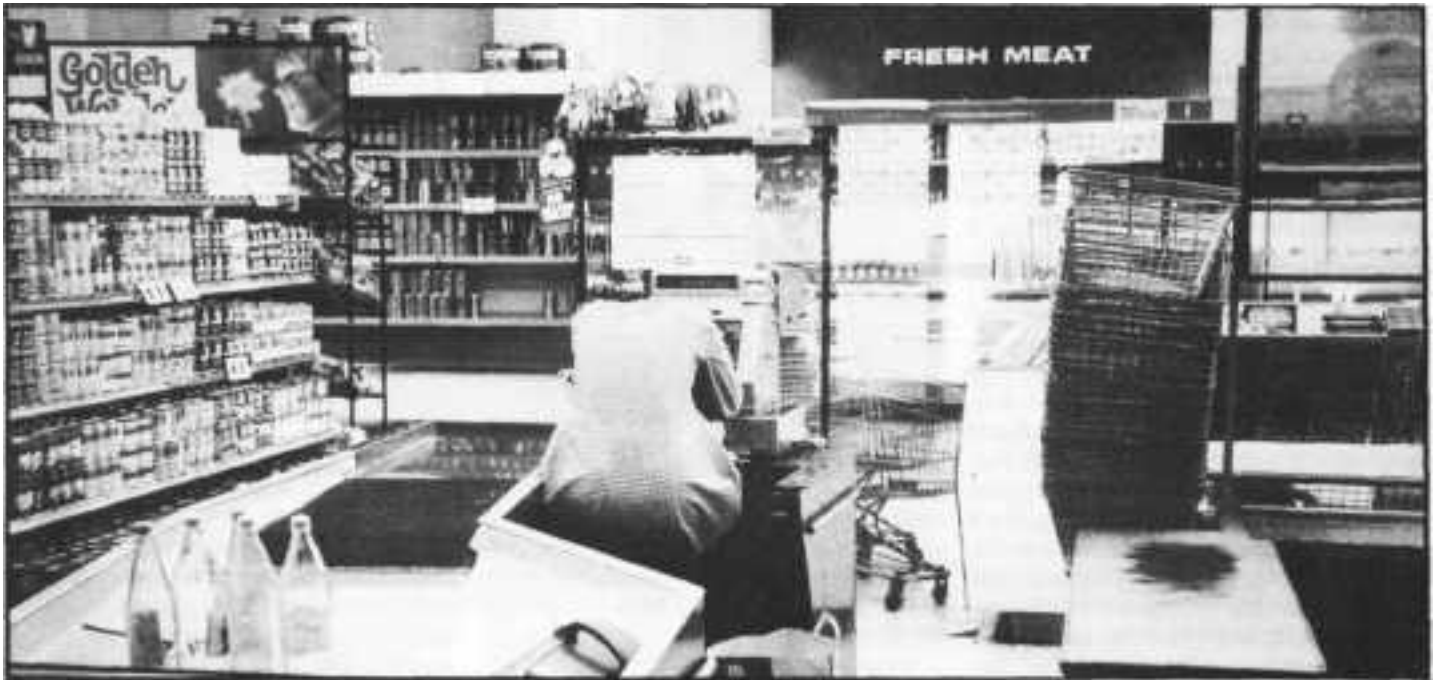


## Thatcherism is not the Moral Majority: it is not a general offensive against feminism

Lynne Segal

# A Question of Choice



'The lives of women are changing' as Anne Showstack Sassoon argued in last month's *Marxism Today*.<sup>1</sup> And they have been for at least two decades now. Most of us for most of our lives are *not* fulltime housewives. But the long hours and inflexible conditions of paid work, as well as the nature of welfare provision and state benefits, still fail to register this fact. The now largely magical belief in the existence of a Cinderella always at the ready at the hearth lives on, though in most households for much of the time she will not be there. But if Cinderella has abandoned her post, surely it is an explicit goal of Thatcherism to return her to it? As the Left portrays Thatcherism, we see it stealing from the housewives shopping bag, as it chains her ever more securely to the kitchen sink.<sup>2</sup> Are not women losing jobs faster than men, and forced by brutal cuts in welfare provision to stay in or return to the home? It is not quite so simple as this.

Certainly, women's lives both at home and in paid work are ever more difficult and demanding. And the tensions between women's two roles in the home and the workforce can only worsen, as the increasing demands on the servicing work still done largely by women in the home are ignored or

exploited by the conditions of women's paid employment. But many women cannot abandon their jobs, even if they wanted to. All of which, as most socialist feminists are asserting ever more forcefully, is likely to place women, as a group, in the forefront of resistance to Thatcherism. But the Left and the labour movement remain only vaguely aware of the significance of the problems women face, and still resist feminist strategies for transforming the nature of political struggle.

As Stuart Hall<sup>3</sup> has been warning us, for at least three years now, Thatcherism has succeeded in building an authoritarian populism of the Right, drawing upon every mean-minded, nationalistic and anti-collective sentiment — the sentiments of the frightened bully under attack. Thatcherism, has one clear goal in relation to the working class: to destroy workers' militancy and undermine support for the trade unions. And just as unemployment *has* undermined workers' militancy, so too incessant union-bashing from the Tories *has* strengthened public suspicion of the trade unions. But what, exactly, are Thatcher's goals and the effects of her policies, in relation to women as a group? I think they are more contradic-

tory, and that within these contradictions a strong resistance is possible.

### The Tories and the family

According to its rhetoric, the effects of Thatcherism on women should not be contradictory. It aims to protect and improve 'the stability and quality of family life', and to stress the centrality of women's place in the home. As central as nationalism and union-baiting to the rhetoric of Thatcherism is its appeal to the importance of the family. 'Bringing up a family is the most important thing of all', Margaret Thatcher assures all women. She sees herself as appealing to women when she asserts that the family unit must remain 'secure and respected'. Just as she sees family values as essentially women's values. 'Women know that society is founded on dignity, reticence and discipline.' It is women's job to be doing that most important work of caring in the home, 'because women bear the children and create and run the home.'<sup>5</sup>

And yet, it is obviously easy to show that the Tory promise 'to be vigilant' in improving family life, is accompanied by policies which continuously erode any such possibility. Thatcher has pursued policies which

make the work of caring for dependents more difficult — if not impossible.

The Tories illustrate their concern for the family by pointing basically to two things. They have enabled certain families to buy their council flats, thus becoming house owners; and they have assisted tiny numbers of parents to send their children to private schools. That *in reality* is all that they really can claim to have done. Meanwhile public housing stock has fallen drastically as housing has been the very hardest hit of all public spending cuts. And there has been a serious deterioration in state schools in terms of buildings, textbooks and other basic supplies while parents must pay double for school meals and meet other educational costs.

### An appeal to individualism

Family rhetoric in Conservative thought is *not* about improving how we are all loved and cared for. Quite the opposite, because it is essentially an appeal to individualism. It is about confirming that we must look after *ourselves* and be self-sufficient. We are told we must look after what we can claim as *our own* — our wives, children and other 'possessions'. Because if we don't, nobody else will.

## Family rhetoric in Conservative thought is *not* about improving how we are all loved and cared for

As Barrett and McIntosh point out in their new book<sup>6</sup>, pro-family rhetoric promotes exclusion and selfishness, in what is presented as inevitably a mean and nasty world. And yet that world would seem less inevitably mean and nasty if a greater public and *collective* responsibility was assumed for meeting people's personal needs, rather than confining them to what is seen as the private world of the family. Were it not generally accepted that 'the family', and the family alone, is the only proper place for loving, caring and sharing, the barbarism of the Tory attack on welfare would surely seem unthinkable.

That our notion of the family lends itself so readily to a Tory realisation of privatisation and welfare cuts is only because of the persisting strength of the sexual division of labour in our idea of family life. Tory ministers like Patrick Jenkins have told us that the family must be the front line of defence when Gran needs help. He of course in practice means women taking full responsibility for caring for the elderly at home, but also conveniently ignored that a third of the elderly today have no living relatives. And when they do they will often live far away

from Gran. A little family rhetoric is a dangerous thing. And digging deeper into the realities of family life would uncover just how much the set of ideologies which form our notion of the family serve always to obscure the multitude of inadequate ways in which most people's needs are met, as well as to obscure what actually goes on in households. Though only one in ten of households conform to the family ideal of male breadwinner, full-time housewife and dependent children, in nearly all households women shoulder grossly unfair burdens of domestic work, and countless frustrations as they attempt largely unaided to fulfil what is seen as 'their' task as sole providers of emotional and physical care for dependent and needy relatives.

### The real effects

In hiding what are the *real* effects of Thatcherism on families with children and other dependents, Tories must conceal a very great deal. For such families are in every way worse off under this government. Child benefit has fallen since 1979, and is now worth less in purchasing power than in 1946. Changes in tax laws have been to the detriment of families with children compared to those without, while low paid parents pay disproportionately more tax than parents with high incomes. The value of maternity benefits, already amongst the lowest in Europe, was cut by the Tories. This accompanied cuts in the value of unemployment, sickness and invalidity benefit. Single parents, over 90% female and now one in three of households with children in inner London, are the hardest hit of all. It has even become almost impossible now for them to claim for 'extras', like children's shoes, clothing, or for fuel.

All capital expenditure on nurseries has been cut, and Boyson has recently repeated that this government has no intention of increasing under-fives provision, because mothers with young children should stay at home.<sup>7</sup> Personal social services for the elderly are now being cut, as the government squeeze on local authorities has led to cuts in domiciliary services, home help services, meals on wheels and day-care facilities.

### Back to the home?

But has this squeeze on welfare provision been forcing women back into the home to meet the otherwise neglected needs of the young, the old, the sick and disabled? It certainly has meant that the work women do in the home has become more and more of a burden. Despite the fact that more husbands and wives now believe that men and women *should* share household chores, surveys have

shown repeatedly that the bulk of housework is still done by women, even in households where women and men work equal hours outside the home, or where men and older sons are unemployed. Husbands of working wives do almost as little housework as husbands of full time housewives.<sup>8</sup> And housing shortages mean that women find it ever more difficult to leave violent and loveless marriages, while economic hardship makes family life grim and depressing. But, perhaps surprisingly, it is not clear that Thatcher's policies will inevitably drive increasing numbers of women out of waged work into full time housework. What they have succeeded in doing is further denying women any possibility of *choice* — choices over whether and how to engage in waged

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work, and over how to combine waged work with domestic work.

For under Thatcherism jobs are determined not by any Tory family rhetoric on women's place, but are left to market forces in an economic climate of industrial decline, re-structuring and deflationary policies. At first it did look as though women workers, frequently part-time and the least secure and protected by their unions, were losing jobs at twice the rate of men. Many women did lose jobs. But overall, in a situation where manufacturing jobs are declining faster than service jobs and where the effects of new technology are unclear, women do not seem to be any longer losing jobs faster than men. For instance, as Gwyn Williams has recently indicated<sup>9</sup>, in Wales it is predicted that within the next ten years women will outnumber men in the workforce, due to changes in employment patterns. And while

<sup>1</sup> A Showstack Sassoon 'Dual Role: women and Britain's crisis' *Marxism Today* December 1982.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the current series of alternative Leeds postcards.

<sup>3</sup> S Hall 'The Great Moving Right Show' *Marxism Today* January 1979.

<sup>4</sup> M Thatcher 'Women in a Changing World' Press Office, Downing Street, July 1982.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> M Barrett and M McIntosh *The Ann Social Family* Verso 1982.

<sup>7</sup> R Boyson, House of Commons. *Hansard* October 1981.

<sup>8</sup> See A Oakley *Subject Woman* Martin Robertson 1981 pp250-251.

<sup>9</sup> G Williams 'Land of our Fathers' *Marxism Today* August 1982.



certain women's jobs, like mechanical office jobs are disappearing, there is also a trend in some technologies towards making more and more jobs home workers jobs, traditionally done by women kept at home with young children.

#### Deprived of choice

Moreover, the expansion of part-time and 'job-splitting' opportunities, which That-

cherism is currently sporting, make it possible for women to do paid work on top of heavy domestic burdens. From January 1983 there will be grants for firms offering job sharing schemes. This suits many employers, as women part-time workers are the most highly exploited. On top of missing out on various workers' rights, their average hourly earnings in April 1981 were only 58% of those of full time male workers.<sup>10</sup> Now, ironically, an expansion of part-time work (but at decent rates, and in suitable conditions) has been pushed by certain socialist feminists, like Jean Gardiner and Sheila Smith", as part of their strategy to enable the sharing of domestic work between men and women, especially the care of young children. Clearly, however, it is very far from this government's intentions to promote greater choice and sharing between men and women in the home. Nor in general have they, for women are deprived of choice.

For example, many women in jobs are likely to fear leaving them to have children, because of the threat of permanent unemployment. The 1980 Employment Act means employers can now more easily refuse a woman her job back after maternity leave. So women are less free to choose to give up

work to have a child, as well as knowing that nursery cuts mean that they are also less likely to be able to return to paid work, even were it available. Meanwhile, male unemployment and declining living standards will force many women to take on paid work — however exploited and unpopular, and whatever her domestic burdens.

Other women, however, and in particular very young women, who can find no jobs, may feel forced into motherhood, as the only role available to them. With no other identification with an adult role, it is not surprising to hear young women say, as I heard on a television programme on teenage pregnancy, 'You feel a lot older if you've got a baby. People don't look down on you like if you're unemployed.' Having a baby can give unemployed women a reason for living (as well as a home away from their parents). Though trying to survive as a single parent on the pitiful allowance of £30 odd a week she and her baby will receive, will most likely create a miserable life for them both.

#### Socialist feminist perspectives

So women who may wish to leave jobs will be forced to retain them while others who would like jobs will be forced to stay at home. Some feminists have perhaps too

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readily accepted the *rhetoric* of Thatcherism, believing that women will be — or could be — forced back into the home. But one thing is certain, that the tensions inside the home, and the tensions between men and women can only increase. Tensions and stress will increase not just from greater poverty and poorer services, but because women's special exploitation both at home and at work will be experienced ever more sharply. Women will continue to face unequal domestic burdens on top of paid work, while unemployed husbands and sons will have been found to add to rather than decrease the work in the home. Pay and conditions in

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women's jobs will continue to deteriorate, as trade union power remains overwhelmingly in the hands of men, who have up until now paid little attention to part-time women workers, or to how trade union priorities might begin to integrate the conflicting demands of home and work.

In this situation central priorities for the labour movement and the Left must be *socialist feminist perspectives*, which not only make the links between home and work, but which recognise the power relations of conflict between women and men in both spheres. It is therefore not enough to demand a woman's right to jobs, nor even improved contraception and abortion, nursery and maternity provision, as the Labour Party and the TUC — at least in principle — now do. Socialist feminist strategies also raise the question of sharing housework and childcare (and hence demanding shorter and

more flexible hours in paid work), of paternity leave, and of job training and sex-segregation at work (which remains as strong as it has ever been, indeed women are today being even more firmly ghettoised into low paid, low status jobs). As centrally however, socialist feminist strategies would seek to find *effective* ways, through positive discrimination, consciousness raising, and women's collective confrontation with men, of challenging the full and threatening complexity of sexist ideology and social relations which maintain male privilege and power, whether in the workplace, the home, the Left or the labour movement.

#### Unlike the Moral Majority

Moreover, it is *not* unrealistic to stress as crucial, the mobilising power of socialist-feminist strategies in this period. For either Thatcherism remains ambivalent, or it has been less than successful, in mounting an overall attack on women's rights. I suspect both factors are operating together. In this respect, it is *unlike* the moral right in the USA, supported by Reaganism, which is directly anti-feminist, explicitly against abortion and equal rights for women, as well as anti-gay. The American New Right has now successfully undermined the equal rights legislation feminists fought for, as well as attacking abortion rights and removing state funding for abortions. Its proposed Family Protection Act, supported by the tirelessly active Moral Majority and National Pro-Family Coalition, aims to strengthen parental authority and in particular paternal authority, while attacking legal funding for divorce, homosexual rights and abortion. In Britain though, the Tory Party and Thatcher's cabinet proclaim an officially 'neutral' policy on abortion, divorce and homosexual rights.

Despite a surreptitious attempt to remove non-medical reasons for abortion on forms for surgeons in March 1981 (which was successfully flouted by gynaecologists Peter Huntingford and his colleagues), the Minister of Health currently denies that there are any plans to restrict abortion services. It seems more likely that the Tories are more interested in promoting private abortion facilities, in line with their general support for privatisation. Nor have the main right wing pressure groups in Britain, SPUC and LIFE, had any particular success lately, though we might expect Thatcherism to provide a suitable political terrain for them. In 1982 LIFE lost its prosecution of Dr Arthur for failing to preserve the life of a severely handicapped baby against the wishes of its parents, although it did manage to obtain some funding for its anti-abortion services from the Department of the Environment, and has applied for further funding.

The anti-feminist Right in this country has been weakened by the continual success and vigour of feminism in mobilising support for women's rights and equality. Contrary to popular, typically misogynist myth, it was not women, as a group, who switched their votes to Thatcher in the last elections.

### The anti-feminist Right in this country has been weakened by the continual success and vigour of feminism

The highest shift in support was from skilled, white workers from the South of England.<sup>12</sup> I see it as a possible weak link in Thatcherism that it has not successfully crushed a feminist consciousness which is aware of the oppression of women's lives as vulnerable and exploited workers and as hopelessly overburdened housewives, mothers and daughters. It is an oppression which Thatcher's policies can be seen to exacerbate. Mobilising on a feminist platform, which embodies quite new ways of working, caring for and supporting each other will be central to any movement which hopes to defeat and replace the ideas of Thatcherism.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid* p24.

<sup>11</sup> J Gardiner and S Smith 'Feminism and Alternative Economic Strategy' *Socialist Economic Review* 1982.

<sup>12</sup> It is interesting that at the moment in the USA, voting trends indicate that it is women who are in the forefront of opposition to Reagan — to the extent that there is said to be a 'yawning gulf between the way the two sexes are voting. C Reed *The Guardian* 4 November 1982.