

Reviews

SWEET FREEDOM: THE STRUGGLE FOR WOMEN'S LIBERATION

Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell

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'The most transient visitor to this planet', wrote Virginia Woolf in 1928, '... could not fail to be aware, even from this scattered testimony, that England is under the rule of a patriarchy'. Anna Coote and Bea Campbell have drawn together, in *Sweet Freedom*, the 'scattered testimony' of the resurgent women's liberation movement over the past fifteen years. They demonstrate, in an overview ranging from the family, work and the unions to learning, culture and sexuality, the 'social construction of feminine psychology — as well as men's constructed sense of masculinity'. They describe vividly and readably the struggles, debates and campaigns of feminists since the 60s; and they attempt to define a strategy which will 'reproduce the means of political survival' for the women's movement in the 80s and beyond.

One necessity for political survival is to pass on collective history. *Sweet Freedom* will be valued in particular by those women new to the women's liberation movement. Coote and Campbell have, however, already been criticised by 'old lags' like themselves (their words) for misinterpreting certain divisions within the movement. They do not mention at all, the struggles of black women, or the accusations of 'imperialism' sometimes levelled at white feminists. Nor do they confront convincingly the wishful thinking which often conflates women and feminists in a single unity.

But they will certainly not be accused of minimising the divisions within the labour movement. Perhaps the most controversial chapters of the book — at least for the male left — will be those on 'work' and 'unions'. Coote and Campbell assert the centrality of trade unions as a site of struggle for (socialist) feminists. But their account of the history of British trades unionism highlights the unions' active collaboration in shaping women's subordination in the workplace and beyond; they describe bargaining's traditional function as 'to safeguard differentials between weaker and stronger groups of

workers, between the "skilled" and the "unskilled", between women and men'; and their analysis of progress so far indicates a mismatch between commitments on paper to feminist policies and any tangible achievements.

Coote and Campbell freely acknowledge their debts to other feminists in this area. Indeed, some of the most exciting work recently by socialist feminists has been precisely an examination of how male privilege is reinforced in paid employment and through trade unions' active — if limited — choices: the gendered construction of 'skilled' and 'unskilled'; the implications of bargaining for a family wage; the assumption by male workers of access to technology; and the distortions involved in the Left's traditional image of a militant activist.

This work has borne witness to a growing confidence within the women's movement — a willingness to challenge the Left on its own ground. But it has also grown from a more problematic recognition that a socialist feminist analysis cannot simply overlap the systems of capitalism and patriarchy and come up with the domestic labour debate; and that the end result of understanding the 'internal process of subjugation' of women will not merely be to make Marxism 'really meaningful' (Sheila Rowbotham, quoted in *Sweet Freedom*).

Of course, there are others voicing fears about the political inarticulateness of wage bargaining as a mode of struggle; about the damaging effects of sectionalism and the failure to politicise inequalities in the labour market; and about the resulting vulnerability of the trades union movement in a time of crisis. But a specifically feminist critique of trade union practices and politics should lead to a reexamination of several areas of crucial concern to the labour movement and the Left in general.

Firstly, Coote and Campbell explore the different relationships of men and women to paid and unpaid labour, focussing in particular on working hours. The 'typical' trades unionist is still seen as a male manual labourer who does regular overtime, at a time when nearly half the workforce is female and over half of it is white collar. Long term labour market trends may result both in the growth of hitherto 'female'-defined jobs, and in a lessening demand for



labour overall. We may fault the proposed demand for all future public sector jobs to be limited by law to 30 hours per week, or the strategy of basing an alternative economic strategy on desirable child-care patterns, but feminists will still ask awkward questions about the future relationship of paid and unpaid work. Will the positive advocacy of a redistribution of *paid* working hours — partly to undermine the male's self-justification for refusing a redistribution of *unpaid* working hours — still be seen as feminists' stubborn refusal to believe in the possibility of full employment?

Secondly, labour movement strategies are still based inexorably on the existence of a strong, popular trade union movement, which is progressive and believes in political and institutional change. But feminist criticisms which emphasise conflicts of interest between workers rather than working class solidarity, the parochialism and irrelevance of many trade union practices, and their lack of anything but paper commitment to progressive policies for women, must throw doubt on these assumptions. If the trade union movement has the hot-line to another Labour government, what will be its priorities? And who else will be interested anyway?

Thirdly, the women's movement has pointed out that the bargaining strength of paid workers is built in part on those who 'choose' not to participate in the labour market (or are excluded from it); the emphasis on safe-guarding the individual wage has in part resulted in forfeiting any political stake in the social wage. What are the implications for trade unions' bargaining force and focus if these criticisms are taken seriously?

Coote and Campbell do not provide all the answers to these questions. As they say, feminists are trying 'to assert the value of the roles we already perform, to create new ones for ourselves, and to break into those traditionally preserved for men' — and at times the book veers between these three perspectives rather disconcertingly. Neither do they provide more than an outline of an approach and a new strategy for the women's movement; the 'silent majority' must find a voice and be less backward in coming into institutional politics before that can be done.

I am left with two misgivings. One concerns the receptiveness of a labour movement in crisis to change in a feminist direction. *Sweet Freedom* locates the source of the patriarchal character of the trade union movement in early craft unionism (and then generalises on that historical base rather too freely). But those exclusionary tactics were a response to an offensive from employers. That history may be more applicable in the current crisis, when unions appear to be losing their monopoly over the supply of labour, than in recent decades when women's economic opportunities have been growing in parallel with trade unions' defensive strength. As male left proponents of the alternative economic strategy keep telling us, men can afford to be so much nicer to women when the economy is working smoothly. There is a free-floating pessimism through the book which sometimes seems to accept the possibility of a recession-induced defeat for feminists.

My other misgiving is about time and energy. Given that the authors trace one cause of women's under-representation in union activities to reluctance to take on more 'mental and emotional burdens', extra to their domestic responsibilities, I find it hard to see how we are simultaneously to carry on consciousness-raising, do individual battle in our small corners at home, and participate in power politics to disturb the 'democratic' (male) consensus. But perhaps that's the price of *Sweet Freedom*.

Fran Bennett