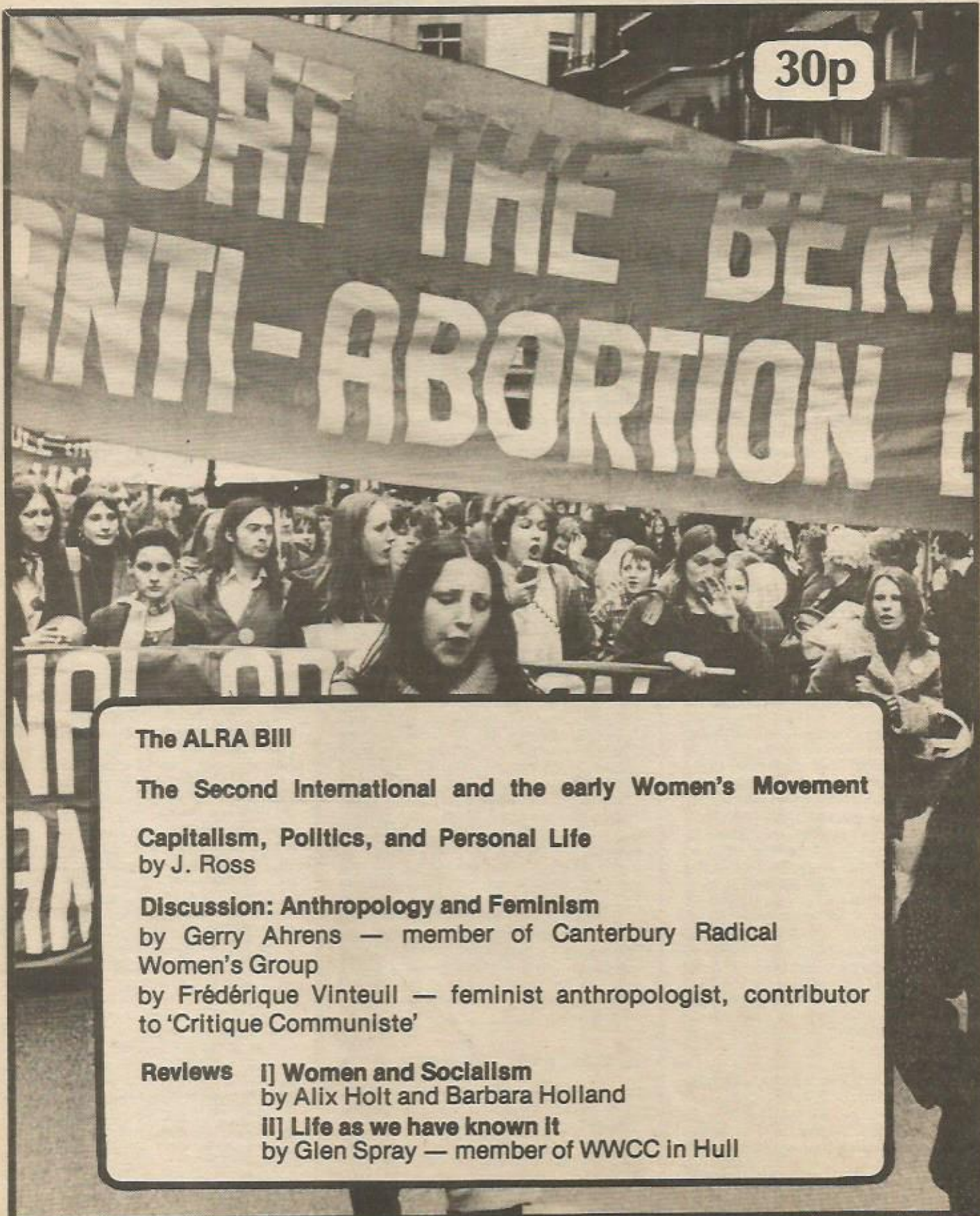


# Socialist Woman

A JOURNAL OF THE INTERNATIONAL MARXIST GROUP Summer 1977 Vol. 6 No. 2

30p



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# EDITORIAL

## JOIN THE DEBATE!

Over 100 arrests had been made on the picket line at the Grunwick film processing firm in North London as *Socialist Woman* went to press. The anti-abortionists have stepped up their campaign to get Benyon's restrictive Bill through Parliament. The occupations at the Weir Maternity Home and Hounslow Hospital in London continue, as does that at the Elizabeth Garrett Anderson women's hospital. These are only a few of the indications of the depth of the present social and economic crisis which is taking its toll amongst women.

It is not an unfamiliar pattern. That much was evident when over 3,500 women met in Paris at the end of May. Coachloads of women from Barcelona, Madrid, Rome, and many other major European cities discussed for three days how they were fighting back against these attacks. We discussed our successes and

drew lessons from our errors. And everyone went away more committed to pursuing and strengthening international links in the women's movement.

Another point which came across in Paris was the need for us to go back to many of the fundamental questions relating to women's oppression. If we want to ward off the present attacks of the ruling class — in which social democracy and the Communist Parties remain complicit — we need to be clear about where we are going. We have to re-discover our traditions as socialist feminists. And we have to re-examine the very roots of women's oppression so that we can map out a clear strategy. This is the kind of clarity which can lay the basis for taking the fight beyond one simply for women's rights — to that of women's liberation.

This issue of *Socialist Woman* reflects

the need to have clarity on fundamental questions — theories of women's oppression, the role of the autonomous women's movement, its relationship to the revolutionary organisation, and the need to retain the autonomy of the women's movement even after the seizure of state power by the working class as a whole. Many more general questions relating to revolutionary strategy have been posed in the debate around positive legislation for women's abortion rights. One of the papers produced on this issue for the conference of the National Abortion Campaign is reprinted below.

*If any of these articles provoke you — take your pen to paper and join in the debate in the columns of Socialist Woman!*

## Why NAC does not support ALRA's Bill

The second national conference of the National Abortion Campaign in March decided to discuss and prepare a Bill that would embody a woman's right to choose. The model Bill proposed by ALRA was rejected as restrictive. This paper was part of the pre-conference discussion, and we submitted it as well to the April 1977 Feminism & Socialism workshop on 'Sexuality' because we believe that all feminists will want to participate in the drafting of a feminist Bill on abortion.

We opposed the ALRA proposals for two main reasons: because it is tactically incorrect to make positive legislation the main focus of our campaign while we have a restrictive amending Bill in Parliament, and because we do not think the content of the Bill, specifically its acceptance of viability, will give women the right to choose.

### What do we mean by a Woman's Right to Choose?

In the recent debate in Parliament around the second reading of Benyon's Bill, Maureen Colquhoun pointed out that restrictive abortion laws are a recent historical event: 'One of the myths used by the anti-abortionists, and often used in debates in this House, is that abortion

violates some age-old and God-given natural law. Yet until 100 years ago almost nobody — not even the Catholic Church — punished abortion in the early stages of pregnancy.' In 1803 the State started the process of making abortion a criminal act. In 1929 the foetus was given rights. The 1967 law lifted some restrictions, but left the decision with the medical profession, not with women.

We say that it is a woman's body and her life; she is entitled to control its reproductive function. No other person or institution should be able to compel her to have or not to have children. We fight for this to be expressed in law because the State claims to have superior rights over the individual's right to control her own life, and has the power to enforce this claim.

### Parliament and Abortion Rights

Since 1967 the anti-abortionists have developed a massive campaign in support of a succession of Bills — Gryll's, White's, and Benyon's. We must not characterise the Benyon Bill as less threatening to women than White's Bill. If it gets through Parliament it will restrict women's abortion rights from two directions. It would both drop the

upper time limit by 8 weeks and also make early abortions difficult to get because of the requirement to find two doctors to sign the form who work in different hospitals or practices, one of whom must have been registered for five years. The charitable clinics who last year did 30,000 abortions would cease to exist. It attacks civil liberties, giving police wide powers to enter clinics and hospitals to obtain copies of confidential records, by implying that a woman's GP must be told about her abortion, and by extending the time during which doctors and nurses could be prosecuted. The Bill would stop research into earlier and safer methods of abortion, by extending the Act to include D&Cs, and menstrual extraction.

The 35 organisations, including NAC, that make up the Co-ordinating Committee to defend the '67 Act felt some degree of satisfaction because the voting differential since the White Bill has altered slightly. Does this mean that the focus of NAC should have been changed? Do we now feel confident that we can trust MPs to vote against the Benyon Bill without further attention from us? Do we feel that MPs presented with ALRA's ideas for a Bill will change their minds about the Benyon Bill or any further abortion amendment Bill?

## NAC, ALRA and Parliament

Since 1937 the Abortion Law Reform Association has been a parliamentary pressure group to convince MPs to legalise abortion. ALRA is a membership organisation whose members meet only once a year at an Annual General Meeting. Its day to day activities and policies are determined by an elected executive committee of about 20 people in London. In 1975 the committee changed its name to 'A Woman's Right to Choose Campaign/ALRA', and some of its new feminist members helped to form NAC.

Implicit in the founding of NAC was the knowledge that the traditional organisations, including ALRA, were unable to defeat the White Bill. These organisations who had worked for and acted as watchdogs for the 1967 Act totally underestimated the strength and perseverance of the anti-abortionists inside and outside Parliament; moreover they had no effective strategy and no forces to counteract them.

NAC was formed to build a mass movement to force MPs to recognise women's right to choose abortion. MPs vote in response to a number of pressures and criteria: (1) because their parliamentary Whip says how they should vote, (2) according to their personal views, (3) because of pressure from constituents, (4) because of a need to maintain credibility among certain sectors of society, (5) threat of withdrawal of support from the constituency party and sponsoring trade unions, (6) because of mass pressure from a national movement. The anti-abortionists recognised in the early '70s the importance of putting mass pressure on MPs.

The anti-abortionists' recent gains in winning parliamentary support did not occur until they moved out from being a small parliamentary lobby into being a national campaign able to bring 100,000 people onto the streets against abortion. The Parliament of the last few years has become steadily more conservative under the pressure of the deep economic and social crisis of the period. The anti-abortionists have capitalised on this by exerting mass pressure. If MPs made their decisions on the basis of public opinion polls, the evidence of groups of specialists, or the presentation of good ideas, there would be no need for NAC.

The main focus for NAC in the first six months must be to defeat the Benyon Bill. If we cannot stop the anti-abortionists from restricting abortion rights there is no way in which we can gain positive abortion rights in the next session. Our first priority must be to defeat the Bill; however, we should also be discussing in depth NAC's ideas about positive abortion rights which clearly demonstrate what we mean by 'A Woman's Right to Choose' in law.

## Our Objections to the Contents of ALRA's Bill

The original Bill drafted by ALRA sought to establish a Woman's Right to Choose up to 12 weeks, when the right would revert to the doctor. NAC members argued against this, and ALRA's latest proposals call for this right to be extended to 24 weeks. Their arguments for a cut-off date fall into two categories: first, that at the point of viability the foetus establishes its right to life which parallels or supersedes the woman's

right to choose termination; secondly, a pragmatic consideration, the impossibility of getting a Bill through Parliament without a time limit.

## When Does Viability Occur?

In the USA in 1974, Dr. Kenneth Edelin was convicted of manslaughter for performing an abortion on a 24 week foetus. The prosecution's case was that at 24 weeks it was viable and could have lived outside the womb. Ever since 1975, when American women won the right to abortion choice up to 6 months, anti-abortionists have used the viability argument as the main way to attack the law.

It is not easy to determine the exact point at which a foetus could exist independently of the woman. You only have to see the BBC documentary on Edelin's trial to see that there are many conflicting 'expert' opinions. Premature births require extensive life support systems, but the advances of medical science will mean that a foetus can be kept alive outside the mother's womb at an earlier and earlier stage — so that the eventual outcome of abortion laws dependent on viability would be a ban on abortion outside the very earliest weeks of conception.

The US Supreme Court on 1 July 1976 unanimously upheld the Missouri law's definition of viability as 'That stage of foetal development when the life of the unborn child may be continued indefinitely outside the womb by natural or artificial life support systems.' But they said that it was the function of the physician, not the legislature or the courts, to place viability at a specific point in gestation, and this point 'may vary with each pregnancy' rather than being a constant for all pregnancies.

If we were to accept that the woman's right was conditional on the possibility of the independent life of her foetus, then the only way in which this could be translated into law would be if the upper time limit for abortion was the very lowest age at which a foetus could survive. If you say that a woman's right is conditional and that a foetus of a certain age has rights, who then decides whose rights take precedence — the doctor? the State? the courts? The political argument of woman's life versus foetal life would have to be thrown into the courts, removing from women their right to decide.

If early abortions and menstrual extractions were readily available, bearing in mind the medical and emotional complications of late abortion, few would choose to have abortions past 20 weeks. But as the Lane Committee and Prof. Peter Huntingford have pointed out, the few women who do present after 20 weeks have compelling reasons for doing so. Those who challenge women's right to choose to terminate pregnancy through to the ninth month imply that women will take such a decision lightly.

## Women's Rights versus Foetal Rights

The 'rights' of a foetus must match biological facts. That is, while it is undeniably a potential human being, it is not yet a human being but part of the woman's body. It has potential rights that can be claimed at birth. If damaged in the womb and therefore still-born or miscarried, the mother claims not as a representative of the dead foetus, but in

her own right, against whoever caused the damage. If a deformed child is born, it can claim in its own right, against damage done to it as a foetus.

We do not believe that there can be any political concessions to the anti-abortionists on the question of viability. And we do not believe that it is the job of NAC, an abortion campaign acting for women, to take up such issues as defence of the foetus.

A Woman's Right to Choose means total control over reproduction. That is the principle we stand for. Insofar as her choice is impaired, then we must recognise that her right is impaired. Abortion 'on condition', or abortion 'until a certain time', is not a 'Woman's Right to Choose'.

ALRA's proposals are based on viability arguments. They accept the limits set by the Infant Life Preservation Act, which they still want to leave on the statute books, although in an amended form. Thus it sets limits on the right of choice. Leaving the viability aspect of the ILPA virtually untouched provides a certain target for the anti-abortionists to amend downwards. These are the most serious problems with regard to the ALRA Bill.

## What Kind of Legislation Do We Want

ALRA are campaigning for a woman's right to choose within the context of British law. They argue that under the present system of law there is no way that abortion could be defined as a legally enforceable right, that it is not important for our movement to challenge precedent, but that we should concentrate on changes and amendments that could be won more easily.

There are other lines of investigation that we could pursue. In the recent debate on the Benyon Bill, Nicholas Fairbairn MP stressed that Scotland had no specific abortion laws before the '67 Act: 'A doctor could perform an abortion just as he could take out a tooth or an appendix.' Does not this imply looking more closely at a perspective of total repeal of all laws involving abortion — including the ILPA? Let us also discuss challenging British legal precedent and establishing positive rights for individuals in law.

## Conclusion

It is important that we separate the fundamental principles of our campaign from the tactical considerations of when and how to adopt a particular form of advancing the struggle. We believe that a Woman's Right to Choose should not be compromised by us. We must work towards the full right to choose in law. If we cannot win it fully, then we must be clear who bears the responsibility for limiting the right. We do not make concessions while the Bill is still in our hands. NAC must formulate what law we think is necessary to give women the right to choose. We will support anything which is an advance for women in our endeavours to win control over our lives, but as a campaign we should not give away what is not ours to concede.

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# The Second International and the early women's movement

**This article is a transcription of a talk originally given to a school on 'Women and the First Three Internationals' organised by the International Marxist group.**

The Second International made a major contribution to the development of a socialist women's movement in Europe and in the USA. Whatever criticisms one has to make of the Second International's role, and there are many, we have to recognise the fact that the International and its organisations gave birth to a mass socialist women's movement with a coherent programme, forms of organisation and systematic agitation, and made this movement a decisive force in the struggles that were taking place amongst women from different social strata for emancipation from some of the most blatant aspects of oppression and repression under capitalism.

By the middle of the first decade of this century, all of the organisations which comprised the Second International had gone through very thorough debates over their programme to deal with women's oppression, and had reached a fairly common accord, which was reflected at the Congress of the International in 1907. This programme dealt with the question of suffrage, of the right of women to vote on a universally equal basis with men; the enactment of various measures of protection for female labour from the rigours of capitalist exploitation; and various other related social questions — such as education, child care, etc. Most of the organisations had also adopted fairly parallel forms of organisation in which the specific oppression of women and the need for specific forms of agitation among proletarian women around these questions was recognised. Special sub-committee structures, sub-divisions of the main party organisations, were created to organise this work, along with special organs for agitation among proletarian women, and specific

posts inside the organisation responsible for this type of work. This was the outcome of a long period of political debate and political struggle, especially within the German party, waged by a number of prominent women socialists, the best known of whom was Clara Zetkin.

The main focus of my remarks will be the German party — partly because it's the party whose history is the most clearly documented, but also because the German party had a position of overriding dominance inside the Second International. Its decisions and its actions inevitably governed what took place in other sections of the International.

## Two Main Questions

There were two main questions which preoccupied the German Social Democrats and, to a greater or lesser degree, dominated the debates elsewhere inside the International. The first was the issue of the role of women in productive labour, and what programme had to be put forward to deal with this question. The second issue was that of the developing fight for women's suffrage, which in turn, in many countries, was associated with the more general struggle for the extension of the democratic rights of the working class. For example, in Germany universal male suffrage existed for the Imperial Reichstag, the parliamentary body of the entire Empire — but it did not exist for all of the provincial parliaments, many of which, especially the Prussian Parliament, were extremely powerful and at the same time had an extremely restricted suffrage.

To understand these debates it is necessary to look at the origins of German Social Democracy. The German Social Democratic Party which was born as a single united movement at the Gotha Conference of 1875 was a fusion of two different currents inside the German workers movement. These were represented on the one hand by the Lassalleans (followers of the early socialist thinker Ferdinand Lassalle), who based themselves on an eclectic fusion of certain ideas drawn from petty bourgeois utopian socialism, and an orientation to the emerging German working class and its newly formed organisations. On the other hand, there was the so-called Marxist wing, led by Bebel and Liebknecht, who looked to the ideas of Marx for their political authority (although they were far from being faithful representatives of either a systematic Marxist analysis or of Marx and Engels' own political views).

Underneath the formal existence of two organisational and political traditions it is possible to see two currents in an ideological sense. The first is economism. It reflected an attempt of the working class to control its basic economic and material interests in the face of the rise of industrial capitalism in Germany. The second is radical democracy, which tried to continue the fight which both the urban petty bourgeoisie and the developing proletariat had launched in the 1848 revolutions, for the unification of Germany on the basis of a radical bourgeois democracy. This was a struggle which had been sold out by the middle and big bourgeoisie to the German landed aristocracy, laying the basis for the particular reactionary form of unification which took place under the aegis of Prussia, engineered by Bismarck in 1871. The economist trend is broadly identifiable with Lassalleism, and the radical democratic trend with the 'Marxism' of Bebel and Liebknecht.

That is, rather schematically, how the political composition of Social Democracy can be characterised, and I believe this division had a reflection in the debate over women's oppression.

## Women In The Productive Process

In the debate over productive labour, what was basically at stake was whether or not one was in favour of introducing and extending the participation of women in the productive process. This was tied up with the global view of social development one had — whether one saw the political objectives and aspirations of the proletariat emerging out of the dynamic growth of the productive forces, setting in motion increasingly broader and broader layers of society (the Marxist view); or whether one had a narrow view of defending the working class from the terrible disruptions of its life being brought about by developing industrialism (the view of petty bourgeois socialism). Not surprisingly, the Lassalleans took the latter position. From an early stage they made it clear that they were opposed to the introduction of women into the workforce, because they felt it was destructive of working class family life (which they thought represented the best elements of working class existence), and because it only benefited the bourgeoisie. This was a view which both Marx and Engels attacked sharply at various times — Marx in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme* around which German Social Democracy was unified, and Engels later on in *The Origin of the Family*. They based their view on the understanding of the labour process as the most basic process of socialisation — that is, the process whereby various social layers were broken out of their narrow, restrictive and fragmented positions and integrated into a broader social whole in the form of the modern proletariat, which was actually capable of transforming society in its own interests and organising a higher form of society.

There was a further division within the ranks of the Lassalleans. Some were actually opposed to *all* forms of female labour and thought women's place was in the home, reflecting their petty bourgeois conception of socialism and their attachment to defence of the family. Another wing felt that female labour was all right in its place: as long as it was not in direct competition with male labour. This current exhibited a narrow, economic trade union view, unfettered by more general petty bourgeois socialist notions. In general until the 1870s it was the first view — opposition to all forms of female labour — which dominated amongst the Lassalleans. This was demonstrated at several public meetings organised by the Lassalleans, where a vote was taken amongst the broad, male working audience, revealing a big majority in favour of the total exclusion of female

labour from the workforce.

The position of the 'Marxist' current tended to be ambiguous. There were various pronouncements by the German Section of the First International which came very close to sharing the Lassallean view, and it is certainly the case that even these so-called Marxists were heavily influenced by Lassallean ideas, which were overwhelmingly predominant within the German socialist workers movement of this period. But Bebel himself had a different position. In general the radical democratic current inside German Social Democracy was brought towards the Marxist view by the fact that they represented a general 'enlightened' view in favour of the emancipation of women from the various constraints imposed on them. They recognised that institutions such as bourgeois marriage and the family objectively, at least under the specific conditions of capitalism, imposed such constraints, and they saw productive labour, in a similar way to Marx, as a liberating force. So while they were in favour of the political emancipation of women, they also accepted that productive labour had a positive role to play in this.

## 'Restriction Of Female Labour'

But they tended to operate with rather cautious formulae. The most common phrase used by the Marxists — known as the Eisenachers after the site of the founding congress of their organisation — was 'restriction of female labour'. This was ambiguous: it could mean preventing competition with male workers, but it was generally interpreted to mean protective legislation.

To a large degree, this was a debate not resolved through theoretical argument, but by history. As early as the 1848 revolution, women workers had begun to develop forms of organisation and political articulation — many women took part on the barricades of the revolution in the most developed areas. But in 1848 there were only half a million workers in Germany — many in domestic service. By the time of Gotha, in 1875, the number had doubled to a million. In the following decade, the peak decade of German industrialisation following unification, the number increased to in excess of five million. Over the remainder of the century it was to double yet again.

Under these circumstances it became clear that the force of German industrialisation, which was not a force against which the working class could hope to defend primitive artisan methods of labour, was systematically creating greater and greater numbers of proletarian women. It became more and more impossible to stand for the position of keeping women out of industry. So while the Gotha Conference represented — as Marx acknowledged — a victory for the Lassallean viewpoint on a whole series of important programmatic questions, on this question of women and productive labour it was the view of the Eisenachers which was accepted, and the demand for the 'restriction of female and child labour' was incorporated into the programme of Social Democracy. Marx himself was not satisfied with this. In his critique of this programme, he said: we need to be clear what we mean by restriction of female labour; what we mean is the hours which they are employed, the specific conditions under which they are employed, this type of thing. But despite its ambiguities, this position made it possible for the Social Democrats to develop a positive programme corresponding to the particular problems and needs of women in industry, and to have a serious organisational and political orientation towards the developing army of women workers.

## Compromise On Question Of Suffrage

On the question of suffrage matters were not so clear. The basic plank around which Lassalle had built his whole utopian schema of socialism was that of universal manhood suffrage. He did not raise the question of female suffrage. At the 1875 Gotha Congress the proposal put forward by the Lassalleans was again for universal manhood suffrage. The final decision of the Congress was, once more, a compromise. The position of the Lassalleans, which would have cut the Social Democrats off from any kind of agitation in favour of female suffrage, was rejected. Instead a vague position was adopted: Social Democracy was in favour of the extension of suffrage to all *adult citizens* without

restriction, in both national and local elections. One could then argue endlessly about whether or not women were 'citizens'. It meant that German Social Democracy had a position that was not opposed to female suffrage, but also one that made it impossible to develop agitation around the question in a systematic way.

This was a serious political weakness which was not actually remedied until the adoption of the Erfurt Programme in 1891. This programme, drafted by Karl Kautsky, was widely considered to be an historic eradication of the Lassallean notions which had played such a dominant role in the early political history of the party. Most of its theoretical formulae adopted positions which were largely consistent with Marxism regarding the dynamics of the capitalist system. It also took a clear position in favour of the vote for women, and in favour of the removal of all legal restrictions on the position of women. This meant it was now possible for Social Democracy to start serious agitation on this question, although there were no attempts to do so for a year.

The typical way German Social Democracy carried out its agitation was through the legislative procedures of the Reichstag; they would draft a Bill which they would then publicise widely, through its various organs, among the working class, and under certain circumstances organise mass mobilisations around the Bill, but that was relatively rare. Accordingly in 1895 a Bill on female suffrage was introduced in the Reichstag, indicating that by the 1890s the German Social Democracy had completed the process of laying the programmatic basis for a serious orientation towards working women and the struggle for women's emancipation.

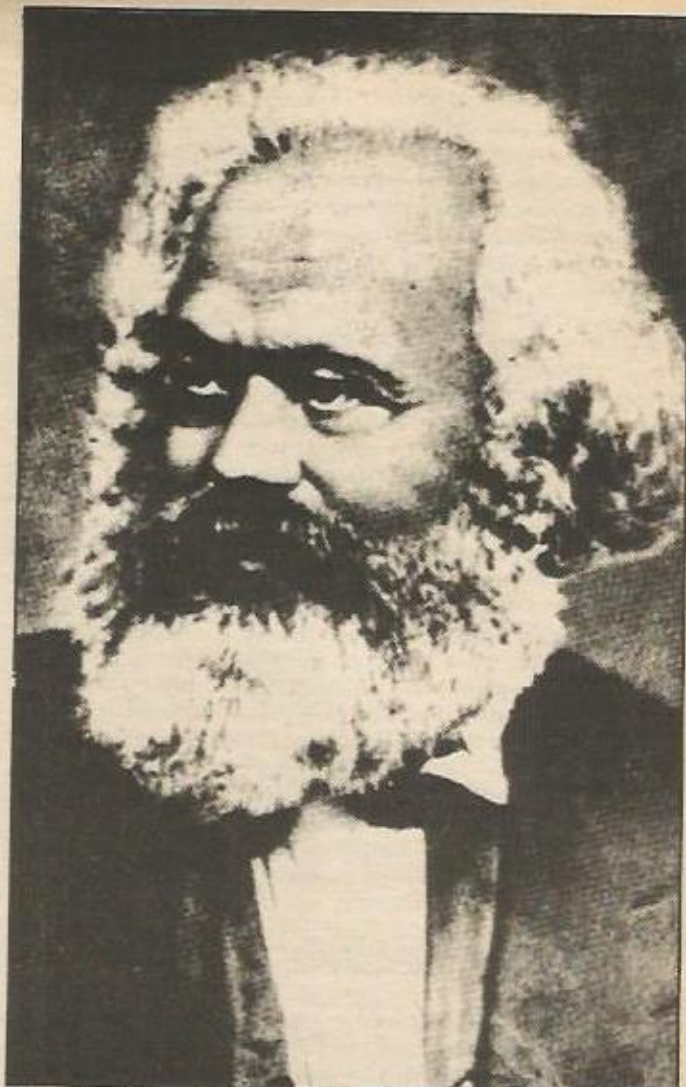
### Special Sub-Committees Set Up

This was rapidly reflected in their organisational structures, with the creation of special sub-committees charged with responsibility for agitation among women, the creation of a political organ for women workers, and the development of representatives of the women's sections inside the various executive bodies of the organisation, and at the congress of the party.

As a direct result of this the ability of Social Democracy to draw into its ranks the most class conscious militants from the female working class was immensely enhanced. The female membership of the Social Democratic Party (or its associated groups) shot up from 4,000 in 1900 to 150,000 in 1913. (Before 1908 it was illegal under the Combination Laws for women to belong to the Social Democratic Party; but this restriction had largely been by-passed by the creation of distinct women's associations.)

Despite these impressive results, grave weaknesses remained in this work, the most serious of which was a powerful trend towards the 'ghettoisation' of women's agitation. We have to understand that the policy of the leadership of Social Democracy to encourage independent, autonomous forms of women's organisation did not flow from particularly positive factors. One important element in their thinking was the fact that for a whole period it would have been illegal to organise women directly under the auspices of the party. And legalism was very deeply ingrained in the SDP, even among some of its supposedly more 'radical' leaders. Here for example is one leader of the SDP speaking in the Reichstag: 'We are going to observe the law for an obvious reason. Our party is a reform party in the strongest sense of the word. It is not a party that wants to make a violent revolution. That would be unthinkable. I deny most emphatically that our efforts are directed towards the overthrow of the existing social and political order.' That was Wilhelm Liebknecht, speaking in the Reichstag on the eve of the adoption of the Anti-Socialist Law, which made the SDP and all activities, with the exception of those directly connected with parliamentary elections, totally illegal.

Another factor was an attitude on the part of the leadership that women's agitation was really not that crucial. There were certain militants in the party who wanted to take up this issue, so the easiest way to deal with the situation was to give them the freedom they wanted and let them get on with the job and see what they could make of it. Ignaz Auer, a leading Social Democratic member of the Reichstag, at the 1900 Party Congress (a real turning point in the Social Democrats' efforts to organise women), said: 'Of course the nervous excitement of our women is, regrettably, easy enough to understand, if we remember that



Marx criticised the ambiguity of the Social Democrats' demand for 'restriction of female labour'—he emphasised that it must apply only to hours, conditions, etc.

despite years of exhausting work they have had minimal success. The trouble is that there are too few women comrades in the party. I wish there were many more. The few who have to do all the work are overloaded and thus prone to become bad tempered. So it comes about that they sometimes make life miserable for us, even though we are not to blame.' This exemplifies how the SDP leadership used its policy to neutralise critics who accused them of not doing systematic agitation on the question of women.

The third factor which shaped the SDP leadership's position was a deep fear of the efforts of various conservative groups to find a base inside the working class. There was, for example, quite a large trade union organisation, the Hirsch-Duncker unions (the so-called 'yellow' trade unions), that organised workers on the basis of overt collaboration with the employers, and had for many years extensive influence among Catholic workers. The SDP leadership was clearly afraid that the bourgeois feminist movement, if the Social Democrats offered no alternative, could become a successful venture in this direction. So, as a defensive measure, they were prepared to encourage a significant amount of work among working women to forestall this threat.

### Fear Of Party Leadership

It should be emphasised that these views were those of the SDP leadership, and not of the leading women militants in the party, such as Clara Zetkin, who for the most part were partisans of the party's left wing and held quite different positions. That is where one contemporary chronicler of the Social Democratic women's movement — Alexandra Kollontai — tended to go wrong in her interpretation. She based her judgement on the views of Zetkin and her co-workers, and not that of the party leadership (who, of course, ultimately determined its policy).

This situation appears to have had serious consequences. A

tremendous rise in agitation around the question of the highly restrictive suffrage in Prussia started in 1910 and continued right up until the very eve of the war. This was such a powerful and emotive issue that it brought Prussia to the verge of a pre-revolutionary crisis. At one time there were half a million workers demonstrating on the streets of Berlin, and widespread physical confrontations with the Prussian army and police — something virtually unknown in the history of German Social Democracy.

It would appear that this agitation was not integrated, however, with the struggle for female suffrage. At about this time there were organised a series of demonstrations on female suffrage; but they took place under the auspices of the women's section of the party, not the main party organs, and were organised on a pan-German basis, both of which must have served to divorce them from the upsurge that was breaking out over the restrictive Prussian suffrage.

We have to say that despite the undoubtedly valuable and important work done under the auspices of German Social Democracy, it remained seriously flawed by this failure to integrate agitation among women into the class struggle as a whole. This weakened the struggle for the emancipation of women, because it cut the women's movement off from the most powerful sections of the proletariat, who were beginning to make important gains and headway in this period. But it also weakened the workers' struggle as a class, because it removed from that struggle the fervour and energy of one force who were among the most systematically oppressed and discriminated against, and whose grievances could have represented a crucial weak-point in the structure of the German absolutist state.

### Conservative Outlook On Family

Intertwined with this ambiguous and often conservative attitude towards political issues on the part of the Social Democratic leadership was an even more conservative outlook on issues such as the family and the various social correlates of women's oppression. This reflected itself in even the more radical quarters. If, for example, you take Bebel's highly influential book *Women and Socialism*, which, when it was published in the late 1870s, represented a very advanced and enlightened view in Social Democracy, it remains conservative on many questions. One illuminating example is Bebel's critique of 'bourgeois marriage'. He only criticises the legal restrictions to which women were subjected by virtue of marriage, not the social implications of marriage and the family. When he refers to the problem of child care, he says that under socialism women will not have to be burdened with this: they can turn for assistance to 'nurses, teachers, female friends, and the rising female generation' (my emphasis). Even in this most enlightened view there is no questioning of the essential allocation of social roles along sexual lines.

This reflected the deep acceptance of bourgeois ideas by Social Democracy on many social and cultural questions, a general failure to confront and fight the hold of bourgeois ideology inside the working class, and a deep hostility to the developing petty bourgeois feminist movement. This latter question was one on which the party's right and left wing was in accord — there could be no dealings with 'bourgeois feminism'.

On the part of the left this attitude, if in many respects incorrect, was nonetheless principled. But from the standpoint of the right it was sheer hypocrisy. For the right was, in general, in favour of Social Democracy establishing political ties with social layers outside the working class. One of the most formative debates in the history of the party was that over the 'agrarian question' in the mid-'90s. Here the right was the champion of the idea that Social Democracy should defend the interests of the peasantry (as one leading right spokesperson, Quarck, argued, Social Democracy had to be the advocate of 'general enlightened policies'). The left took a narrow and essentially 'workerist' position of wanting to have nothing to do with the peasantry (a position which, it should be noted, Engels disagreed with quite strenuously). However this stand was tied up with the right's electoralism: it was an issue which would allow them to strengthen their electoral influence in predominantly agrarian areas like Bavaria. On the question of women's oppression their view was very different; here a 'general enlightened policy' would have meant confrontation with the absolutist state and the

prejudices of bourgeois ideology. The right was having none of that.

In conclusion, it is instructive to contrast the attitude of German Social Democracy with that of the American Socialist Party. The American SP had the advantage of organising within a working class that had been uprooted from its traditional social ties (at the turn of the century a majority of the American industrial working class were first-generation immigrants) and rapidly drawn into large scale industry. It was therefore relatively unencumbered by petty bourgeois pressures.

As a consequence the American SP had no reservations in taking up the issue of women's suffrage, and no fear of forging links with the petty bourgeois feminist movement. When Eugene Debs ran for the Presidency in 1908 the demand for female suffrage was one of the main planks in his platform (compare this with the publication of Karl Kautsky's *The Road to Power* — a basic text of the German Social Democrats — the year before: its main emphasis was on the development of the working class vote as an instrument in the class struggle, but there is not one word about female suffrage!). The result was that feminism in the United States did not develop as a current in sharp opposition to socialism, but was a movement whose main leaders were on the periphery of the socialist movement and deeply influenced by its ideas.

Thus, for example, Margaret Sanger, a leading feminist of her day and internationally famous as a pioneer of birth control, was an active militant of the Socialist Party and for many years disseminated her ideas through a column on birth control and sexual advice in *The Call*, paper of the New York SP. (A small example which indicates what impact the partisanship of the SP for the cause of women could have in even the most alien circles was the involvement of the daughter of banker J.P. Morgan, herself a bourgeois feminist, in the SP's solidarity movement with a major strike of women textile workers.)

The fusion of the class struggle with the broad movement for women's emancipation in the United States was an example which, if it had been duplicated in a country like Germany, where the socialist movement had a deeper tradition and more powerful organisation, could have had immense political consequences for the class struggle as a whole.

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# Capitalism, Politics, & Personal Life

The growth of the women's liberation and gay liberation movements has stimulated many questions, both for supporters of these movements and for members of revolutionary groups. Among the issues that crop up repeatedly in discussion and in the writings of those concerned with sexual politics has been the relationship of politics to 'personal life' and, connected with this, the principles of organisation of the revolutionary party and its spheres of activity. In this article, these questions are considered as they are raised in *Capitalism, the Family and Personal Life*, Eli Zaretsky's book about the dichotomy between private and public life under capitalism (Pluto Press, £1).

These ideas will be new to many readers of *Socialist Woman*; we hope that they will stimulate discussions among those seeking to develop a theory of social relations, and we invite contributions from readers for publication in future issues.

The goal of the Marxist movement is the liberation of humanity. This involves the destruction not merely of economic exploitation but of political domination, the oppressive relations of the family, and a series of other things. Anyone who denies this, and attempts to reduce Marxism to merely the struggle in the economy, is not a Marxist but an economic reductionist.

But to define this as the goal of Marxism does not distinguish it from other positions held by different groups which wish to change society. The liberation of humanity through the destruction and overcoming of all exploitative and oppressive social relations is a goal not merely of Marxism, but of anarchism, petty-bourgeois humanism, utopian communism, and so on. It is no accident that all these tendencies are present in the women's liberation movement, particularly among women who call themselves socialist feminists. What distinguishes Marxism from these philosophies is not the goal but the fact that Marxism is the sole theory and practice which outlines the scientific means whereby this goal can be achieved. These means are the seizure of political power from the ruling class and the use of that power to begin the work of the destruction and transformation of all social relations emerging from capitalist society. It is only on this basis that a classless society and the elimination of the social relations of oppression and exploitation can be achieved. In Lenin's words, 'Basic propositions and aims are two different things; even the anarchists will agree with us about aims, because they

too stand for the abolition of exploitation and class distinctions...How do we differ from the anarchists on principles? The principles of communism consist in the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat and in the use of state coercion in the transition period. Such are the principles of communism, but they are not its aim.' (Lenin — 'Speech in Defence of the Tactics of the Communist International')

## The Primacy Of Politics

From this elementary outline we can already see the main and underlying error of writers like Eli Zaretsky, who criticise Marxism because they believe that the basic locus of Marxist practice and line is the economy. In reality, the focus and dominant element in Marxist practice and line under capitalism is not economics but politics. In the words of the *Communist Manifesto*, 'the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class', or, as Lenin put it, 'Politics comes before economics, that is the ABC of Marxism' (Lenin — 'Once Again on the Trade Unions'). The essential reason for this is elementary: it is not the transformation of the economy which is the precondition for the seizure of state power by the working class, but, on the contrary, the seizure of state power which is the precondition for the transformation of



the economy.' In colonial and 'underdeveloped' countries, the transformation of the economy by centralised planning may follow hard upon the capture of state power by the working class, while in advanced countries, as Trotsky pointed out, 'The proletariat...when it takes power, will probably permit market relations to continue for a rather long transitional period, gradually giving them an ever more regulated form' (*Writings, 1930, p384*).

In short, Zaretsky and others who have criticised 'traditional' Marxism by equating it with economic reductionism have missed the point that 'struggle between classes is ultimately resolved at the political — not at the economic or cultural — level of society' (Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* p.11). All social relationships, including those of the family and the oppression of women, are defended by the capitalist State and can only be overcome following the destruction of that State. For that reason the primacy of the political is displayed just as much in relation to the wider social struggle as in the economic. But it is precisely the political and not the economic which is the decisive issue.

There are several reasons for the confusion of Zaretsky and the others. First, the practice of many organisations claiming to be Marxist gives the impression that Marxism is above all 'about economic change'. Second, there appears on the surface to be a contradiction between the leading role assigned to the proletariat in Marxist theory and the empirical evidence of the backwardness of the working class (even of its vanguard) on questions of sexual oppression and the need to transform social relations. Hence the assumption that — to put it crudely — a working class which is mainly interested in the size of the pay packet can only lead an 'economic revolution'. Third, there is the idea that there exist two kinds of Marxism — the economic analysis of capitalist society, and the humanism of the *1844 Manuscripts* — and that it is the latter which must be rescued and restored to prominence by those seeking to change social relations. We do not have space here to investigate these questions more fully; they will be discussed in future issues of *Socialist Woman*. But they show clearly the need to go back to the basic texts of Marxism in order to dispel subsequent distortions.

## Politics And Society

Having shown that politics is the decisive element of Marxist principles and practice, we then have to ask 'what is politics?' — and what do we mean, if anything, by the 'politics of the personal'? Politics, in the sense used by Marx, does not at all mean everything worth talking about — as Zaretsky seems to suppose. On the contrary, it has a very specific meaning.

As Marx put it, 'the fact that a question is political means that it exists in relation to the different powers of the political State' ('Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of the State'); or, in Lenin's classic formulation, 'politics is participation in the affairs of the State, directing the State, determining the forms, tasks and contents of the State's activities' ('On the Question of the Role of the State'). Thus, for example, Marx explains the difference between a political and an economic struggle perfectly as follows: 'The attempt in a particular factory or even in a particular trade to force a shorter working day out of individual capitalists by strikes, etc., is a purely economic movement. On the other hand, the movement to force through an eight hour day, etc. law is a political movement' (Marx to Bolte, 23 November 1871).<sup>2</sup>

Of course, it does not follow that, because a question is specifically political, it is therefore not important. No Marxist, for instance, has ever dreamt that the economic struggle for wages is insignificant — on the contrary, the general accusation is that they are too concerned with it. From the general dominance of politics, it does not flow that everywhere and at all times specifically political issues are more important than economic or social ones.<sup>3</sup> But as a general historical truth and long-term statement, politics dominates over other issues from the point of view of Marxist practice. Above all, the economic struggle of classes can only be finally resolved at a political level — through the destruction of the bourgeois State and the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

What applies to economic issues applies to every social question in relation to politics. The entire period leading to and following

the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat will be filled by gigantic social struggles against every form of sexual, racist, national and other oppression. A social issue can become a political question (for instance, abortion law restrictions, divorce, state repression of gays, nursery cuts). But not every social issue is a political one, although times of social crisis are often characterised by the rapid transformation of social issues to the political level. An example may make this clearer: the existence, under the dictatorship of the proletariat, of laws forbidding homosexual love (as is the case in every deformed and degenerated workers state today) is a specifically political issue. Whether more or fewer people will choose a homosexual orientation under the dictatorship of the proletariat is, however, not a political but a social and personal question.

## The Transition Period

This dominance of politics is precisely a characteristic of the period of transition from capitalist society, through the dictatorship of the proletariat, to socialism. The withering away of the State must also be the withering away of politics. Lenin's slogan — frequently raised after 1917 — 'more economics and less politics' (which should well have been extended to 'less politics and more economics, and more social questions') will become much more apt after the victory of the proletariat in more countries.<sup>4</sup> The supremacy of politics is not a moral question but a characteristic of a specific period of social development. For without the wielding of State — therefore specifically political — power, the working class cannot defend the workers state, or proceed to the transformation of all social relations. Victorious world revolution, by eliminating the need for this repressive function, will greatly decrease the need for State power, greatly speed the withering of the State, and therefore reduce politics to a vastly less exalted place than that which it occupies in the present period of class struggle.<sup>5</sup>

In common with the women's movement and many of its theorists, Marxism rejects the notion that sexual orientation, life-style, personal relations, etc. are purely individual questions. However, the counterposition involved here is not individual

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(personal) / political but individual/ social. Only if they are questions impinging on the State do they become specifically political as opposed to social.<sup>6</sup> Marxism, as a study of social relations, needs to have an analysis of all such questions; but that does not make them automatically and specifically political.

Now what many theorists of sexual politics assert is the equality — or even dominance — of the social with the political in the class struggle. For Zaretsky there are two (seemingly equal in emphasis) sides to a socialist programme: on one side the 'self-transformation of social relations'; on the other 'the struggle against the State and the capitalist class' (pp 139-40). Feminists who 'leave in abeyance the problem of developing a programme that men and women could institute by themselves, and instead make direct demands on the State', tend to be reformist (p 139). He therefore ignores the fact that making demands on the State (over issues where the State holds the key to satisfaction of these demands) is one of the ways which leads them to the political level. Abortion is an excellent example of an issue which, from appearing very 'private' and 'individual', has become 'social' — a matter of concern to the community — and then political, by raising demands on the State or opposing State restrictions. Throughout, abortion was equally important to the women who needed it; but abortion openly became part of the class struggle as a political issue. In this case, the struggle against the State lays the preconditions for women to take control of their own fertility.

Part of the problem is that Zaretsky is confusing the ends and means of Marxism. Certainly, Marxism asserts that the ends must determine the means. But it does not follow that the ends are the same as the means. On the contrary, Marxism — seen from an individual and not social-historical point of view — can even utilise a means which is in apparent contradiction with an end, in order to attain it. So, for example, Marxism stands for the withering away of the State, but the actual wielding of state power is the only means whereby this goal can be achieved. Marxists oppose killing but they are of necessity prepared to meet the violence of the capitalist class with the violence of the proletariat. From the goals and ends of Marxism it is not possible to derive mechanically the means — or, put in more general terms, from an abstract truth it is not possible to derive mechanically a concrete truth.

## The Party

It is from this fundamentally anti-Marxist starting point that Zaretsky and other writers who hold similar views on sexual politics develop an anti-Leninist position on the party. It is well-known that Marxism and Leninism assert the necessity and 'leading role' of the party (although many people attribute this emphasis on the party solely to Lenin and define themselves as 'Marxist but anti-Leninist'). Confronted with such horrific examples as the Stalinist parties in Eastern Europe, with their claim to arbitrate everything from economic planning to people's sexual relations, such antipathy is not surprising. However, while understandable, such opposition flows from a radical misunderstanding of what a Marxist political party is and the way in which Stalinist parties break from that conception and practice.

The only really coherent opposition to the party comes from those who consider that the entire revolutionary process can develop spontaneously with no leadership or organisation. However, to be consistent, such people would have to deny not merely the necessity of the party but also of the women's movement, the gay movement, the trade unions, etc. In reality, of course, few people believe in such spontaneism. The most frequent opposition is not to organisation or leadership as such but specifically to the party form of organisation.

This latter type of opposition, however, is not in reality an argument about the party at all, but about the primacy of politics. Once it is accepted that organisation is needed to wage any struggle, then opposition to party organisation can only flow from one of two positions: either that the political struggle is unnecessary or at least not central — in which case organisations based on economic (trade unions) and social criteria (women's movement, gay movement, etc.) are sufficient — or that it should be the trade unions, women's movement, the gay movement, etc. which should lead the political struggle.

Neither of these arguments can be sustained. Anarchists of course can reject the primacy of politics and therefore logically reject the party. However, the reality of capitalist society is quite different

from their conceptions. As we have already discussed, the ending of the economic relations of exploitation and the social relations of oppression cannot be achieved except through the destruction of the capitalist State which defends them. Anarchism may wish to forget politics but unfortunately politics intrudes itself centrally into every social struggle. Every great social question can be carried to victory only through the destruction of the capitalist State. The necessity of political struggle is posed not by schemas of Marxists but by the reality of capitalist society.

As for the concept that it should be the unions, the women's movement, etc. which can organise and lead the general political struggles, and that a party is unnecessary, this leads to disastrous conclusions in practice. Just as the women's movement has to be organised to fight for definite demands in order to struggle for women's liberation, so also an organisation to wage a general political struggle has to be based on a clear and definite programme. But the women's movement and unions are not and cannot be organised on the basis of agreement on the political struggle to destroy the bourgeoisie — the women's movement and the unions must include those who stand for the dictatorship of the proletariat and those who oppose it, those who believe it right to meet the violence of the capitalist class with the violence of the working class and those who reject violence in any form, those who stand for reform and those who stand for revolution. Such organisations cannot lead the political struggle against the ruling class.

Many different organisations are needed in the struggle against capitalism. No Marxist can deny the necessity of trade unions, the women's movement, the gay movement, black organisations, etc. to wage that struggle. But only those who deny the centrality of politics, or even its reality, can affirm the need for these other organisations and deny the need for a party.

## Limits And Organisation Of The Party

If, however, Marxism asserts the primacy of politics and therefore the necessity of the construction of the revolutionary party, then also the clear limits of that party flow from the very same bases as its necessity. Membership, recruitment, and organisation of the party are based on political criteria. In that political realm, and insofar as other struggles intersect and affect politics, this organisation and concentration make the party a powerful and even unrivalled instrument. Not merely in the construction of soviets and the insurrection, but in how to fight bourgeois attacks on the unions, how to fight abortion laws, how to marshal the working class and oppressed minorities against fascist attacks, and in every similar struggle, a revolutionary party is organised to act and believes that its conceptions and education will make its militants among the best and most determined fighters. It does not and cannot attempt to gain leadership through assertion, domination and organisational manipulation (that is a self-defeating Stalinist practice), but the party does think that it can earn support for its positions precisely because in this epoch it is the political struggle which decides all else.

But the moment the party steps away from politics in the strict and specific sense it is entering an arena in which it is not in the slightest automatic, or even likely, that it is the best judge. It is absolutely ridiculous to conceive, for example, that an organisation based, educated, and developed on a programme of the dictatorship of the proletariat and transition to socialism should be the best judge of scientific theories, the best authority on art, on how to develop the best social life, etc. The concept that the party is the arbiter of all fields of activity from art, to science, to farming, on how to raise children has nothing whatsoever to do with Marxism. It is Stalinism, not revolutionary Marxism, which asserts that the party should determine such questions. It is Stalinism (as, for example, practised by Chiang Ching in China) which condemns art (regardless of its merit) because it is 'reactionary', and uses the party to enforce a uniformity of culture in the 'service' of the revolution. All that the primacy of politics asserts in this domain is that if there is an absolute contradiction between the needs of politics and of some other sphere then politics is dominant.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, this limitation of the area of a party's role also determines the organisation and discussion held within it — the two together because, for a party, discussion is not held for its own sake but in order to decide. Thus the membership of the party is only open to those who agree with the task of the establishment of the political power of the working class and the means necessary to achieve this — principles established by the programme of the party. Within that

framework it demands of party members that they carry out the democratically decided decisions of the organisation on how to fight for this programme. All the party's other organisational forms — for example, its internal groupings of political tendencies or factions and not of industries or sexes — are specifically designed to maintain the primacy of politics.<sup>8</sup>

But outside of that political programme and area where the party is called upon to decide and take a position, the situation is totally different.<sup>9</sup> A party demands as a basis of membership and activity total opposition to laws against gays and for the use, where necessary, of the organisations of the working class and oppressed, and finally of the State power of the dictatorship of the proletariat, against oppression suffered by gays. But the party cannot have a position 'directing' its individual members towards or against pursuing a homosexual sexual orientation. The debate on sexual orientations and social relations is an important one. It needs journals, discussions, organisations and struggles. But the party will not take a position. And as always, outside of that area in which the party takes a position, the discussion should be held as a non-party discussion, involving non-party people, and held in a non-party form.<sup>10</sup>

### The Party And The Women's Movement

From the nature and limits of the party also flows its relations to the women's movement, to the gay movement, and to every mass organisation of the exploited and oppressed. Marxism asserts the necessity of a vast range of different organisations of the oppressed and exploited to wage the struggle against capitalism. A Marxist party, far from (as is sometimes supposed) trying to 'take over' the women's movement, stresses on the contrary the necessity of the **distinction** and organisational independence of the women's movement and the party, the trade unions and the party, the gay movement and the party, etc. A party, by its nature, can only include those who agree with its full political programme. The strength of the women's movement, however, is based on the fact that it includes **all** women prepared to fight for its demands regardless of whether they are Marxists, humanists, libertarians, belong to unions, don't belong to unions, etc. If the women's movement **did** organise to attempt to lead the general political struggle, which would mean making the basis of membership a whole series of

positions in favour of socialism, the dictatorship of the proletariat, soviets, etc, it would totally split and divide its forces just as would the trade unions if they organised on such a political basis. On the other hand, if the party attempted itself to organise directly the mass struggle of women this would be equally disastrous. The party would either have to recruit to its ranks those who totally disagreed with its political aims, which would totally defeat the purpose of the party, or it would in practice (whether formally or not) only include in its front organisations those women who agreed with its political programme — thus dividing those fighting for women's liberation and disastrously weakening the women's movement. No more than it favours 'red unions' can the political party attempt to control organisationally or 'take over' the women's movement. If its members gain positions of leadership or influence within the movement, it must be because of their own merits and because the policies they have pursued, including those of the party, have earned the respect and agreement of women. But this must be achieved on the basis of the total organisational independence of the women's movement — its decisions on its own structure, its decision of whether it wants a leadership or not, and if so, how it selects it, the total independence of its own journals, and so on. A party, and party members, can attempt to **persuade** or **urge** a course of action on the women's movement or a union, but they must never be in a position to **impose** anything.

### The Dictatorship Of The Proletariat

Even where it is understood that Marxism supports the autonomy of the women's movement from the party in capitalist society (and after all, there isn't any way it can actually subordinate the women's movement in such a society!), it is nevertheless still felt by some people, particularly those who consider themselves libertarians, that Marxists and Leninists consider that the destruction of capitalism and the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat will eliminate the necessity for the independence of the women's movement in a workers state. Such a view has been fostered by looking at Eastern Europe and China, where indeed any moves towards autonomous women's organisations have been prevented and where the bureaucracy denies even in theory the necessity of such a movement. However, such a conception among feminists is again based on a misunderstanding of the difference



Photo: CHRIS DAVIES (Report)

Strength of women's movement is based on the fact that it includes all women prepared to fight for its demands.

between Marxism and Stalinism.

It is certainly true, as we have analysed here, that Marxists do hold and understand that only the seizure and wielding of political power by the working class can even begin to establish the basis for social liberation. Oppression is based on material forces and relations of society and not on human psychology. It cannot be overcome except by equally massive material forces. The overcoming of the oppression of women requires not merely ideological pressure but the elimination of privatised domestic labour, the family, and many other things. Only the State possesses the vast resources to start such a work of social reconstruction. For this reason Marxists are clear that the liberation of women passes through the establishment of the political power of the working class and that every other route is utopianism.

But although the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat is an indispensable step towards overcoming social oppression, it does not by itself automatically eliminate it. The society which emerges from a proletarian revolution will not in the slightest be a utopia. In the struggle against the capitalist class the different layers within the working class — the oppressed nationalities, women, and those suffering racist oppression — all have a common enemy, and the struggle will press the oppressed and exploited together to create a common political instrument to achieve victory. But the very course of that fight itself, and even more when the danger of capitalist restoration is eliminated, will see a differentiation among the forces fighting capitalism.<sup>11</sup> Although there is no class division between the male section of the working class and the overwhelming majority of women in society, and men do not exploit women in the Marxist class sense, it is absolutely clear that the installation of the dictatorship of the proletariat will not achieve the liberation of women or of any other oppressed social group in one fell swoop. Not merely will immense legacies of backwardness exist on the oppression of women, but there are also objective conflicts which will take place under the dictatorship of the proletariat. While in the historical sense the interests of all the oppressed and exploited coincide in the development of the productive forces and the social transformation which this makes possible, very real clashes of immediate social interest will nevertheless exist in the short term. Whether to increase the living standards of workers in ex-imperialist countries at the fastest possible rate or whether to use the economic surpluses of these states to speed up further industrialisation of ex-colonial states; what resources to allocate to improving general conditions at work and what to eliminating private domestic labour as rapidly as possible — these are the sort of very real choices which will be faced by the dictatorship of the proletariat. Only a massive development of the productive forces, taking decades to achieve, will succeed in eliminating such choices. Until then, men will still be in a privileged oppressive relationship in relation to women, workers of dominant nationalities in relation to oppressed nationalities, and so on. Material bases of forms of social oppression will still continue to exist for a definite period even under the dictatorship of the proletariat.<sup>12</sup>

Placed in this historic perspective, it is absolutely clear that neither women nor any other oppressed layer will be 'granted' their liberation by the revolutionary party, by the white male working class, by the omniscient thoughts of Chairman Mao, or by any other such means. Such a concept is utopianism and not Marxism. Women and every other oppressed group will have to fight for and win their liberation in the struggle against the underdevelopment of production and the residues of class society as these are refracted through the dictatorship of the proletariat — including the backwardness that will still exist in the working class. In short, far from being a peaceful bureaucratic paradise, the period of the dictatorship of the proletariat will be a gigantic period of social struggles as oppressed masses fight for their full liberation.

In this context it is absolutely obvious that even a multiplicity of workers parties based on the democracy of workers councils, let alone the actual situation which exists in Eastern Europe, would be totally inadequate to overcome social oppressions. Lenin already pointed out in Russia that workers required trade unions to protect them against the errors of even their own State. A thousand times more will women require their own independent organisations to protect them against the errors of the workers State and to develop an immense struggle for their liberation. The very same reasons which lead Marxists to the conclusion of the necessity of political power and of a political party make them assert the autonomy of the women's movement both under capitalism and under the dictatorship of the proletariat.

The Stalinist suppression in Eastern Europe of an autonomous women's movement, of independent trade unions, and their oppression of gays, has nothing in common with Marxism. The dictatorship of the proletariat will see not the lessening of the need for an independent women's movement but on the contrary its tremendous development.<sup>13</sup>

## The Withering Away Of The Party

By outlining the nature of the autonomy of the women's liberation movement and of the dictatorship of the proletariat we have, however, also outlined the final historic limitations of the State, of politics, and therefore of the party. A State power in itself cannot overcome all the bases of human oppression.

The State of the dictatorship of the proletariat can grant self-determination to nations denied it by capitalism, it can totally legalise abortion which is denied by the bourgeoisie, it can make abortion and contraception freely available on demand, it can institute preferential hiring and education for women, it can protect the rights of gays and blacks even with armed force, it can establish the right of black workers in the United States to create their own state if they wish, it can place immense financial and material resources at the disposal of the autonomous women's, gay, black and other movements. Without destroying the capitalist State which defended the old social relations, and without undertaking the vast task of the reconstruction of society that only a political power makes possible, the foundations of human liberation cannot be laid.

But a political power cannot legislate human minds and it cannot penetrate into every nook and cranny where the filth of class society has lodged. Only an immense social struggle by all the exploited and oppressed can finally cleanse society. The proletarian State can aid that process but it cannot substitute for it. Furthermore, at a certain point even the very existence of the bureaucracy, the armed force, and the division of labour of a specifically State organisation becomes a barrier to that which society must achieve.

It is here that we return to the relation of goals and means with which we started this discussion. Marxism certainly asserts the necessity of political struggle to establish the State power of the working class. But it is Stalinism that has invented the myth of the 'intensification of the class struggle under socialism' and the necessity of 'strengthening the socialist State'. Marxism asserts on the contrary that while the progressive intensification of struggle between proletariat and bourgeoisie under capitalism leads to the ever greater intensification of the repressive power of the ruling class (and the increasing domination of politics over every sphere of life), so also the elimination of the struggle against the bourgeoisie through the dictatorship of the proletariat means the progressive elimination of the State and therefore also of politics. In Lenin's classic phrase, 'the proletariat needs only a State which is withering away, i.e. a State so constituted that it begins to wither away immediately and cannot but wither away' (*State and Revolution*).<sup>14</sup>

Rather than the intensification of the political struggle, what Trotsky said about art and economic construction is the goal of Marxism in the field of social life: 'In the measure in which political struggles will be eliminated — and in a society where there will be no classes there will be no such struggles — the liberated passions will be channelised into technique, into construction which includes art... All forms of life, such as the cultivation of land, the planning of human habitations, the building of theatres, the methods of socially educating children, the solution of scientific problems, the creation of new styles, will virtually engross all and everybody. People will divide into "parties" over the question of a new gigantic canal, or the distribution of oases in the Sahara... And as all problems in a socialist society — the problems of life which were formerly solved spontaneously and automatically, and the problems of art which were in the custody of special priestly castes — will become the property of all the people, one can say with certainty that collective interests and passions and individual competition will have the widest scope and the most unlimited opportunity... It will be the aesthetic schools around which "parties" will collect, that is, associations of temperaments, of tastes and of moods.' (*Literature and Revolution*)

But the framework which Trotsky outlines, which is the Marxist analysis of the withering of the State, determines the historical limits of politics and therefore of the party. The fact that inverted commas

are around the word 'parties' in such struggles reflects not punctuation but social reality. **The necessity and role of the proletarian party, like that of the primacy of politics, is not an ahistoric development, but one tied to a specific epoch of history: the epoch of capitalism, of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and of the transition to socialism.** The less the dominance of politics — and the entire period of the dictatorship of the proletariat is one of the progressive elimination of politics as the arbiter of social struggles — the less will leadership in any sense be exercised by the party. The withering away of the State is also the withering away of the party.<sup>15</sup> Again Trotsky's comments on art apply to all social questions: 'Undoubtedly a time will come when people will approach the works of Shakespeare and Byron in the same way as we approach most poets of the Middle Ages, that is, exclusively from the point of view of scientific-historical analysis. Even sooner, however, will come the time when people will stop seeking in Marx's *Capital* for precepts for their practical activity and *Capital* will have become a historical document, together with the programme of our party.' (*Literature and Revolution*).

After the overthrow of capitalism and the immense social struggles of the dictatorship of the proletariat, a socialist and communist society will finally eliminate the social basis of the oppression of women, of gays, and of every form of sexual oppression and orientation. At that time, and having gone through its greatest ever development, the women's movement in its present form will not need to exist — or at least will not have the same tasks. But long before such a women's movement is not needed the Marxist party will have disappeared into the museum along with the specifically political form of social struggle.

## The Personal And The Political

It is from this historical development that we can also see the final form and the real relation of the question of the 'personal' and the 'political'. After God, the State (and therefore politics) is the supreme form of alienation of class society. That alienation, however, can only be overcome through participation in political life and the destruction of the State power of the capitalist class. All other policies amount to utopia.


But despite the means which are thrust upon it, the goal of Marxism is not the glorification of politics but their ending. The society of the future will not develop through the intensification of

its political instruments but through outgrowing them. It will destroy alienation through the integration of every aspect of social and natural life into human action and development. Marxism asserts the primacy of the political and the leading role of the party — but only in order to create the basis for the disappearance of them both. The problem is not, as Zaretsky supposes, the 'politicisation of the personal' but the elimination of the political altogether. His entire frame of reference is upside down.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, however, we can see that those who believe that the party can or should be a model of future socialist society, or that it should develop a line on every major issue, are bound to end up either in a Stalinist organisation or outside any party — unable to join because the party is not the all-embracing institution they think it ought to be. Such misapprehensions about the role and nature of the party explain why many people in the gay movement and the women's movement reject Leninism. Only by understanding the primacy of politics, and from there defining the areas of party involvement, activity and decision-making, can we really determine where the meeting-point of the 'personal' and 'political' lies.<sup>17</sup>

J. Ross

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## FOOTNOTES

1. There are a number of other reasons — in particular, that in gripping the consciousness of classes the State represents the general interests of the bourgeoisie and it is only in relation to the State that all questions become matters of 'general concern.' Under capitalism, in Marx's words, 'The sphere of politics has been the only (real) state-sphere in the State, the only sphere in which both form and content was...truly universal', and also under capitalism, 'the State is the "matter of general concern" and in reality by "matters of general concern" we mean the State' ('Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of the State'). It is not necessary to deal with these questions here, however, as they are derivative from the central objective place occupied by the State within the social formation.

2. This distinction of course fully continues to apply under the dictatorship of the proletariat. Lenin explained the distinction of economics and politics, and the primacy of politics, clearly in the famous debate on the trade unions in the Soviet Union. Trotsky and Bukharin approached the issue from the point of view of the organisation of production — the economic issue. Lenin asserted the issue of politics — of the trade unions in relation to the Soviet State:

'Politics must take precedence over economics. To argue otherwise is to forget the ABC of Marxism...you forget the ABC of Marxism when you say (or imply) that the political approach is equivalent to the "economic", and that you can take "the one and the other". *What the political approach means...is that the wrong attitude to the trade unions will ruin the Soviet power and topple the dictatorship of the proletariat [emphasis added] ... Bukharin's insistence on combining the political and economic approach has landed him in theoretical eclecticism.*

'Trotsky and Bukharin make as though they are concerned for the growth of production whereas we have nothing but formal democracy in mind. This picture is wrong, because the *only* formulation of the issue (which the Marxist viewpoint allows) is: without a correct political approach to the matter the given class will be unable to stay on top, and, consequently, will be incapable of solving its production problem either.' ('Once Again on the Trade Unions')

3. In relation to the economic struggle, Rosa Luxemburg's is the classic formulation of this process, which occurs even in a revolution:

'But the movement on the whole does not proceed from the economic

to the political, nor even the reverse. Every great political mass action, after it has attained its political highest point, breaks up into a mass of economic strikes. And that applies not only to each of the great mass strike struggles, but also to the revolution as a whole. With the spreading, clarifying and involution of the political struggle, the economic struggle not only does not recede but extends, organises, and becomes involved in equal measure. Between the two there is the most complete reciprocal action.

'Every new onset and every fresh victory of the political struggle is transformed into a powerful impetus for the economic struggle, extending at the same time its external possibilities and intensifying the inner urge of the workers to better their position, and their desire to struggle. After every foaming wave of political action a fructifying deposit remains behind from which a thousand stalks of economic struggle shoot forth. And conversely. The workers' condition of ceaseless economic struggle with the capitalists keeps their fighting energy alive in every political interval; it forms, so to speak, the permanent fresh reservoir of the strength of the proletarian classes, from which the political fight ever renews its strength, and at the same time leads the indefatigable economic sappers of the proletariat at all times, now here and now there, to isolated sharp conflicts, out of which political conflicts on a large scale unexpectedly explode.' (*The Mass Strike*)

Trotsky showed the same process in more normal conditions: 'The masses may, at certain periods, be completely absorbed in economic struggles and show very little interest in political questions. Or, suffering a series of defeats in economic struggles, the masses may abruptly turn their attention to politics. Then — depending upon the concrete circumstances and the past experience of the masses — their political activity may go in the direction of either purely parliamentary or extra-parliamentary struggles.' ('The Third Period of the Comintern's Errors')

4. It is here that the *real* criticism of some of Lenin's theoretical formulae needs to be made. Lenin, following Engels, defined three chief fields of struggle — economic, political and ideological. In reality however this is not correctly posed. An infinitely wider range of social struggles exist than simply economic ones. Lenin and Engels singled out the economic because these struggles were at that time massively

larger than, for example, the struggle for the liberation of women. This remained true even into the 1930s. However, since then the social decay of capitalism has developed far further — not least because of the development of the productive forces it has brought about since 1945. Struggles against every form of oppression — sexual, racist, national, cultural — have developed to a qualitatively higher level than before the Second World War, let alone since Engels and Lenin's time. This generalised social crisis is in fact one of the chief features distinguishing the present period and making objectively possible the favourable relation of forces in the capitalist countries. Lenin's formula (of economic, political, ideological), however, leaves out these social struggles as chief areas. No theoretical or practical justification exists for it. The real formulation should be that the three decisive fields of struggle are social, political, and ideological — or if one wants to maintain the specific category of the economic, then that they are economic, social, political, and ideological. This is the correct way to deal with the inadequacy of Lenin's formula — not by distorting Marxism in an attempt to insert the general category of 'social' into 'political'.

5. Maoism may wish to place 'politics in command' in every sphere of social life but, as discussed below, the *real* aim of the proletariat is the elimination of the political State, and therefore specifically *political* struggle, at the most rapid rate made possible by the defeat of the bourgeoisie.

6. Here again we may see that Zaretsky's opposition is not specifically to Leninism but in reality to Marxism itself. Zaretsky takes hold of the words of Marx's famous distinction between 'personal' and 'public' but he gives this distinction an explanation which proceeds precisely from his economist framework and not from a Marxist one. Zaretsky develops the distinction from the *economy*:

The "split" between the socialised labour of the capitalist enterprise and the private labour of women in the home is closely related to a second "split" — between our "personal" lives and our place within the social division of labour. (p29)

Marx, however, develops the real distinction of personal/social from political/public from an entirely different basis. He derives it not from different parts of social and economic life but from the nature of the capitalist State and its relation to society. The distinction on which the public/private split is based lies not in the division between socialised and non-socialised labour but between the life of the capitalist State and the real nature of capitalist civil society. Thus Marx distinguishes 'The system of particular interests (the family and civil society) and the system of general interests (the State)'. ('Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of the State'). The split is that: 'The political man leads his particular existence alongside the unpolitical man, the private citizen. Property, contractual agreements, marriage, civil society appear in them as particular modes of existence alongside the political aspects of the State.' (Ibid).

The nature of that split leads to the conclusion that *political* 'liberation' is not at all sufficient to guarantee real social and human freedom. What, in relation to the political State, may be a 'free contract between two people' in social terms is an exploitative relation of capitalist and workers, what in capitalist political terms is a 'free decision of equal partners' in marriage is in reality an oppressive social relationship of the family. As Marx put it: 'Just as Christians are equal in heaven although unequal on earth, the individual members of the people become equal in the heaven of their political world, though unequal in their earthly existence in society' (Ibid). Zaretsky's whole framework on this is outside of the analysis of Marxism.

7. Furthermore, clashes by different types of criteria are not confined solely to relations between politics and other social spheres of life — although here Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky's comments on such great writers, but political reactionaries, as Balzac, Goethe, etc. provide the basic framework of Marxist analysis of such problems. The decline of capitalism and its degeneration has given rise to innumerable phenomena which are very difficult to handle in practice. Thus, for example, Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* is an artistically important film but its subject, open glorification of the Ku Klux Klan, is amongst the most despicable imaginable. Another classic case is that of the German philosopher Nietzsche, who was a political reactionary, proponent of extreme bourgeois individualism, and an open advocate of sexism, but who is also one of the greatest writers of German prose and poetry and whose ideas prefigured many of those of psychoanalysis and other modern psychological theories. These cases are merely extreme ones of the general problem of sexism, racism and other positions which pervade class society and the dictatorship of the proletariat emerging from it.

The way in which a society in transition to socialism and the party today deals with these types of clashes will have to be decided concretely in each case. It may well be necessary to take strong actions on some criteria which go against those valid on others — thus, for example, no political or black organisation could seriously believe that a showing of Griffith's film could be considered a solely artistic event or a women's organisation that a presentation of Nietzsche was purely a recital of German prose.

What is clear, however, is that the different criteria which are involved in judging events and works must not be mixed up. Thus, for example, to take an extreme case, it is obvious that a workers state engaged in a civil war against capitalist restoration could not simply freely permit the publishing of openly defeatist or pro-bourgeois literature under the guise that it was 'purely artistic' activity. As Trotsky put it, 'the revolutionary state has the right to defend itself against the counter-attack of the bourgeoisie, even when this drapes itself in the flag of art or science' ('Towards a Free Revolutionary Art'). Even in such extreme cases, however, the State, party, or other organisation must

act on openly *political* or social grounds and not pseudo-artistic or literary ones. The concept of Chiang-Ching *et al* that a work of art *must* be bad in artistic terms if it is politically reactionary has nothing in common with Marxism.

8. Thus, for example, the party demands of groupings within it that they are organised on a clear *political* basis and not that of friendship, personal ties, etc. — in other words, that they are tendencies and factions and not personal groupings and cliques. Furthermore, all activity in contradiction with the programme of the party evidently means exclusion from the party.

Internally, also, the party demands standards of behaviour which are necessary from the point of view of functioning of the party and which may well go beyond its programme. These are, however, derived from its political tasks and not from a position on social and personal questions. In Lenin's words: 'Yes, we recognise the duty of comradeship, the duty to support all comrades, the duty to tolerate the opinions of comrades... (but) the duty of comradeship derives from our duty to Russian and International Social-Democracy and not vice-versa.' ('A Retrograde Trend in Russian Social-Democracy').

Finally, in the interests of protecting the ability of the organisation to function politically, the primacy of politics may be asserted through having to ban various activities to which no serious Marxist can have any moral objection whatsoever. A classic example here is smoking pot. This is a perfectly harmless activity and revolutionaries demand its legalisation. But as long as pot remains illegal, its smoking by members of a revolutionary organisation lays them open to legal blackmail by the police and the use of this against the party. For that reason pot smoking is banned by the revolutionary organisation.

Obviously in many cases the applying of these political criteria in practice, as with that of democratic centralism discussed below, is a complicated question. However the approach is clear — the position on the social and personal question is derived from the political starting point and not vice-versa ('the duty of comradeship derives from duty to communism and not vice-versa').

9. Even where *Marxism* as such may lead to, or be claimed to lead to, a particular conclusion on a field such as art, social life, science or sexual relations, the political party is not the organisation to take a position, has no discipline, and should not attempt to organise the discussion within itself. The sole intervention of the party in such fields is a *political* one — that the members of the party accept and base their activity on the necessity to achieve social liberation through the destruction of the state power of the capitalist class and the establishment of a dictatorship of the proletariat where state power is directed towards overcoming the social bases of oppression and creating, in that sense, freedom of human choice. Naturally such questions do *relate to* and *overlap* political ones but they are not *the same* as them. A few examples may illustrate the point.

In *art* it has frequently been claimed that Marxism leads to support for realist trends — although almost as many people have denied this. Major and important discussion, debate and even struggle can take place around such a question — as indeed did occur, for example, in the early years of the Russian Revolution. But the best place for such a discussion is within a body of Marxist or even non-Marxist artists and people concerned with art. The idea that *the party* is best equipped, or should decide or take a position, on such a question is absurd — and totally misunderstands Marxism. It is only a Stalinist party, and not a revolutionary socialist one, which could demand that Lukacs made a self-criticism for 'bourgeois' trends in artistic theory, Shostakovich for 'individualism' in music, poets for 'formalism' in their work, etc. Party members are free to take up a position for or against any artistic school they wish. Only if this art becomes intertwined immediately with political consequences should the party take a position (e.g. if a member of the party utilises art to express reactionary political positions) and then it should be on the political issue and not the artistic question.

In *science* a major debate has raged over various psychological theories. Whether to support Freudianism, Pavlovianism, a physiological or any other psychological approach is not an issue for the party. Quite different, however, is the attempt to propagate, under the guise of science, the racist filth of the pseudo-geneticists of the Eysenck school. Here the party as such takes a position against reactionary politics masquerading as science and it is the duty of all psychologists, educationalists, etc. of the party to wage a struggle to expose these 'theories'.

In *social life*, also, Marxist analysis will be applied to every question. To develop the concepts of life-style necessary for the liberation of women, the ending of prejudices against gays and all other issues involved in building a socialist society is going to take gigantic debate, work, and struggle. However there is not in the slightest a 100 per cent correlation between political correctness and positions on social life — for example, Marx maintained many bourgeois prejudices and some of Trotsky's pronouncements on sexual relations are nonsense. It is absolutely obvious that on such issues and debates party members will take part in advocating and fighting for different social inter-relationships, sexual orientations, and so on. The types of discussions of Inessa Armand, Kollontai, Lenin and Trotsky will be merely pale precursors of the type of debate which is needed at present and in the future. However, the party is not at all the best organisation in which to debate out these issues. On the contrary, party members should participate fully in much wider debates and struggles and take up positions on the contending sides just as anyone else does.

In short, the task of the party is to fight for the political basis to eliminate social oppression and create freedom of human choice — not to substitute itself for that choice or attempt to take decisions, or to wage struggles, which other types of organisation are far better qualified to work out and settle. When it comes to everyday practice in their social

life, party members are going to learn more from the women's and gay movements than from the party. When it comes to art, science or social life, heaven help anyone who waits for the pronouncements of even the most democratic party discussion rather than the work of artists, critics, scientists and women activists themselves. The claim to leadership of the party is based on the primacy of politics and relates to that field. It is only God and Stalinism which claim omnipotence and omniscience in every field of human life.

10. In relation to this we may note that the question of the discipline of a party is a much misunderstood question in many social movements — a misunderstanding not helped by the sectarian concepts practised by some Marxist groups. It is frequently conceived that a revolutionary organisation determines what its members do on every question, and that all public disagreements and polemics are forbidden.

In reality, however, the discipline of the party has absolutely clear limits which flow from the political character of the party and the concept of democratic centralism. The idea that members of the party cannot discuss, debate, and disagree in public is quite false. Even on political questions the carrying out of majority decisions, and the putting in public of a common line, applies only to particular actions decided on by the party and not to views unconnected to such definitely decided acts. Lenin explained this principle clearly in reply to the Menshevik Central Committee of the RSDLP when the latter attempted to claim that public discussion was unacceptable. He stated: 'The principle of democratic centralism...implies universal and full freedom to criticise [within the principles of the party programme — J.R.], so long as this does not disturb the unity of a definite action' (Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 10, p443). Outside of this, however, criticism of the party policy is not at all purely internal:

'Criticism within the limits of the principles of the party programme must be quite free...not only at Party meetings, but also at public meetings... (But) the Party's political action must be united. No "calls" that violate the unity of definite actions can be tolerated either at a public meeting, or in Party meetings, or in the Party press...the Central Committee has defined freedom to criticise inaccurately and too narrowly, and unity of action inaccurately and too broadly. Let us take an example. The Congress decided that the Party should take part in the Duma elections. Taking part in elections is a very definite action. During the elections (as in Baku today, for example), no member of the Party anywhere has any right whatever to call upon people to abstain from voting; nor can "criticism" of the decision to take part in the elections be tolerated during this period, for it would in fact jeopardise success in the election campaign. Before elections have been announced, however, Party members everywhere have a perfect right to criticise the decision to take part in elections. Of course, the application of this principle in practice will sometimes give rise to disputes and misunderstandings; but only on the basis of this principle can all disputes and misunderstandings be settled honourably for the Party.' (*Ibid*)

It flows immediately from the character of democratic centralism that the party cannot have discipline on social life, artistic questions, science, etc. On these issues, as we have already discussed, the party will never take a position. It therefore never calls for definite actions and as such discussion is free. It cannot therefore have discipline.

11. An historical example may make this clearer. In the struggle against feudalism the necessity of concentrating all forces against the old regime led the bourgeoisie and its allies to create and unite its forces around a single decisive political instrument to secure victory — the Jacobin Club in France and the New Model Army in England, for example. In the heat and at the height of the struggle all relative differentiation of the most important and determined forces fighting feudalism was overcome in the necessity to defeat the common enemy. With the definitive routing of the old order, however, the differentiations within the bourgeoisie and its allies came out into the open: Presbyterians, Puritans, Levellers, the Army, etc. in England following the crushing of the monarchy; Robespierriests, Hebertists, Dantonists, Thermidorians, etc. in France after the defeat of the foreign invasions of 1793-94.

Of course, it is not possible to make any mechanical analogy between the bourgeois revolution and the proletarian revolution. Following the victory of the capitalist revolution a class political differentiation took place between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, embryo proletariat, peasantry and artisans, etc. Therefore the differentiations were not merely between different sections of the bourgeoisie (Robespierriests against Thermidorians, Puritans against Presbyterians) but also between the bourgeoisie and embryonic developments of organisations of other classes (Babeufists, Levellers). Following the proletarian revolution these *exploitative class* differences will not exist. Differentiations between the proletariats of the ex-imperialist countries and the ex-colonial countries, between the proletariats of different nationalities within the same state, between the male section of the working class and the female, between the working class and those not yet integrated into it, between the working class and the peasantry, etc., are not of the same type as those between bourgeoisie and proletariat. It is a question of differences between historic allies and not between exploiters and exploited. Nevertheless, such unevennesses within the working class, and between it and other social layers, will take an entire historical epoch to disappear completely. In the period before this is finally achieved it is absolutely inevitable that differences both of objective immediate interests and in degrees of political consciousness will exist. These will inevitably give rise to different parties, the necessity of many different independent organisations of the masses (unions, women's movement, peasant organisations, national organisations, cultural societies, etc.).

It is thus quite false to believe, as does classical Stalinist theory, that under the dictatorship of the proletariat the working class will only have one party. In the period of revolution itself, theory and historical experience of revolution indicates it is overwhelmingly likely that the

oppressed masses will unite in one single decisive instrument (although that leadership can only be won by correct line and not imposed as in Stalinist practice). Nevertheless, following the victory of the revolution, any serious Marxist analysis leads to the conclusion that many different parties and fractions will develop reflecting political, social, national, regional, sexual and other differences and unevennesses within the working class. Furthermore, not merely differing political parties but every conceivable type of organisation of the masses will be needed in such a situation.

12. As the resolution of the Fourth International on Socialist Democracy and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat (shortly to be published in *Inprecor*) puts it: 'Momentous struggles will continue throughout the process of building a classless society, struggles that concern social evils rooted in class society, but which will not disappear immediately with the suppression of capitalist exploitation or wage-labour. The oppression of women, the oppression of national minorities, and the oppression and alienation of youth are archetypes of such problems which cannot be automatically subsumed under the general heading of "class struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie" except by divorcing the categories "working class" and "bourgeoisie" from their classical Marxist, materialist definitions...Political freedom under workers democracy therefore implies freedom of organisation and action of independent women's liberation, national liberation and youth movements, i.e. movements much broader than the working class in the scientific sense of the word, not to speak of the revolutionary Marxist current within the working class.'

13. Immense resources and mobilisation of the masses are needed to ensure that the struggle for women's liberation penetrates every sphere of life right down to every individual family. Buildings, printing presses, journals, television facilities, medical resources, education materials, gigantic financial resources must all be under the control of an autonomous women's movement. Not even the wisest political party in the entire world could substitute for that process. The mightiest women's liberation movement in the entire world should exist today in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and China. It is one of the ultimate condemnations of Stalinism and the bureaucracy that instead this movement is suppressed and is weaker even than in capitalist countries which by their very nature must organise their material resources not for but against the liberation of women.

14. This is not merely phrasemongering. The elimination of bureaucracy, the arming of the whole working class as long as arms are necessary, the cutting of the wages of state officials and all the other parts of the Marxist programme which Stalinism is so keen on forgetting are in reality merely the practical means whereby to move towards the goal of the withering away of the State.

15. As with the State this is not a matter of mere words. The concept that the whole structure of democratic centralism and party organisation is needed to wage struggles on social organisation, economic construction, the raising of children, etc. is ridiculous. The concept of a 'democratic centralist economic organisation', a democratic centralist scientific society, a democratic centralist cultural organisation, etc. is absurd. As the bourgeoisie is definitively defeated even political questions will decreasingly need the old type of party form — for example, such positions as a multinational party in one state, as in Russia following 1917, must be reconsidered.

The types of organisation necessary to carry out the social struggles of the phase of society following the international defeat of capitalism and the final phase of transition to socialist society bear no relation whatever to the party in the Marxist and Leninist sense. From a mighty instrument of political struggle and power the party will become progressively less significant than any other tool of social organisation.

16. Even before the destruction of capitalism, however, people will not find the overcoming of their oppression purely in politics but in their fullest participation in every social struggle. To develop human beings even to the highest potential that can be achieved without the construction of socialism means not the confining of their activity to politics but their integration and participation in the women's movement, trade unions, historical, cultural, scientific and every other form of activity. Marxism achieves its goals not in opposition to these struggles but in showing them the political means whereby their aims may be realised. To devote their activities, energies and lives to building a revolutionary party and to regard it as one of the greatest days in the history of humanity when that party shuts up shop for ever is not a contradiction for Marxists but merely the real unfolding of the struggle of society.

17. As an aside we may note that in fact Zaretsky's problematic, which is that of counterposing to the economic not the primacy of the political but instead the necessity for a wider social framework, is in reality not a break with but a classic statement of Economism. The famous *Credo* of the original Russian Economists put it in a way that could almost be a quotation from Zaretsky's book: 'Intolerant Marxism, negative Marxism, primitive Marxism (whose conception of the class division of society is too schematic) will give way to democratic Marxism, and the social position of the party within modern society must undergo a sharp change...The concept "politics" will be enlarged and will acquire a truly social meaning.' The theoretical counterposition to Economism is not that of asserting more social issues — that is to remain in the framework of Economism — but to assert politics. Once that is done, however, then the limits of the party must also be drawn. In Trotsky's words: 'Our standard is, clearly, political, imperative and intolerant. But for this very reason, it must define the limits of its activity clearly' (*Literature and Revolution*).

# Discussion: ANTHROPOLOGY & FEMINISM

Socialist Woman — in conjunction with others — helped to organise a highly successful tour in Britain for Evelyn Reed, author of *Women's Evolution*. She spoke at meetings throughout the country, including several in London. The importance of these meetings was the debate which was stimulated and the discussion which developed around issues which are of central concern to Marxists and feminists — namely, the material basis of women's oppression and the role of anthropology in developing a

correct analysis.

Below we print two contributions to this debate. The first is a reply to Olivia Harris's article in the latest *Red Rag* (No. 12). The second is an article reprinted from *Critique Communiste*, theoretical journal of the LCR (French section of the Fourth International). We hope these contributions will in turn stimulate further debate in future issues of *Socialist Woman*.

## 1. A reply to Olivia Harris by Gerry Ahrens

'Matriarchal Missionary', Olivia Harris's article in *Red Rag* No. 12, raises criticisms of Evelyn Reed's Marxist feminist interpretations on anthropology which merit a reply. An important weakness in Olivia's article is that she fails to appreciate the importance of many areas of debate that have been initiated by Reed's theories. Like any theory, Reed's conclusions shouldn't be blindly accepted. But they needn't be summarily dismissed as Olivia seems to. She does this when she accuses Evelyn Reed of proclaiming 'the dogmas of an out-of-date Marxism' (p.30). This is exactly how the 20th century anthropologists dealt with the evolutionist pioneers.

Anthropology has never been in the hands of Marxists. It has remained an academic stronghold of bourgeois scholars. As such, the empirical, structural and functional schools are not only anti-historical — by rejecting the evolutionist approach; they are also positively hostile to feminist and Marxist interpretations. Students of anthropology find that their theories are 'validated' only if they adopt these dominant methods and employ the necessary amount of field-work data. What is ignored by these scholars is that most of the societies now studied are patriarchal (whether the lines of descent are traced through women or men) and that there are very few societies that have not been influenced — even in a limited way — by Western capitalist culture.

It is important to trace the effects of colonialism. Equally it is crucial to see why societies have become patriarchal. Mainstream anthropologists, in dismissing the historical approach, develop an analysis which is extremely limited, purely based on empirical comparisons. Feminist and Marxist anthropologists should

combine, rather than separate, the different methods.

This is exactly what Evelyn Reed has done. It is reflected both in her methodology and in the data she uses. To say, as Olivia does, that her ideas do not seem 'to depend much on whether they are true or even plausible in the light of recent research' and that 'her writings use anthropological data in a highly selective way' (p.29) is to fail to realise what Evelyn Reed herself says. She argues that 'the same data can be analysed differently when submitted to different methods of interpretation and this can lead to deep-going theoretical conflicts'. (1) These are the 'theoretical conflicts' which Marxists and feminists need to take up in a challenge to the bourgeois academics who dominate the discipline. Evelyn Reed's methods, her use of data, and the ideas she pursues do represent such a challenge.

Much has been learned — not only from Engels, Morgan and Bachofen, but from Evans-Pritchard, Lévi-Strauss and Leach as well. Their ideas and theories have been subject to positive critiques — through questioning, discussion, modification and extension. They should not be dismissed out of hand. To do so would be to fall into the same traps as the bourgeois anthropologists. Evelyn Reed's theories about such things as the matriarchal clan system and cannibalism should be similarly treated. Her years of research have raised debating points that are just as important as Malinowski's years amongst the Trobriand Islanders, or Durkheim's years with his library.

Olivia goes on to question whether we need Evelyn Reed's ideas. She even asks whether it is necessary for feminists today to know the former position of women. That point of view *in itself*



represents a fundamental difference with the method adopted by Evelyn Reed. If feminists do not question why certain social relations have arisen — such as the family, the sexual division of labour, women's biological role — then the ability to develop a strategy for today which is based on a *scientific* approach is extremely limited. We have seen the political weaknesses of this failure in the article in *Revolutionary Communist* No. 5 (November 1976) on 'Women's Oppression under Capitalism'. According to the Revolutionary Communist Group's theory, women's oppression emerges with capitalism — not *class* society. The economic consequences for the RCG's strategy are extremely serious. They even reject the need for an independent women's movement.

Evelyn Reed does not focus her analysis on the existence or otherwise of patriarchy. Her main area of analysis concerns whether women have been oppressed throughout pre-recorded and recorded history. She analyses why and how women's position has changed through society's evolution to its present mode of production — capitalism. In doing this, her contribution to both

feminism and anthropology has been to question — and threaten — the so-called 'absolute' concepts of the 'eternal' nuclear family and the 'truth' that 'biology is a woman's destiny'.

Evelyn Reed has not — nor does she claim to have — come up with complete answers. Most of her analysis is concerned with pre-recorded history. This is obviously subject to speculation. But her views certainly do provide a different point of view from those currently dominant, which expound the 'natural' and therefore 'unavoidable' inferiority of women. And they are also diametrically opposed to those who think that the subject of 'women' is totally irrelevant as a separate study. If Marxists and feminists are going to gain anything from these anthropological conflicts, then it is high time that serious anthropological critiques were made of all research done in this field extending as far back as the last century. This is the best guarantee for ensuring that the *practice* of the women's movement is rooted in a firm theory which can take the struggle for women's liberation forward.

1. *Is the Nuclear Family Eternal?*, Evelyn Reed (1973).

## 2. In the beginning . . . . by Frédérique Vinteuil

'This world has always belonged to men', writes Simone de Beauvoir [1]. This affirmation has a broad consensus, even amongst feminists and women writers. This can be explained by the fact that the oppression of women spans several millenia, and that women occupied an inferior position in all historical societies that have left written traces. Theories about the existence of a primitive matriarchy that appeared in the 19th century are regarded by contemporary anthropologists as outright digressions, or as assertions without scientific evidence. But if their thesis was accepted, we would be confronting in women the sole and unique group in history whose inferior condition is original, natural and does not result from a historical process.

This is not at all an academic debate. If we admit the 'always' of Simone de Beauvoir, if we justify the ongoing enslavement of women since the beginning of time through some wider hold arising from rules governing the species and the exhausting demands of reproduction — which is a *natural* parameter — then we refuse to consider women as *historical products*. That means that child-bearing is seen as a natural handicap which necessarily determines a social oppression. It then follows that women's oppression is natural, arising from their specificity as sexual beings, and also that men are *spontaneously* oppressors because of their own sexual specificity.

One can draw logical conclusions from this which are absolutely contradictory. Sexist theoreticians can see a justification for the natural and irremediable inferiority of women in this premise; while female theoreticians of radical feminism are inclined on the contrary to see the existence of a contradiction between men and women — not only a major one, but a primitive and natural one. They also tend to situate the liberation of women in test-tube babies, which would free them from child-bearing. These are in fact the conclusions drawn by Shulamith Firestone in her book *The Dialectic of Sex*, a book which is certainly the most representative and coherent expression of the radical feminist currents in the United States today.

We reject this thesis of the eternal enslavement of women in the name of the 'laws of nature'. Humanity from its beginnings, from the stage of the primitive horde, has been a historical reality which does not have natural parameters, but which transforms them in the praxis.

It is useful to recapitulate here, briefly, the evolution of anthropological thought as applied to the problems of the 'feminine condition' [2]. Women were born as objects of science at the time of the epistemological revolution of the 19th century. This corresponded to the end of a type of history which was understood as a factual succession of events, regulated by very few people who were elevated to the rank of 'subjects' of history. It also corresponded to the project of a kind of science which would update the social facts in their totality and would acknowledge them. The investigating field of historians moved from the compilation of diplomatic documents to the study of economic mechanisms, and also to the family and institutions of daily life.

It marked the emergence of the 'woman question'. Eliminated from public life, from 'the history that can be seen', women have been given a role by the historians: that of being the main agents for reproduction, in studies of marriage and fertility in past societies. They are sometimes economic subjects linked with a specific type of production, but above all women are seen as privileged elements in understanding the uses and values of 'daily life' (from cooking to emotional ties, and clothing).

But their recognition as objects for study by the historians did not imply the recognition of an autonomous role for women in history. Women are nothing more than the 'symbols' of a social process. They 'symbolise' the capacities for reproduction, the mode of life and also the collective unconsciousness of a society.

Women *are* the reproduction in a society, and not a social group defined by its relation to reproduction. The history of historians is fundamentally 'male', including even that of the 'Marxist' historians, where classes and class struggle are often implicitly reduced to the masculine element. Arising from this is the absurdity of half of humanity floating on the margin through the course of the centuries. The historians don't even think that women's oppression and the struggle against this oppression might have a role in the historical process!

But there is a field, subsidiary to the development of historical science — though occupying a marginal position in its methods and its objects of investigation — in the heart of which women have found themselves. This is the study of archaic societies. The

1. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (Pelican).

2. For more details, see Ida Magli's *La Donna, un problema aperto*, Florence 1974.

first books totally [3] or partially devoted to the feminine condition are anthropological books of the 19th century. Two reasons explain this. The birth of a feminist movement and the interest shown in the 'woman question' created a debate about the nature of the feminine condition. The new born anthropology provided information on societies which supposedly corresponded to a stage of primitive development of humanity. It destroyed the image of the universal and ahistorical man coming from the philosophies of the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe. It distinguished between the natural and the cultural. *But especially what became evident to the first anthropologists, even obscurely, was the importance of kinship structures in archaic societies.*

Engels [4] correctly wrote: 'The less developed the work, the smaller the mass of its products and consequently the wealth of society, and also the more the predominant influence of blood links seem to dominate the social order.' From that time on, the study of kinship relations which postulated the division of sexes in the reproduction of the species marked the appearance of kinship as an object for investigation. The sexual group with a particular relationship to reproduction, namely women, was called by the Italian woman anthropologist Ida Magli 'the anthropological discovery of the woman'.

Immediately research and debates turned to the scandalous problem of the primitive matriarchy. 'Our' anthropologists (imagine them as learned members of the bourgeoisie, believing in the natural superiority of their class and sex) had, in the warmth of their libraries, received a shock. It appeared more and more obvious that the majority of archaic societies were acquainted with or had experienced a matrilineal order of descent (consanguinity through the maternal line). Now contemporary society gave the image of patrilineal consanguinity, accompanied by an absolute pre-eminence of the male, the father. A similar logic led to the conclusion that matrilineal consanguinity was a criterion for the social domination of women: at the beginning there had been matriarchy.

The emotion caused by this 'discovery' went beyond scientific spheres. Feminists saw a confirmation of their struggle in this discovery: the inferiority of women was not natural, oppression had not always existed. Most anthropologists came to a decision: they were either in favour of or against the theory of the primitive matriarchy.

Those in favour based themselves on the prior appearance, in most societies, of matrilineal consanguinity. This prior appearance was explained by the ignorance of primitive people about the role of the father in reproduction. Only the woman seemed to be the source of life to primitive people, and her power was based on her reproductive functions.

Those against argued that no serious historical evidence existed of the slightest 'feminine power', and that, after all, the natural superiority of the man ....

## Morgan And Bachofen

In 1871 the work *Ancient Society* was published by the American writer Morgan. Morgan had lived amongst Iroquois tribes. His work was the first attempt to develop a theory about the evolution of the structures of kinship: from the absolute sexual promiscuity without any prohibition of incest at the beginning, up to the monogamian family, through the consanguine family (union of all people of the same generation), punaluan family (prohibition of incest between brothers and sisters, group marriage), and the pairing family (birth of the couple). According to Morgan, the monogamian family started with patrilineal consanguinity and with it ended the pre-eminence of women. In *The Origin of the Family* Engels draws the same conclusion as Morgan. We will deal with this later.

The legitimate theoretician of matriarchy was not Morgan but Bachofen, who was not, strictly speaking, an anthropologist, but rather a historian of religions. [5] Morgan started from the kinship structures in archaic societies of the time. Bachofen started from the analysis of the 'sacred' in archaic societies of the past. He

discovered the cult of the Great Mother of Gods [6] and the symbolic structures that emphasised the feminine aspect of the 'holy', the power of fertility of the Earth Mother, exaltation of the lunar principle, cults of vegetation.

From the primary role of the feminine element in the religious order, Bachofen draws the pre-eminence of women in the social order. Not that he was a feminist. The whole meaning of his thesis lies in the celebration of the passage from the female order to the male order, the former corresponding to the primitive and barbaric stage of society. According to Bachofen, what was for Engels 'the historical defeat of the feminine sex' is in reality the beginning of civilisation: the passage from original chaos to an ordered social structure; the passage from instinct to reason; from submission to nature to its transformation; from passivity to activity; from nature to culture. The patriarchal order incarnates progress. According to this author of *Das Mutterrecht*, 'the overthrow of the matriarchy occurred when men realised their role in reproduction'. They then freed themselves from the Mother-goddesses of fertility that terrified them, to replace them by male gods that they promoted to the rank of supreme gods. [7]

## 'The Origin Of The Family ...'

It was on the basis of this research of a new born anthropology (in the framework of a heated debate between supporters of whether the patriarchy or matriarchy came first) that Engels wrote the *Origin of the Family* .... The discoveries of Morgan and Bachofen had enthused him, as they had Marx. The monogamian family was no longer seen as a natural grouping but as the result of a long evolutionary process started at the beginning of humanity. Moreover, the comparative method used by Morgan confirmed Marx's intuitions about the pre-history of Western civilisation. Morgan outlined how Indian archaic societies in America in the 19th century had the same kinship structure and the same evolutionary process as the archaic societies of the past (Greece, Far East). 'Morgan spontaneously rediscovered, through the limits imposed by his subject, the materialist conception of history that had been discovered by Marx'. [8] Engels adopted the evolutionary schema provided by Morgan almost unreservedly, but added to it a materialist basis.

We are familiar with the thesis developed in the *Origin of the Family* ..... on the birth of women's oppression. At the beginning, humanity knew a form of 'primitive communism' probably corresponding to the Stone Age. The land was communal, a first division of labour appeared, rooted in the sexual division of reproduction. Women, less 'mobile' because of child-bearing, were associated with husbandry, and tasks near the dwelling place: weaving, pottery .... Men devoted themselves to hunting and fishing. Only the mother's role was known in the reproductive process, and matrilineal consanguinity was natural in the kinship structures. This was reflected in marriage groups (a union of all the men in a clan of a given age group with the women of the same age in another clan). According to Engels, matrilineal consanguinity was, doubtlessly, accompanied by the social supremacy of women: 'the domestic communist economy where women belong, for most of them if not all, to the same gens, while men were divided into different gens, is the most concrete basis of this predominance of women'. [9]

But with the Iron Age and the appearance of the plough, husbandry was modified, and required more physical strength and a greater mobility. Above all, an accumulation of a social surplus product appeared. Now it was men — through their physical predispositions — who were more suited to this new husbandry and seized upon this surplus product. Private ownership of the means of production started to develop. Men were unable to make their offspring profit, since inheritance came through the mother only.

Men used their new economic superiority to reverse the family structure and to establish patrilineal consanguinity. Because women have a natural property relation with their body as a

6. Works on the Great Mother of Gods: Kerényi, *La Grande Mère*; E.O. James, *The Cults of the Great Mother*, London 1959; R. Briffault, *The Mothers*, London 1927; R. Pestalozza, *L'Eternel féminin dans la religion méditerranéenne*.

7. A rapid summary of this theory can be found in the 'History' chapter of Simone de Beauvoir, *op cit*.

8. Engels, Letter to Kautsky, 16 February 1884.

9. Engels, *Origin of the Family* ....

3. C. Letourneau, *La condition de la femme dans les diverses races et civilisations*, Paris 1903; *Evolution du mariage et de la famille*, Paris 1888.

4. Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*.

5. The main work: *Das Mutterrecht*, 1861.

means of reproduction, men depend on women to reproduce themselves. To overthrow this dependence, to ensure one's own descent, can only mean the appropriation of women's bodies by men, with the transformation of women into socially degraded beings.

Let's say from now on that this schema, whatever its weaknesses (attributable to the level of knowledge at that time), continues to have decisive importance. For women's oppression to be acknowledged not as a natural, original fact, but as the result of a historical process, constitutes from the point of view of method an immense gain. To this, we can add intuitions — even if they are insufficiently explained — that the first class struggle was a struggle between the sexes, and that class oppression was made possible only by the appropriation of the female sex. It is necessary to quote again from the well known sentence: 'the first class opposition that manifests itself in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between men and women in the conjugal marriage, and the first class oppression with the oppression of the feminine sex by the masculine sex.' [10].

Engels' thesis was attacked on several grounds: for example, the existence of a primitive matriarchy, the simultaneous birth of private property and women's oppression, the analogy made between the sexual group constituted by women and a social class. If criticisms have come from a range of scientific viewpoints, the most radical is undoubtedly that of the anthropological structuralist school of Levi-Strauss in particular.

It is necessary to study at some length the details of Levi-Strauss's theses on women's oppression. First, because they are considered as the most systematic refutation of Engels' theory. Secondly, because they have a certain authority and are taken up again by a section of the new feminist literature.

### Levi-Strauss And The 'Inequality Of The Sexes'

We are familiar with the thesis which is defended in Levi-Strauss's major book, *Structures elementaires de la parente* (Elementary Structures of Kinship). He argues that every human society is founded on the laws of exchange. The first exchange, the fundamental one, is that of women. The passage from 'nature' to 'culture' starts with the prohibition of incest: that is, with the rule made by men involving the exchange of women of their own blood relations with foreign women. It is this exchange which makes social life possible. In the beginning, women were the mediation through which men affirmed themselves as social beings. No symmetry existed between the sexes: 'The fundamental point is that it is men who exchange women, and not the contrary'. [11] The type of patrilineal or matrilineal consanguinity does not matter for Levi-Strauss. For him matriarchy is a nonsense, contradicted by extensive evidence. 'Political authority, or simply social authority, always belongs to men, and this male dominance is a constant'. [12] The only difference between patrilineal and matrilineal regimes for Levi-Strauss is that in the former the power belongs to the fathers and men in a masculine lineage; in the latter it belongs to brothers or uncles on the mothers' side.

In most societies with a matrilineal regime, the woman goes to live in her husband's clan (patrilocal dwelling). This single fact demonstrates for Levi-Strauss the supremacy of men. We are familiar with his conclusion: 'Matrilineal consanguinity is the hand of the woman's father or brother that reaches up to the brother-in-law's village'. [13] There is no system of relations between the sexes — men maintain their relationships between themselves by means of women.

Levi-Strauss's analysis leads to an absolute reification of women. It is all the more absolute because this reification has neither an origin nor any apparent cause. It is not, after all, Levi-Strauss's desire to explain why men exchange women and not vice versa. 'Women readers can console themselves by thinking that the rules of the game would remain the same if it was decided to consider men as objects of exchange for groups of women'. [14]

These are the words of a good structuralist for whom A is always equal to B — provided A and B occupy the same function in the same structural group. However, A and B don't occupy the same place. When Levi-Strauss takes the risk and develops a hypothesis to explain this, he needs Freud's help — with Freud's theory about the well-known sexual passivity of women. The superiority of the male libido, of the 'sexual instinct', Levi-Strauss says, is what ensured male supremacy in the active passage from nature to culture. This superiority represents the sexual relations: it corresponds to an 'instinct', but an instinct that needs another human being to satisfy itself.

Levi-Strauss expresses, in a sophisticated way, the notion that inequality of the sexes is fundamental and natural. This uncontented master of structuralist anthropology brings us back, through his analysis of the origins of women's oppression, to the good old naturalist explanations and to tautological reasoning: 'Women are inferior because they are inferior'. And after all, Levi-Strauss, caught in his own trap, doesn't hesitate to make his theory of the exchange of women a universal one. For him, the exchange draws its universality from Nature — where it finds its basis. Thus, in our developed capitalist societies, a woman who gets married thinks she is signing a contract of legal equality with her husband. But just let her read Levi-Strauss and she will lose her illusions: in reality it is her father or brother who have merely exchanged her. 'This point of view [the exchange of women] must be maintained in all its rigour even with respect to our society; the link of reciprocity that makes the marriage is not established between men and women, but between men by means of women.' [15] This is all evidently absurd, especially in a system with bourgeois law, and at a time when many women are totally independent economically. But to deprive this exchange of its universality would mean to deprive it of its 'naturalness'. And this would make women's position a *historical* product arising from a specific society.

We reject Levi-Strauss's conclusion because we reject his method. We have not got the means (research is not that extensive) to criticise his analysis tribe by tribe. However, an ethnologist — whatever his intellectual honesty — interprets facts also as a member of his own sex, and through what his sex supposes through the structuring of consciousness and of the unconscious. Levi-Strauss's choice of words is remarkable in this respect. His use of 'we', 'one', 'mankind', 'man', appear exclusively in the masculine gender of the French language. This overtly helps to convince the reader of the 'fundamental asymmetry between the sexes'.

But even if we take it for granted that the information provided by Levi-Strauss about the kinship structures is correct, the problem still remains. What is the value of his schema of interpretation of these phenomena? He would defend himself against charges of 'interpretation'. His intention is to enable us to see the social mechanisms of kinship structures, by cracking them open. However, his 'cracking open' occurs in the abstract, cut off from any other social reality (the structure functions in autarchy), implicitly stressing the quasi-natural inferiority of women. Undoubtedly, conclusions would be different if Levi-Strauss cared to link his analysis of kinship structures with the more fully understood praxis of the groups being examined. There is no precise evidence from Levi-Strauss about the tribes he has studied in depth — about the kinship systems, about the historical evolution of the tribe, this exogenous influence it had, and about the type of political power which was exercised. We are aware of the love that structuralists have for 'cold societies' — those where historical movement seems to be absent. It is in this kind of society that Levi-Strauss finds his examples of kinship structures.

### Appropriation By Men Only

Levi-Strauss's restrictive method is concerned only with the *mechanisms* of kinship. This makes him neglect almost entirely the fact that there is only appropriation on the side of men. This is male appropriation of women's capacity to reproduce, as well as their labour power.

Marx noted that the first division of labour is situated at the level of the reproduction of the species [16]. Engels saw that this division for reproduction purposes implied a division of labour at

10. *Ibid.*

11. Levi-Strauss, *Structures elementaires de la parente*, Presses Universitaires de France, p. 147.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 150.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 149.

14. Levi-Strauss, *The Family*; Shapiro, *Man, Culture and Society*, London 1956.

15. Levi-Strauss, *Structures elementaires de la parente*, pp. 148-9.

16. Marx, *The German Ideology*.

the level of production. And, as Levi-Strauss himself writes: 'Satisfaction of economic needs entirely rests on conjugal society and on the division of labour between the sexes'. [17] The societies studied by Levi-Strauss rest, at their level of development, on the appropriation — by a group of men — of the labour power of women. 'Such pygmies consider that the more women there are, the more there is to eat.'

Engels was reproached because he linked *the birth of women's oppression to that of private property* in a situation where collective societies existed and communal property was evident, but women still had an obviously inferior status. *The first form of property was in fact the appropriation by a group of men of the labour power and the reproductive capacities of a group of women.* Marx had an intuition of this when he wrote: 'The first form, the germ of property is the family where the woman and children are the man's slaves'. [18] This appropriation is in no way original. Humanity seems to have known a stage (one which has been left behind by almost all the primitive societies of today which are studied by anthropologists) where the natural division of labour was reflected in exchanges between the group of men and the group of women. Two examples to illustrate different extremes of the ancient world include the studies of Louis Cernet and Marcel Granet.

### Exchange Between The Sexes

After examining the survival in ancient Greek law of the rituals of exchange, Louis Cernet writes: 'One can risk saying that in the oldest system of exchange, *the exchange between the sexes* plays a central role'. [19] Marcel Granet comments on ancient China: 'In ancient China, men and women competed with each other like two rival corporations. Ploughmen and women weavers formed groups with different ways of living, different interests, and different riches. Although rivals, they were also interdependent. These complementary groups divided the work between themselves. The hours and places of the work were also shared. Each group had a pattern of life. Social life was the result of the interaction between the two.' [20]

The idea of exchanges between the sexes, similar to rivalry between corporations, is a long way from Levi-Strauss's notion of exchange through the means of women. This stage of sexual division of labour corresponds to a kinship system based on matrilineal consanguinity. But does this period correspond to a matriarchy? This is pretty improbable. The collective property and the communal aspect of the social organisation did not provide a basis for the domination of women over men.

Nevertheless, the primary role of reproduction in these societies gave women an eminent religious power. Great goddesses began to reign in the religious world who were not indifferent to the fate of women on earth. Simone de Beauvoir [21] only sees the religious transposition of the male view of women in the image of these great goddesses. For her, the woman — although an almighty goddess — is nevertheless the 'Other'. There is no possibility of any reciprocal relations between men and women.

This hypothesis is gratuitous: the notion of the great goddess reflects the image of women with their own power. The group of men which de Beauvoir describes — in line with Levi-Strauss — are the *original* and uncontested owners of their sons. Political power is seen to be assumed by an act of creative liberty because, according to the existentialists, men are naturally the ones able to transcend their situation. The picture painted is one of a cruel, domineering, terrifying woman with many lovers — either humans or animals — who kills or castrates them when they betray her or no longer satisfy her. What an act of masochism this is! But if the same group of men described by de Beauvoir worshipped divinities such as the minor goddesses from Crete who were devoted to alleviating the sufferings of women arising from menstruation and child birth, what a rare generosity in history that would be ....

In reality, in a type of society where private appropriation did not yet exist, the specific relation of women to reproduction is far

from being a handicap. It gives rise to some privileges, in fact: the woman is mistress of life, her fertility is seen to be part of the vital fertility of the earth. This is the root of women's predominance in ancient religions.

The 'enslavement' of women to reproduction of the species did not in itself allow the historical defeat of the feminine sex. It was rooted in the consequences of the sexual division of labour when the progress of technical development made the accumulation of a social surplus possible. In the most primitive tribes, women generally did the weaving, pottery and husbandry when the cultivated soil was near the dwelling place. Men would hunt and make tools for production. Women's role was, indeed, a result of their poorer mobility. But this did not in any way reflect women's inferiority. On the contrary, women controlled most of the economy of the group at the beginnings of husbandry.

The discovery of bronze and iron made it possible to cultivate larger surfaces. This resulted in the accumulation of cattle. Breeding, a substitute for hunting, was the occupation of the men. Moreover, the muscular strength of the man became an advantage as the rewards reaped with the help of bronze implements increased. It is the determining role of women in the primitive *economy* which seems to have acted against their interests as a sex.

At this time, women's activities ceased to be the pivot of the life of the group. Women continued to weave. But men profited from the accumulation of cattle and agricultural products. It was the men who saw the beginnings of a surplus product from their work. With the appearance of a substantial surplus product, it was possible for one part of the group to appropriate the labour power of the other part. At the primitive stage, even before the appearance of slavery, the sexual division of work resulted in the appropriation by men of the labour power of women. The relation of women to reproduction and the nature of the kinship structures made it necessary to take possession of the bodies of women — as tools of reproduction — as well.

Engels rightly saw that the transmission of private property — in the hands of men — required a kinship system to ensure its maintenance. At this time the couple appeared as a social entity, leading to the existence of 'legitimate' children to whom property could be handed down.

### Struggle Between The Sexes

In the following stage, with the appearance of slavery, women were expelled from production and relegated to domestic tasks. This was more profitable than exploiting women's labour power. With the monogamian family, women's tasks were excluded from the realm of exchange and directed to consumption within the family unit.

This 'revolution' was long and progressive. It resulted in the social integration of the religious values of the past. From this it is possible to understand the few survivals of an epoch when women were not yet enslaved. One example: in Crete, after the Minoan society, at a time of the triumph of patriarchal social relations, the laws of Gortyne made the wife the exclusive proprietor. Even in the case of divorce, women owned all that was spun and woven in the house.

This 'revolution' was the fruit of a struggle between the sexes. Numerous testimonies exist confirming this struggle. It continued even after the solid establishment of the patriarchy. When Levi-Strauss writes about the social and *uncontested* superiority of men in primitive societies, he forgets to report the existence of a widespread institution — the House of Men. This was a place apart from the village where only men met. Women had no rights to venture near the House. Ceremonies of initiation were carried out there, as well as the preparation of expeditions to punish women of the tribe. Many institutions and rituals developed which excluded women: masks were worn by men only, and they alone had access to rituals surrounding the reincarnation of ancestors. According to Genevieve Calame-Griaule, masked men of the Dogons 'could really exercise a terrible vengeance on a woman guilty of a grave disagreement with a man from the village .... They would invade her hut, demolish the roof, take her goods and pursue her in order to kill her.' [22] But she points out later that some old women would hide themselves to spy on the men and steal the masks ....!

17. Levi-Strauss, *Structures elementaires de la parenté*, p. 148.

18. Marx, *The German Ideology*.

19. L. Cernet, *Anthropologie de la Grèce antique*.

20. M. Granet, *La pensée chinoise*.

21. Simone de Beauvoir, *op. cit.*

22. G. Calame-Griaule, *Ethnologie et langage*.

The institution of the House of Men is incomprehensible in the framework defined by Levi-Strauss, which is premised on the uncontested superiority of men. The need for men to organise themselves, to celebrate phallic cults and to plot against the group of women doesn't express his notion of the cloudless triumph of patriarchal domination. The House of Men rather reflects the terror of men who were confronted with the uncontested magic of the woman's body. It is the concrete expression of the struggle of the sexes and the organisation of men as males to deal with the domination of women in a tension-filled situation. The supremacy of men is accomplished through their organisation as a sex, exercising the most open forms of violence.

The literature of ancient and classical Greece provides many examples of the existence of a struggle between the sexes. One only has to read the Greek tragedies. [23] Here women belong to the past. Their preference for archaic and irrational religions, and for political systems which existed before the City system, is constantly noted in this literature. From Orestes to Penthee to Creon, the (male) hero in these tragedies proclaims that women won't have any power in the City. And, as Bachofen saw, *Orestes* by Aeschylus strikes the last blows against matrilineal consanguinity: the young gods of the patriarchal era descend from Olympus to proclaim that women have no role in reproduction. Children are seen as the fruit of a single active principle — the male principle. The Eryneas, the goddesses of vengeance, of blood, of darkness and the depths of the earth, bow before the will of the young gods.

At the end of this brief study we would like to underline several points. In primitive societies, the first appropriation

occurred when men appropriated woman's labour power and her power to reproduce the species. This implies that the first class struggle definitely was the struggle of the sexes, and that the main force of history, at that stage, was the struggle between the sexes. With slavery there was a differentiation of social classes in the usual meaning of the word. Women, as an autonomous group, were excluded from production. Then the essential contradictions shifted and history became the history of class struggle.

This fundamental transformation upset the status of men in relation to women: it was then no longer the case that men exercised an oppression over women as males, but rather as individuals situated in the process of production. Women's oppression then becomes related to the dictates of the mode of domination of the ruling class, not to the specific interests of men as a group. Men as a group ceased to exist as a socio-economic unit, even if maintained as an ideological entity.

Thus a specific oppression exercised over women as women remains. The struggle of women develops, rather than the struggle of the sexes — which is a restrictive and archaic concept. It nevertheless played an undeniable role in history: especially in the evolution of the family, on the ideological terrain, and in the struggle at the level of everyday life.

However, contrary to the ideas from the radical feminist current of the women's movement, the struggle between the sexes is not the main contradiction in history, even if it pre-dates the class struggle and even if class exploitation arises as a result of the domination of women by men. Each mode of production develops its own contradictions, and uses and modifies for itself the unresolved contradictions of the previous modes of production. Women's oppression aids the reproduction of capitalism, it does not engender it. Examining the roots of women's oppression allows one to define it as a *historical* product. But this analysis cannot substitute itself in any way for a study of the function of this oppression in the mode of capitalist production.

23. J.P. Vincent, *Mythe et tragedie*: 'The tragic moment is the one when a gap opens at the heart of social experience, wide enough so that in between juridical and political thought on the one hand, mythical and heroic tradition on the other, the oppositions clearly appear, yet narrow enough for the conflicts of value to be still felt painfully and the confrontation to continue to occur.'

## LETTERS

# Domestic Labour

I would like to congratulate you on conducting serious theoretical discussions in *Socialist Woman*, in contrast to the inferior woman's magazine format of your SWP rival. May I take up two points about the article by Celia Holt on Domestic Labour in Vol. 6, No. 1?

I should start by saying that I agree with the theoretical substance of her argument, i.e. that housework does not produce value, at least if we stick to the theoretical categories of Marxist political economy. However, I would like to offer two criticisms of her position.

First, one important feature of the idea that Marxism is scientific socialism is that questions of theory are not subordinated to immediate campaigns or prejudices of the movement. For example, in developing his scientific political economy Marx was led to give a more favourable account of the position of the working class under capitalism than the one he started with. Between 1844 and 1867 he decided, for instance, that trade unions *could* raise wages, whereas he started by thinking that they could not; he decided that the subsistence which wages pay for includes a social element which can raise the working class well above biological subsistence, whereas in 1844 he thought that the working class was condemned to be reduced to biological subsistence. Both of these conclusions are unpalatable for someone with a position which in general argues for the forceable overthrow of the bourgeois state as the road to socialism, for they tend to foster

reformism.

It is alarming, then, to find that Celia Holt's first two arguments about the dangers of Ann Chesterton's position concern the practical effects of the theory she advocates, not its truth. These are that the Chesterton arguments might help the wages for housework campaign, and that they fail to prove that capitalism cannot socialise domestic work, 'which destroys our case against an idea current on the left that women's liberation is an "ideological issue", not a real part of the class struggle'.

I would rather suggest that if the Chesterton arguments were correct, then the current positions of *Socialist Woman* should be questioned, and the possibility of changing possibly incorrect policies should be welcomed.

Second, the substance of Holt's conclusions from her correct argument that housework does not produce value is false. Holt argues that because domestic labour is not a source of profit it is of no interest to capitalism, hence capitalism cannot socialise housework. In doing so she contradicts two fundamental ideas of Marxist political economy, namely that capitalism seeks to expand the market, and that capitalism tends, unevenly, to seek to expand the labour force. Both of these can readily be combined by the 'capitalist' socialisation of domestic labour.

Consider the labour involved in, say, the production of food in the traditional domestic economy and today. Instead of preparing raw

vegetables a modern housewife will usually open a tin or etc; her cooking will start with a frozen chicken, not a live one, or with a shop bought pie, not with flour and meat. This will save her time, which can then be spent working for a capitalist (a pea-canner, for example); it will also create a larger market for the capitalists. This sort of socialisation of housework is already dramatically advanced in the middle classes, with the decline of domestic service, which is, of course, unproductive labour, and the departure of servants to work productively in factories or etc; it is also constantly advancing in the working class.

I am not saying that this process, backed by the expansion of Welfare State child-care 'at a snail's pace', is as effective or as desirable as the socialist road to the socialisation of domestic work. But I do think that, far from being impossible, it is happening and will continue to happen. And I also think that it is more desirable that it should happen than that it should not, for the traditional Marxist reason that it makes for the independence of women and their entry into the life of the community.

Finally, I think that if my argument is correct, then, like the conclusions of Marx which I refer to above, it strengthens the case for reformism to some extent. I hope that at least it will lead to some useful discussion.

Yours in comradeship,

MARK COWLING

# REVIEWS

## Women and Socialism

*Women and Socialism* by Hilda Scott (Allison & Busby, £2.95)

In a pamphlet 'Protection of Women and Children in Soviet Russia', published in 1932, A.W. Field quoted Lenin as having said that every intelligent woman should know how to cook. Lenin, of course, had never said anything of the sort; what he had written in *State and Revolution* was that every *kukharka* (woman cook) should take part in government. A.W. Field's confusion, though, is not so absurd as it might seem, for neither women cooks, nor men cooks for that matter, had any political power, and all women cooked for their families.

Things have changed since 1932, but the women's movement has suspected that as regards cooks and women the situation has improved but little. *Women and Socialism* is a detailed study of the daily life of women in contemporary Eastern Europe; it is a first-hand account that offers ample evidence to confirm suspicions that women in Eastern Europe are less than liberated. Anyone who still believes that the women of the GDR, of Poland, etc. enjoy full equality or are drawing steadily nearer this goal should read this book. Those who do not believe the claims of equality should read the book too, both for the information value and because it takes the discussion a step forward: Hilda Scott does not just want to prove that women in Eastern Europe are not equal, she wants to know why they are not equal and what, anyway, precisely is equality?

Constant reference is made throughout the book to the position of women in Western countries, and background material on the views of Marx and Engels and Bebel on the 'woman question' and on the development of the socialist women's movement is supplied. This makes it easier for the reader to contrast and compare the facts presented and evaluate social trends and government measures in the light of socialist theories and expectations. The author, however, lived for over twenty years (from 1948 to 1973) in Czechoslovakia, working for the last ten of these years as a journalist specialising mainly in questions concerning women, and so it is through a careful case study of the Czech experience that the problems of realising in practice the liberation of women are posed and answers sought.

Women, we are told, were 38 per cent of the work-force when the Communists came to power in 1948, but 1.2 million of the 2.1 million women workers were employed in agriculture. By 1969 over 80 per cent of women of productive age were at work and the overwhelming majority held jobs outside agriculture. Alongside this drive to bring women into production, social security provisions were introduced with the aim of enabling women to combine their maternal and productive functions: eighteen weeks paid maternity leave was granted for instance, and retirement for women was set at 55 (it was 60 for men). The extension of pre-school facilities was promised, and by 1967 10 per cent of children under three and 55 per cent of children between the ages of three and six had places in creches and kindergartens. But despite these achievements, full equality did not materialise and in the '60s the government and the media began to expose the failure. Although the expansion of female education had been apparently successful, female students constituting over half the student body in academic and vocational secondary schools and nearly 40 per cent in higher education, women's wages were still much lower than men's. At the Telsa-Pardubice electrical engineering plant in 1965, for example, 70 per cent of men but only 0.3 per cent of women earned more than 1,200 crowns monthly. The number of women to hold responsible administrative positions did not seem to be rising; in 1973 women accounted for over half the employees in the food processing industry but only five of the 579 plant directors.

### Emphasis On Psychology

Several factory managers and specialists of one kind or another are quoted as expressing their surprise at the limited progress women had made and their inability to find a suitable explanation. Hilda Scott, herself, seems to favour an explanation that sees both the economic and psychological patterns in the countries of Eastern Europe as having provided an obstacle to women's social advancement. But it is the psychological patterns that take precedence in her account. 'The engineering industry, the spearhead of the country's economic drive', she writes, 'in spite of its need for labour soon began to demonstrate its

reluctance to accept girls for its apprentice-training programme.' In other words, male 'reluctance' is seen to be the main reason why women have not taken up skilled and well-paid jobs in proportion to their level of education. Male planners, she argues in her concluding chapter, find and will always find enough other projects that need tackling more urgently than the ones that would liberate women. In reviewing *Women and Socialism* in *Red Rag*, Katriona Graham makes explicit the conclusion which is implicit in the book: 'In socialist countries male dominated governments and state institutions cannot by definition articulate and isolate the myriads of ways in which women are controlled and limited by that very system of male domination.'

Between the women of Eastern Europe and their liberation there thus stands only the necessity of teaching their children non-traditional roles, changing male attitudes, and smashing the male dominance of government and state institutions.

These tasks, in Hilda Scott's view, will not be easy to achieve. On the contrary, she feels that the position of women in the countries of Eastern Europe is likely to deteriorate, their importance in social production is likely to become more marginal, and women are likely to drift back to the home. For one thing, women are not theoretically equipped to fight their battles, and for another (and this is the main reason) the 'economic patterns' are against them. 'Even in a socialist society', she writes, 'everything that is subsidised by society has to be paid for by the production of new values, and the more that is subsidised by society, things that are given away or sold below cost, the more efficient the production required in other spheres.' Thus it transpires that, even though traditional values are having a negative influence on the rate of progress, the economic situation means that it would be impossible even with the most enlightened attitudes to afford the socialisation of child care. In Czechoslovakia, for example, the money spent on creches, schools, maternity benefits, etc. represents 25 per cent of social and cultural funds and 10 per cent of the entire national expenditure. So it would be unrealistic to expect improved services in the immediate future. Liberation is a far more expensive process than socialists had imagined in the past and many women's movement theorists imagine in the present. Society can only afford what is profitable. 'Nursery hospitals' for sick children were suggested to relieve women of the necessity of continually having to take time off work, but the idea was pronounced unprofitable and shelved.

Hilda Scott accepts the logic of this kind of economic rationality without question. Economic development happened because it had to happen; it could have happened in no other way. Socialism, she admits, was supposed to have eliminated the sexual division of labour, but when it did not, 'society fell back upon its stereotypes.' When socialists found themselves in power they had to take the kind of decisions for which they had criticised the capitalists: 'The captains of socialist industry... were quite content to have a reservoir of inexpensive labour power which did not offer any real competition with men on the labour market.' Again, Katriona Graham's review develops this thought further and draws the conclusions that are implicit in the book but never clearly expressed: 'Taking this a step further, we could say that, in a situation where the primary goal is the raising of the level of production and this imperative sets social priorities, then the very forces of production determine the dual role that women play. Even in a planned socialist economy, there continues to be conflict between the forces of production and reproduction'.

But do we have to draw this conclusion? Surely there are questions that have to be asked and assumptions that have to be questioned. It is not enough simply to state that socialism was supposed to have eliminated sexual divisions but did not. Hilda Scott explains at another point that one would have expected a campaign against traditional roles but part of the problem was that no vocational guidance existed in Czechoslovakia at the time. This is only to rephrase the question. Why was there no vocational guidance? Why were traditional sex roles left unchallenged? What kind of socialism is it that values women as cheap, uncompetitive labour? And if, under socialism, a certain level of contradiction between the interests of women and of society as a whole is inevitable, must the problem manifest itself in the acute form observable in Eastern Europe? In order to find answers we need to look at the political and social context in which the attempt to liberate women was being made.

In 1948, when the Communists took power in Czechoslovakia, it was not a model socialist plan of economic development that they were introducing but a specific system that had evolved in the USSR in the 1930s under the conditions of Stalinist rule. This unwieldy, highly-

centralised system of industrial planning was accompanied by an undemocratic, highly-bureaucratic system of government, also of Soviet origin, to which any initiative from below was anathema. The first few years of the Communist regime saw the decimation of the workers' movement and the growth of the security forces. In 1952 the General Secretary of the Communist Party, Rudolf Slansky, was brought to trial and another ten members of the government were hanged. During the purges 60,000 Communist Party members were imprisoned and over 100,000 people served sentences in the camps.

Hilda Scott only mentions the optimism and idealism of the early years. For her the history of Eastern Europe shows what happens 'when a comprehensive programme for women's equality was made part of the overall objective of governments and during this period', she insists, 'an attempt was made... to put a consistent body of ideas into practice in a changed social order.' Optimism and idealism there certainly was, but in every country of Eastern Europe the history of repression was the same. The political system was designed to safeguard the interests of the few at the expense of the many. In a situation where the organisation and activity of the working class was illegal, and where ordinary people had no control over government decisions, a project to liberate women was doomed to failure. Bureaucratic rule depended upon the passivity of the mass of men and women, and the regime could not therefore have afforded to initiate the action campaigns or to set in motion the questioning of all authority and accepted social norms that the socialisation of the family would have involved. The Women's Union suffered the fate of all independent organisations: in 1952 it was closed down and replaced by a rubber-stamping Czechoslovak Women's Committee. Women — in the same way as workers, peasants, young people, national minorities — were deprived of the opportunity to defend their specific interests.

## Failure Of Economic Reforms

In the 1960s the governments of Eastern Europe found that their economies were refusing to grow at the required rate. As the societies developed and the economies became more complex, the old system of planning and administration was no longer suitable. Hence economic reforms were tried, introducing market mechanisms and rationalising, among other things, the work-force. The reforms, however, did not seek to alter the balance of power, to restrict the power of the bureaucracy and give more control over events to the working people; consequently, after some initial successes, the performance of the economies did not improve. In recent years the policies of the '60s have therefore been abandoned and other ways of increasing production have been tried.

These changes in economic policy had a direct and crucial effect upon the position of women in Eastern Europe. During the '60s it was observed that women were the less skilled and productive workers, and the question was raised of the desirability of interpreting equality to mean that women must take an equal place in production. It might be more sensible, it was argued, to send some women home; over-employment would in this way be reduced, and less money would have to be paid out in providing facilities. In recent years the argument has still been to send women home, but the reason now is not that such a measure will rationalise the labour force, but that it will increase future reserves of labour — women will be able to have and raise larger families. In all the countries of Eastern Europe there has been a steady drop in the birth-rate since the 1950s, and the governments, now they have abandoned whole-scale rationalisation, have become concerned at the prospect of dwindling reserves of labour. Hence they have introduced a number of measures to make the idea of more children more attractive to more women. Paid and unpaid maternity leave has been extended. In Poland, women can take three years unpaid leave and then return to their old job; in Hungary women can take the same period off without losing their jobs, in addition receiving a monthly grant from the government (which is worth roughly one third of the average wage). In the GDR women are given a day off every month to help them cope with their domestic responsibilities.

Hilda Scott does on occasion note the effects of economic policies. For instance, she mentions measures taken in 1963 to put services on a 'paying basis' which resulted in the closure of many canteens and price rises in others. Two years later the government withdrew millions in subsidies that had previously helped to finance services: in consequence, prices in the laundries rose on average by 33.4 per cent, and between January 1964 and the end of 1970 retail prices in the service section increased by 40 per cent. But she does not draw any conclusions about the nature of the reforms, and about the nature of a government that could introduce such reforms. According to her view the uprisings in Eastern Europe are the result of maladjustment of the Soviet model — 'Where the model was not adapted to fit it creaked and still creaks today' — and the low level of service provision is the result of the expropriation of the small craftsmen after the Communist seizure of power.

Much of the book is taken up with a discussion of the debate within Czech society on the relative merits of collective versus family care of children, and on the significance of the family unit in socialist society. This discussion likewise accepts the framework of the existing economic structure. In the 1960s concern began to be expressed at the strain being

placed on women: they had to bear both a physical burden in their responsibility for the housework, and an emotional one in their responsibility as home-maker. One Czech pediatrician asked: 'Does today's overworked woman and mother have time, strength and ability to create a good emotional atmosphere? Indeed, with the present tempo of life, is she not herself emotionally deprived?' There was also concern that young children, particularly those under three, were being emotionally deprived by being placed in nurseries. The abrupt break in routine when a young child enters a nursery, and the long day spent there while the mother travels, works, travels home and shops, is undoubtedly upsetting. Hilda Scott describes an influential documentary film, 'Children Without Love', that illustrated the retarded development of children in institutional care and the anxieties of those who spent all day in nurseries. The film was shown to the Czech parliament and helped to win official approval for those who were questioning the emphasis Soviet educators had always laid on the value of the 'collective'.

Psychologists began to consider seriously ideas current in the West about the importance of family relationships (Freud) and of maternal as opposed to institutional care (Bowlby). The main result of this in practice was that working mothers began to feel guilty, and the programme of nursery building stagnated. At the same time sociologists attempted to analyse the Czech family and were struck by its similarity to the Western family, and by the common problems that West and East faced with regard to increasing divorce rates and the question of how best to bring up children. They suggested that the idea of a 'socialist family' existing in Czechoslovakia was therefore misleading, and that 'the democratic nuclear family', having lost its patriarchal character, was emerging in all industrial societies. Ideas of 'convergence' are not liked by the authorities (and generally ignore important social and economic distinctions), but their promise that the scientific and technological revolution will make possible greater equality in the 'egalitarian socialist family' sometime in the future is not very convincing. As Hilda Scott points out, this waiting for the scientific and technological revolution is another version of pie in the sky. But she herself is not optimistic about the possibilities for significantly changing the situation. All the suggestions for improving child-care hinge either on the mother giving up some of her working time — a process which inevitably reinforces sex-role divisions — or on greatly increased expenditure to improve the quantity and quality of facilities — which seems unlikely. Hence her pessimism. She writes: 'It is apparent that the real prospect for taking the responsibility for all care of children out of the hands of their parents in any society is remote. Recognition of this calls for a re-evaluation of the importance of the family (not just the mother) to the child, and for a re-thinking of the ways by which the family could be made an institution not for the enslavement of women but for their greater emancipation.'

The main features of Eastern European society are taken as inevitable and as inevitably limiting future developments: in other words, its economic priorities are fixed, money allocated to social expenditure cannot increase, people will continue to lead highly atomised lives at work and at home, unable to help one another out. Within this framework, the only room for manoeuvre left that Hilda Scott can see is the reform of the family. Although she calls on the last page for experiments in family arrangements and personal relationships, it is with the belief that the basic unit of heterosexual couple and children can and should continue to exist. She takes the research of the '60s at its face value, accepting that it throws doubt on the desirability of collective care, and welcoming the abandonment of the mechanistic application of Marxist thinking. In fact the research of the '60s was obviously inspired by the economic debates of the time, and the emphasis on the family reflected the government's awareness of its importance to the maintenance of the social structure. Hilda Scott does not mention the role of the family as a means of social control; she does not appear to recognise it as such. Communists generally, she remembers, were embarrassed by the experiments at abolishing the family in the early days of the Soviet Russian revolution, and Czech intellectuals never questioned the need for the family unit. She quotes without comment the 1948 constitution which stated that 'the institution of marriage, the family and motherhood are under the protection of the state', and the opinion that the Family Code of 1950 was a 'model of common sense'. In her chapter on Engels she questions the possibility of collective forms of social living ever replacing the family. This attitude, along with the omission of any reference to lesbianism and sexuality, is another indication of her failure to look beyond the alternatives that Czech society seems to offer.

## What Kind Of Societies?

The main problem with Hilda Scott's book is that it does not place the question of women in the context of the economic and political developments in Eastern Europe, and so does not consider the nature of these societies. It takes for granted that this economic and political framework is socialist, and that the problems of Czech society are an inevitable result of socialist change. Her main strategy is consequently to put pressure on men to face up to child-care and domestic work as a mutual responsibility, to change traditional sex roles (especially in children), and to discriminate positively in favour of women. This must be done, but it will be done far more effectively if accompanied by

changes in economic and political life that begin to involve the masses of people in making decisions and fixing priorities. We need to question whether 'the forces of production under socialism' inevitably lead to the inequalities described, and whether in fact we can call these societies socialist.

Lindsey German and Anna Paczuska, reviewing the book in *International Socialism* No. 96, argue that, far from being socialist, Eastern Europe is no different from capitalist Europe. 'Impressive social reforms accompanied the entry of women into the labour force, but these are looked at in isolation. In fact, many such reforms were also introduced in the West during the post-war boom. They are not exclusive to socialism'. This is to ignore significant differences in the position of women in Eastern Europe and the West. In Czechoslovakia, women may be subjected to ideological pressures to have children, and abortion and contraception services are not all they could be, but women do have the right to control their own fertility. Women at work may still be in low paid and inferior jobs, and nursery provision could be considerably improved, but women do have the right to work. This is not just a theoretical question. German and Paczuska quote a Czech newspaper as saying: 'Many people in management make no secret of the fact that in connection with the introduction of the new economic system the blow will fall where necessary on the women first.' Of course this is discrimination, but the difference is that these women will not be pushed onto the dole queue — the management is bound by law to find them alternative and comparable jobs. Certainly there is an offensive against women's rights, because at the present they clash with the bureaucracy's desire to rationalise the work force and increase the birth-rate, and this has led in some countries to the backward step of paying young mothers

to stay at home and to the withdrawal of the right to abortion. However, women still have a choice in the matter. Jobs can be found, and it is significant that in Hungary in 1972, 60 per cent of women who had opted for the three year housewives allowance returned to work after only half that time.

Women in Eastern Europe do have some rights which women in capitalist countries do not enjoy, but these clearly do not add up to their liberation. This situation does not refute Marxist ideas about women's emancipation; it reflects the transitional nature of these societies. Not only women, but also workers, ethnic minorities and intellectuals, find themselves oppressed and voiceless. The interests of all these groups are subordinated to the interests of the privileged elite at the top whose policies are designed to keep itself in power and not to promote the development of fully socialist relations. The struggle for an extension of women's rights is therefore a part, and a very important part, of the struggle against the bureaucracy. Years of oppression have made it especially difficult for women to organise a fight for their interests, but in Czechoslovakia a start was made by the Union of Women in 1967-68, and a recent report in the *Guardian* mentioned that the woman question was being raised within Charter 77.

We should support any such steps towards the establishment of an autonomous women's movement in the East European countries. It is only by women themselves organising to discuss their problems that the best tactics and demands will be found for the fight against male domination in Eastern Europe and against the oppressive system that perpetuates it.

ALIX HOLT AND BARBARA BROWN

# Life as we have known it

**Life As We Have Known It** by Cooperative Working Women (with Introductory Letter by Virginia Woolf), edited by Margaret Llewelyn Davies (Virago, £1.25)

The other day I was talking to a woman who has spent twenty years of her life working as a waitress. As the eldest of seven children brought up amongst the pungent smells of offal from the nearby fish dock, she has had ample experience of real poverty and hardship. But her enthusiasm about the area in which she lives is tremendous, and so is her ability to relate it. As we talked I was particularly struck by a remark she made: 'If only I could write, I'd make a book out of all the experiences I've had'. A book indeed.....

It is precisely with the intention of publishing personal reminiscences of working women that Virago, the feminist publishing company, has reprinted *Life As We Have Known It*, a series of accounts by women in the Co-operative Guild. This book (first published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf in 1931) recounts the lives of women as children, workers, housewives and Guild members, bringing out in a simple but striking way the day to day reality with its degradation and inhumanity.

Unlike their wealthy contemporaries, childhood for these women was far from being the innocent fantasy which the Victorian middle classes professed. On the contrary, they received a quick and often crude introduction to working life. The appalling, but obviously profitable, nature of child labour is described by one woman who recounts her experiences working in the fields with forty or fifty other children whose average age was six. As she says: 'We were followed all day by an old man carrying a whip in his hand which he did not forget to use'.

It is through the small but keenly observed details that the autobiographies come to life, showing the hypocrisy of the time and the sickening contrast between the rich and poor. They also reveal the links between home and work. One woman, a miner's wife, speaks of the frustration in trying to combat the coal dust trailed in daily from

the pits. Another shows how smallpox was prevalent in the homes of march workers and allowed to spread in the interests of profit. A foretaste of Seveso!

Their membership of the Co-operative Women's Guild clearly meant a great deal to the women writing. Certainly, the strength of the movement was in its ability to recognise the importance of women's issues and to stimulate members' intellectual and political self-confidence.

Despite the great enthusiasm in the voices of these women however, the book unfortunately leaves me with a feeling of disappointment. The key to this can be found in looking at the politics of the Co-operative Guild itself. The kind of socialism it stood for seems to have been a rather confusing mixture of humane reformism, much the same as that of the Labour Party to which it was affiliated. In the same way, these individual testimonies very much reflect a vagueness about the realities of ownership and power — in other words, class. Judging from the book, the Guild itself appears to believe that change will come about by women achieving places on committees. In her introduction, Margaret Llewelyn, the General Secretary, talks about the 'peaceful revolution from autocratic capitalism to democratic co-operation....'

What is very much revealed by these accounts is an individual pride in having fought successfully in a man's world to achieve places as Poor Law Guardians or, for some, as JPs. But there is a certain smugness about them. Nowhere is there a real questioning of any of the wider issues concerning women's emancipation. I'm forced to wonder just how typical these women were. As we know only too clearly, their intentions, however laudable, did not bring about the fundamental transformation of society — as my friend the waitress would strongly testify, we are still awaiting it! In her introduction to the 1931 edition of the book, Virginia Woolf comments aptly, 'If every reform they demanded was granted, it would not touch one hair of my capitalist head'.

During the period about which these reminiscences were written however, capitalism was

receiving a few strong dents from other quarters. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century was a time of enormous militancy amongst women workers. Organisations like the Women's Trade Union League were formed, and women began to recognise themselves as a highly exploited section of the workforce which needed to take militant action if change was to occur. One result of the many famous strikes which happened all over the country was that male trade unionists were forced to see the necessity of unity with women workers and the importance of female militancy for the whole working class.

Sadly, the importance of these struggles is not reflected in the book. It would be unfair simply to criticise the personal testimonies of individual women. Their omissions are in themselves interesting. What is lacking overall in the book, however, is an accompanying social commentary.

Anna Davin could well have enlarged her minimal introduction for this edition to place the book in some deeper historical context. The precise value of hindsight is that it enables us to raise some of the wider issues and to learn from the past. Nowhere in the book is the success or failure of the movement assessed or the implications of it for today drawn out. It may be that these women were the equivalents of today's Shirley Williams and Barbara Castles. If so, we have to question just what the Guild achieved for the vast majority of working women. The book leaves us with our appetite whetted but not satisfied.

The great value of a feminist publishing company should be not only to reprint extracts of this sort but to locate these voices of the past in the richer tapestry of the struggle of women as a part of the working class as a whole. There seems no great value, to me, in devoting sixteen pages to list books read by Guildswomen. Dickens wins in the popularity polls, but where does that leave us today? The space could well have been used to print extracts from the works of such other contemporary women activists as Sylvia Pankhurst, Annie Besant or Eleanor Marx.

These are not small points. As it is forty-five years since the book was first published, it is important to place it in context. By failing to do this we may fall into the trap of eulogising personal accounts without recognising their weaknesses and learning from them.

It will be interesting indeed to see our reactions in another forty-five years from now to the writing of May Hobbs on the night cleaners' strike. Or my friend living near the fish dock — if I can persuade her to put pen to paper that is.

GLENSPRAY