notoriously – as the last to be held in Britain. Its debates were so acrimonious that no one individual or grouping has taken it upon themselves to organise a repeat. Over 3,000 women attended the conference. All the different wings of the movement were represented there – but some were more dominant than others. Many radical feminists were becoming increasingly impatient with any strategy of change which involved men or socialist (therefore by implication male-defined) politics. Among them were the Revolutionary Feminists – so called not because of any adoption of socialist ideas, but because of their uncompromising hostility to any collaboration with men.

Revolutionary feminism had emerged at the previous year's women's liberation conference, when Sheila Jeffreys organised a workshop entitled *The Need for Revolutionary Feminism – against the liberal takeover of the Women's Liberation Movement*. Two hundred women turned up to discuss

a political feminism. There was sex-rolism, lifestylism, and socialist feminism. I was in a desperate search for radical feminist theory which talked of the power of men and how to take it from them. Politics was taken to mean socialism, and theory the extension of Marxism. [81]

Jeffreys hit a nerve. By the time of the 1978 conference anti-socialist ideas were much more widespread. The conference was split on every major issue. The report in **Spare Rib** gave some indication of this. The conference was divided into workshops which discussed three issues: how do we oppress each other? what is the nature of campaigns, how effective are they and what is the alternative? and how do we come together in terms of our own internal organisation? The atmosphere was



acrimonious. As the report's writers, Anny Bracx, Gail Chester and Sara Ranee put it:

one concept which we have developed hardly surfaced in this set up: sisterhood ... there was little sympathetic listening; it was mainly a question of attack and defence. [82]

Debate centred around the phrasing of the new seventh demand of the movement. Should it be preceded by the phrase 'male violence against women is an expression of male supremacy and political control of women'?

After a protracted shouting match, it was voted to delete the incriminating sentence from the new seventh demand. [83]

But the damage had been done. Women who had gone to the conference hoping to experience the movement as a real sisterhood of women were bitterly disappointed. This was reflected in **Spare Rib's** letters pages in the following months. A Birmingham woman wrote:

the threatening stances, arrogant posturings and self-indulgent introspection I and my friends witnessed at conference have ensured that none of us will ever try to establish contact with the movement again. [84]

A number of feminist groups including Lesbian Left, Rights of Women and Women against Racism and Fascism wrote, on the other hand, that the movement had to be 'broad enough to accommodate our differences'. [85] And members of Brighton Women's Liberation wrote defending those who had argued:

While the plenary was disastrous and upsetting it revealed genuine political differences within the movement which we have been afraid of facing up to.

This statement was undoubtedly true. There *were* real political differences. The letter described them thus:

Our politics are feminist. We analyse our oppression as due to male supremacy, to the patriarchy. Men are our oppressors, the enemy, and not some abstract 'system'. The system is created and perpetuated by men for the benefit of all men. Capitalism, class, racism, fascism, colonialism and imperialism are all male institutions, current manifestations of male rule – the patriarchy. [86]

These feminists were absolutely clear about their politics, and they were developing more confidence in expressing them: oppression came from the patriarchy; it could be fought not by focussing on issues like class or imperialism but by fixing on male rule as the primary source of women's oppression. Such an analysis clearly left no room for any political activity which involved men. This analysis was miles away

from the established socialist feminism – Sheila Rowbotham’s writing on history, the domestic labour debate, issues like the night cleaners, the National Abortion Campaign or Trico. But the socialist feminists had a problem. They had conceded the theory of patriarchy and therefore at least some of its conclusions. Now many feminists were taking these conclusions much further than the socialist feminists had wanted.

It was at this time that socialist feminism really went into crisis. But instead of reasserting any sort of Marxist tradition, they responded by attacking at least some of the socialist ideas that they had previously embraced. This in turn reflected how far the socialist feminists had moved over the years. A telling comment on this came from a leading American socialist feminist, Kathie Sarachild – a former founder of Redstockings. Interviewed in **Spare Rib** in 1978, Sarachild said:

New York Radical Women had always contained a contradiction between what then were called the politics and the feminists; later you would call it the socialist feminists and the radical feminists. But then, the politics didn’t call themselves feminists. They were against feminism. [87]

By the late 1970s the ‘politics’ certainly weren’t against feminism. Their defensiveness at being socialists was indeed reflected in nearly all the socialist feminist publications. **Red Rag** – by now totally dominated by Communist Party feminists – went through a crisis in 1980. Its editorial stated:

Our crisis ... came from our assumption as socialist feminists that because the WLM existed, men would change. But the pain of our personal and political lives over the past couple of years has been the discovery that the second doesn’t follow from the first. [88]

The editorial continued: ‘socialism has not only failed to confront patriarchy, but socialism in Britain has just about killed off socialism.’ [89] **Socialist Woman** went through a similar crisis in 1978, over whether to organise a socialist feminist current; [90] and the SWP’s **Women’s Voice** saw in the bitterly divided 1978 Women’s Liberation Conference a sad betrayal of the earlier unity of the movement. In an open letter issued after the conference it looked back to the 1970 founding conference in Oxford and said:

There we were, not knowing how our movement would develop, not knowing each other, not yet having proved that we could build any campaigns among the masses of women who hadn’t even heard of us. But there was far more sisterhood and solidarity and sense of purpose in that meeting than there was in Birmingham. Is this what we’ve achieved in our eight years? [91]

All these statements provided evidence of the deep crisis in which socialist feminism found itself. But the solutions to this crisis weren’t forthcoming. Or if they were,

they tended in every direction other than towards an attack on radical or separatist feminism. Feminists around **Red Rag**, particularly Beatrix Campbell, increasingly adapted radical feminist theory to attack the male working class and the trade unions – with predictably reactionary results. The SWP and **Women's Voice** went through its own internal crisis, partly at least centred on the need to resolve the relationship between Marxism and feminism. Other feminists turned to a form of organisation which did not exclude men and indeed welcomed them. But they did so by launching a major attack on Leninist organisation, which allegedly had nothing useful to say or offer to women. Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright published their influential book, **Beyond the Fragments** in 1979. [92] It drew strongly on libertarian politics and polemicised against Leninist forms of organisation. Its main thesis, however, was that left politics had to be transformed by women and by the experience of the women's movement. **Beyond the Fragments** was praised by nearly everybody on the left. It was even the subject of an adulatory article written by Jill Tweedie on the **Guardian** women's page. Tweedie stated in support of the book that

political and industrial jargon is too often used to make people feel inferior, ignorant, powerless. Godheads like Lenin and Marx are invoked to put you in your place and the ordinary person fights back in the only way possible – by dropping out. [93]

This really was standing things on their head. Women's liberation started as a movement against oppression which was caused by the system, and perpetrated through the dominant ideas in the system – those of the ruling class. Here, so the argument went, women's oppression was maintained not just by men, but by *socialist* men – the very ones committed to ending this oppressive system! Just to rub the argument in, the article was accompanied by a picture of two women pensioners captioned 'waiting for the revolution: are they failed by the organised left?' [94] This was the message which many would-be socialists took from **Beyond the Fragments**. As Lynne Segal later admitted, some saw it as justifying abandonment of class politics – others as the green light for joining the Labour Party. [95] This may not have been the intention of its authors, but it was nonetheless the reality. The fragment conference in Leeds in 1980 was hugely popular. Yet little came out of it. Attempts to set up local fragment organisation foundered on two things: the decline of local 'fragment-type' groups around the end of the 1970s; and the massive influx of those influenced by fragment-type arguments into the Labour Party. This was the key political direction for socialist feminists in the 1980s.