

Discussion

The Forward Face of Feminism

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The following contribution is the result of discussions between three feminists in Bristol, two of whom are in the Communist Party.

Firstly we would like to say that we welcomed Tricia Davis and Cath Hall's article 'The Forward Face of Feminism' (*Marxism Today*, October 1980) in its seriously committed attempt to examine the present state of feminism and socialism and the potential for alliances. It succeeded in creating discussion amongst us and we hope that our contribution, which poses criticisms and some different experiences, will add to the developing analysis of alliances.

We agree that the potential for developing alliances, in as broad a way as possible, must be seriously examined, otherwise we are left with empty sloganising which will always fail to win understanding or support. For us, the homogeneity of a broad alliance must, in the first place, rest on an experience of oppression out of which a shared consciousness can be developed, to form a basis for specific



oppression to be collectivised into a common strategy. The article discusses the concept and practice of consciousness raising and whilst we would criticise some of the authors' emphasis on consciousness raising in the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) we think that it is a political practice which needs to be taken up by the whole of the Left in the development of a broad democratic alliance.

In the discussion of the different objectives of socialism and feminism and the need to negotiate and renegotiate the connections between the two, the authors appear to be making an incorrect assumption about the nature of socialism. There is no one distinguishable form of socialism in Britain today which the WLM could, if it wished, negotiate with. The fact that socialism takes many different theoretical forms and that its practice for change is diverse, often leaves the Left fragmented and weak through divisions. In examining the possibilities for alliances, we need to be realistic about the differences and conflicts within the established Left, as well as within the WLM. The experience of conflict and sectarianism on the Left has, we believe, motivated many people towards the ideas expressed in *Beyond the Fragments*. Any fit between socialism and feminism must seriously consider these problems.

Sexuality

Tricia and Catherine's description of feminist work over the last decade is accurate to a point but has glaring omissions which we would like to include in the discussion. We feel it is important to emphasise the enormous contribution that feminists have made to the understanding of sexuality. The need to make connections between the social construction of sexuality and the patriarchal values that confine and undermine women's contribution, both inside and outside the home, is a constant aim for feminists. The essential dynamic of feminism as encapsulated in 'the personal is political' becomes even more vital and relevant now, as reactionary ideas are brought into popular use so that women's lives are again restricted as we are pushed back into that privatised 'natural' and oppressive sphere. Unfortunately it is not only Patrick Jenkin who believes in biological determinism; we need to launch the ideological counter attack at every level. Connected to such retrogressive changes in consciousness about women and men is the danger, as Tricia and Catherine point out, that the Left will also push our demands further down the list of priorities. It is a particularly urgent task for feminists working within the established Left to be continually demanding attention for feminist thought and strategies.

We found the discussion on the Fightback Campaign both disappointing and contradictory in relation to the article as a whole. We would certainly agree with the criticism that Fightback's present approach is limited in its almost exclusive concentration on a woman's right to work but we do not accept that this approach is rigidly formulated or impenetrable. So far, our experience leads us

to believe that Fightback is neither static nor inflexible. Fightback, to us, represents a potential for alliances in its commitment to provide 'a focus for united action by women already organised in the labour movement and in campaigns and groups of the women's movement, and to involve women who do not yet relate to any of these movements' (Fightback Policy). The relationship between Fightback and the Labour Party should be particularly significant for Communists who seek an alliance with the Left of the Labour Party where possible. In Bristol, we recognise the present limitations of Fightback and its frequent reliance on traditional male forms of politicising, but we have decided to work within the campaign and, by keeping a dialogue open, hope to push out its present limitations. Forming alliances is not easy and often the differences between us appear to prohibit any coming together. Yet, in spite of the apparent difficulties we believe that it is politically important to test every possibility and sound out the basis for alliances.

Consciousness raising

Returning to the role of consciousness raising in the WLM we would like to contradict the idea that this practice is no longer centre stage, though this may be the case in Birmingham. In Bristol consciousness raising groups are continuously being formed — at present there are at least ten groups meeting weekly. We agree that it is crucial for us to build our theories of women's oppression to inform a wider political practice but we would add that the process of consciousness raising contains an important aspect omitted by Tricia and Catherine. Consciousness raising provides us with a developing sense of our individual and collective potential and power which allows us to recognise and combat the internalisation of our own oppression. Internalised oppression, highlighted so clearly by feminists and the gay movement has a political significance for all oppressed groups. The need to counter the ideological and economic attacks on our lives is clear but we suggest that without consciousness raising, any resistance to the ideological attacks from capitalism and patriarchy inevitably contains a weakness. The Left needs to take up consciousness raising as a serious political practice and to stop seeing it as something the WLM does, spasmodically, because we are women.

At times Tricia and Catherine seem to present the WLM as a monolithic body with a clearly defined boundary. As a result of this, we think that they fall into a trap which divides women and which says there is a gap between feminists inside the WLM and other

women working outside, for example, in trade unions. It might be more accurate, from our experience, to describe the WLM as having a semi permeable membrane through which ideas, practices and women move in both directions. The monolithic description does not take into account any dialectical relationship between movements and organisations.

The issue of the WLM not taking up the practice of recruitment to political activism requires close examination. We are left wondering what the definition of this term is. Recruitment to the WLM is very difficult to assess if we are going to measure involvement by numbers (we have no cards to count). Political activism needs qualification and it has been feminists who have extended the areas of political activism because we have insisted that every aspect of our lives has a relationship to a broader political construct. Could we say that the work we do, as feminists, in talking to schools, women's groups, street displays, theatre groups are all forms of

recruitment since all these are geared to spreading feminism and expanding the movement? Could we say that the weekly meetings held by Bristol WLM specifically for women new to the movement (which have attracted around 400 women during the past 3 years) are a form of recruitment?

Revolutionary feminism

We are aware of the gulf between revolutionary and socialist feminists in some parts of the country although it has not been our local experience. We do not hold an idealised picture of unity in the WLM and agree that often a dialogue seems to be out of our reach. However we feel that it is important to be wary of any rigid stereotyping of different tendencies. Without being naive about political differences in theory and practice, we believe that an open dialogue should be created wherever possible and however difficult that may appear. Revolutionary feminism has often pushed out the limits of our thinking and enhanced our collective

strength in the fight against male power and privilege. We share Tricia and Catherine's worries around the dangers of socialist feminists developing a separate organisational form within the WLM and feel that we should attempt to build democratic structures which break down polarisations rather than reinforce divisions.

Finally, the need for developing a left alliance has a particular political urgency at this time. However, the need will remain after the destruction of Tory ideology and practice. Alliances cannot develop in a naive or Utopian way whereby we fail to recognise real conflicts and real enemies. Yet, the formation of alliances is essentially based on a fundamental belief that bonds do exist between people and groups of people. Through the workings of a dehumanising system, these bonds are constantly under attack and often severed. Our task is to be deeply involved in and committed to the reconnection and building of those essential bonds.