



**FEMINISM, CULTURE & POLITICS**  
**Editors: Rosalind Brunt and Caroline Rowan**

Lawrence and Wishart, 1982 pbk £3.95  
 ISBN 85315 544 5

Ranging over topics as diverse as the lesbian novel and the history of the Women's Cooperative Guild one can nevertheless pick out certain interlocking themes within these eight feminist essays.

Both for feminists and for those communists who see the relationship between the partners in the broad democratic alliance as being based on mutual respect, the question of autonomy is a central one. It is dealt with from a political aspect in both Caroline Rowan's article, 'The state, the labour movement and working class mothers 1900-1918 and in Tricia Davis' contribution on 'Women and Communist Party politics 1941-1955.'

During the Second World War women had 'stepped through the door of domesticity' into the political arena but by the late 50s they had been consigned once more to their traditional role as wives and mothers. Tricia Davis contends that it was not just social pressures which led to a parallel decline in the importance of women's issues and influence in the Communist Party. A major factor, she says, was the uncritical acceptance of the Soviet model of socialism which purported to have solved 'the woman question.' And although the first version of the *British Road to Socialism* in 1951 broke new ground with its concept of a 'broad popular alliance of all sections of working people,' it assumed that women's interests

equated with class interests which were seen as all embracing and left no space for the autonomy of women.

Caroline Rowan contrasts the independence of the Women's Cooperative Guild from the main body of the cooperative movement, with the much closer ties between the Women's Labour League and the Labour Party. As the report of the founding conference of the League stressed . . . 'the best way (for women) to look after their homes was by taking an interest in the life of the community.' No threat to patriarchy there! In contrast the Guild's autonomous stand over divorce in 1914 led to the withdrawal of its £400 annual grant, and in its campaigning for a national maternity service it fought for the maternity grant to be paid direct to the mother against the opposition of Labour MPs. This article reminds us that discussion on the ideology of the family is nothing new and that early struggles for welfare provision were impeded by conflicting views among socialists as to the ideal form of child rearing.

It is not possible to explore all the essays in a review of this length but I must mention two which deal with the question of autonomy as it relates to sexuality. In 'Permissive sexual advice in the 1970s,' Rosalind Brunt ruthlessly exposes the claims of the advice manuals to promote every woman's right to sexual pleasure for what it really was: 'permission for more of the same' male defined sexuality with its rigid hierarchy of sexual activity culminating in penetration. The women's liberation movement's response was to assert the right of every woman to a self-defined sexuality.

Sonja Ruehl uses some of the ideas of Michel Foucault to analyse the effect of Radclyffe Hall's novel, *The Well of Loneliness*, on the development of the lesbian identity. Late nineteenth century sexologists tried to define people by their sexual natures. Thus Havelock Ellis identified lesbians as 'congenital inverters' — a separate type of person that is born that way and therefore not morally responsible for her condition. Although the popular mind still equated lesbian with sinner, Ellis provided a category with which lesbians could identify. A passionate plea for understanding based on his views, Hall's novel, says Sonja Ruehl, opened up that category for exploration and transformation from within, enabling lesbians, at last, to define their own identity.

In her essay, 'Feminism and the definition of cultural politics,' Michele Barrett questions whether it is a worth-

while project for feminism to rescue forgotten women's writing and painting just because it was done by women or to elevate what are generally regarded as crafts, such as embroidery, to the status of art. Is this a challenge to male dominated views of what constitutes art or merely a welcome 'gender congratulation' as she terms Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*? Can a work of art be intrinsically feminist if we recognise that the meaning put upon it by the consumer is socially structured? Does feminism demand new cultural forms or is it equally valuable to change the content of existing popular forms such as the soap opera?

As a non-academic reader, I found some of these essays heavy going. How refreshing, therefore, to come upon Florence Keyworth's down to earth contribution which deals so perceptively with a subject largely neglected by feminist writers, 'The politics of ageing.' 'The old woman,' Florence Keyworth says, 'experiences sexism at its worst. She takes it neat so to speak, undiluted by flattery or flirtation.' In our sexist language old woman (along with its many synonyms) is a term of abuse. Older women are the butt of music hall humour and seaside postcard jokes. Women who don't join in the laughter confirm the male image of the humourless feminist. No wonder women learn to dread the grey hairs which symbolise the ending of their role as sex object or child bearer. 'Their status has been conferred on them by men. So when attractiveness to men is at an end they become non persons.'

Florence Keyworth's experience in a male dominated Communist Party will be recognised by many women comrades. She puts it succinctly — with women's issues marginalised 'we preferred to concentrate on the general political struggle and elected ourselves honorary men.' She sees the centre of the party's stage still dominated by men. In my view we are beginning to nudge them over!

Esme Barnsby

**BOOK NOTES**

New books this month: *Socialist Arguments*, edited by David Coates and Gordon Johnston, Martin Robertson £5.95, with chapters by Fine, Gamble, Rowthorn; *There's Always Been a Women's Movement This Century*, Dale Spender, Pandora £2.95; *Labour and Socialism*, James Hinton, Wheatsheaf £5.95; *One Day in My Life*, Bobby Sands, Pluto £2.95; *Unemployment*, Jeremy Seabrook, Paladin £2.50; *Jobs for a Change*, GLC Economic Policy Group, GLC 90p.