

Feminism is not being ignored by the Left, just marginalised. Below, two responses to the articles by Tricia Davis (October) and Jean Gardiner (February).

Feminism in 1984

KATHY MYERS

Masculinity under threat

In Tricia Davis' article 'Feminism is Dead? Long live feminism' (MT Oct 83) she examines the credibility of feminism in the current political arena. In Davis' opinion, Tory ideology has ironically embraced many of the demands and characteristics of feminism whilst the Left has retreated from them, regarding 'women's oppression as a subsection of class oppression.'

In conclusion she puts forward three options. First that the Tory attempt to appropriate feminism should be taken seriously. Second, that the Left should learn from feminist debates, and finally, that there is an imperative to develop a feminist economic strategy.

As Davis points out, the feminist debate makes good economic and political sense from a socialist point of view: yet the Left has consistently 'ignored', 'marginalised' or rendered 'irrelevant' feminist arguments. But why should this be? Davis has two possible scenarios. First that the Left genuinely regards 'the women's question' as subordinate to the class struggle. Alternatively the Left (specifically Labour) has been myopic in its political vision: 'uncomprehending and incredulous' of feminism. In part both explanations are true, but what Davis' argument conceals is that the implications of feminism have been only too well recognised by the Left. Feminism has been marginalised because of the sexual, social and political threat which it poses.

The threat

This threat can be better understood if we look at the definition of feminism which she offers: 'Feminism indeed can now be described as an alliance around a commitment to end the oppression of women.' On this score, feminism has offered three alternative strategies. Radical feminism argues that oppression is synonymous with patriarchy and that domestic and labour separatism is the only option. By comparison reformist feminism, primarily a politics of accommodation, has argued for

the right to work within the orthodox structure, campaigning for parity and equal pay. But the ultimate threat of feminism is derived from the assumption that separatism and accommodation are themselves only intermediary phases. The real demand is a total transformation in what is meant by socialism, the division of wage labour and the definition of gender.

So what feminism has put in crisis is not women's identity and role. Women traditionally have been used to leading double lives and this equally well applies to Tory women. Women have traditionally been strong and capable of fighting for their rights. But feminism is not synonymous with female strength nor equality, and here I would disagree with Davis that it is purely an end to female oppression. Feminism has argued that the price of female liberation is a transformation in what is meant by patriarchy, and ultimately what is meant by masculinity. If women are to reject outmoded social constructions of the feminine, then it follows that the concept of masculinity might also be subject to interrogation and investigation.

Masculinity

It can be seen that feminism is questioning masculinity, precisely at a time when it is already in crisis. Recently, Diverse Productions (C4's Alternative News Feb 1) transmitted a right wing programme on 'Women wedded to the State' and the demise of the family. Men, it was argued, were now peripheral to the domestic situation; little more than studs, they no longer fulfill their traditional role as breadwinner. The programme suggested that the state was creating autonomous queen bees simultaneously emasculating the male species. Looking at current patterns of unemployment with the decimation of traditional forms of male employment, it can be seen that this argument has some credence.

However this erosion of the masculine identity has nothing to do with feminism. Under the conditions of Capital wage labour working class masculinity has historically been managed, defined and constrained by the class system.

Male working class culture is caught in a

contradictory situation. On the one hand, Tory ideology promotes the myth of virile masculinity, powerful, indomitable and complete. On the other, it undermines and jeopardises this identity, castrating through unemployment, class antagonism and the humiliation of hierarchies and the division of labour. Class and sexual identity are inseparable. Masculinity, like colour or creed, is managed, fought over and constrained.

In this sense the battle over masculinity is nothing new. However, feminism has further placed gender politics in crisis, demanding that fundamental assumptions be re-examined. So precisely at a time when working class masculinity is rebelling against Tory threats to what it is 'to be a man', feminism, for different reasons, is also critical of what it is 'to be a man'.

I would disagree with Davis' claim that: 'There is no clear evidence to suggest a massive reaction against the ideals of women's liberation.' On the contrary I think the reaction has been phenomenal: resistance cannot be solely measured in terms of escalating sexual and domestic violence. The strategy of patriarchy, which includes the Left, has been one of entrenchment. In a time of crisis when masculinity has become politically pressured from the Right and Left, the reaction has been to reject, ignore and marginalise the feminist argument. The effect of this dismissal has been to trivialise and ghettoise feminism as 'the women's question', thus avoiding confrontation with its broader sexual and political aims. The Left desires to remain untainted by feminism. Frozen in crisis, it confuses the political intention of feminism with right wing sexual management. The Left, as Tricia Davis so cogently put it, remains 'criminally silent'.

ANN SEDLEY

New priorities

There is an increasing recognition among those debating 'Labour's Lost Millions' that the labour movement and parties on the Left must become relevant to women. The point is made with different degrees of emphasis and analysis. Some, unfortunately

see women just as voting fodder. Robin Cook has argued, in deriding the suggestion that the Labour Party should work with the Alliance, that David Owen has more in common with Margaret Thatcher than Neil Kinnock. In terms of appealing to women in a progressive sense this is not so. The SDP has a very determined policy of winning the women's vote. It also responds to pressures from women within its own Party. Last year, without prompting from outside women's lobbies, it opposed the Government's regulations on equal pay for work of equal value — something the Labour Party did, but was confused about for some time. The SDP also supported the Sex Equality Bill. Again, Labour did as well, but the House was not exactly packed with Labour MPs. They were also criticised for double standards, as feminist policies and demands are not taken seriously within the Party.

The recent articles by Tricia Davis (October MT) and Jean Gardiner (Feb MT) raise many very important points about the relationship between the labour movement and feminism and the dangers of the Left not taking feminist politics seriously. Tricia Davis describes the creeping attack on feminist politics starting with ultra left groups and now taking hold among the sectarian members of the Communist and Labour parties. While it is important that Kinnock should support a progressive family policy and condemn the family wage and while it is extremely important that there is a Labour front bench spokesperson on women's rights, we must be careful that these are not sops to the women's movement, but are turned into policies and action relevant to women. And this must be the difference: where the SDP woos the women's vote, the Left must have a conscious understanding of changing its politics and its organisation so that it reflects the lives of women, is relevant to them and makes them want to be involved. Like Tricia, I think it is important to point out that the Communist Party is the only party on the Left with a programme which includes a commitment to feminism. It recognises that the position of women must be changed under capitalism: it is not enough to wait for the socialist revolution. It says sexism must be combatted and there must be a determined struggle against ingrained prejudices. Why is it then, that even with such ideas in its programme, the CP is not making big strides in gaining support among women?

A male movement

The answer is the same for all left parties

and for the labour movement. By history and tradition the labour movement is a male movement. In the past it specifically excluded women, now it marginalises us. Twelve years ago there would be fierce debates about feminist ideas. Now they are often agreed, but no action is taken on them. The theory of male passive resistance has been expounded elsewhere. But what affects women's lives also affects men's. And that is the crux of the matter. If feminist politics are to be taken seriously things are going to change for men. They are going to have to give up the power traditionally seen as theirs at work, in the labour movement, in politics and at home.

Parties on the Left must look at their own organisation, political debate and political activities and change them so that they become relevant to women. Qualities seen as important for leading positions are usually male qualities reflecting a certain sort of political and trade union experience. The experience and qualifications of women must be re-evaluated and upgraded. The experience of women at home with small children; the experience of women in peace camps; the experience of women in their school PTA. In terms of labour movement politics these are not seen as an important part of the class struggle. But in fact they represent key political battles against the actions of this government and the Left is losing out by ignoring this experience.

And the other questions?

If political debate is to become relevant to women, it must become a matter of course to consider how political issues affect



women and following on from that, if changes are made, how they will affect men. For instance, the role women play in the mining communities, particularly during industrial action, is something that is raised by the Right to destroy unity but not discussed politically with women and men on the Left. We support the NGA in the struggle against anti-union laws, but do we discuss the fact that some members of the NGA sexually harass women members and make their working life a misery? If a male comrade beats up his wife is that a personal or a political issue for a left party? What policy does the Labour Party and Communist Party have on pornography?

When discussing unemployment, do we look at the fact that part-time workers, most of whom are women, are unfairly and often unlawfully dismissed before full-time workers? Are the political implications of this discussed and taken up in our unions?

Both Tricia and Jean have raised very important questions to do with Thatcherism's appeal to women, particularly through discussing morals and values. They argue that the Left has not taken these questions seriously, in spite of the fact that feminists have tried to introduce them into left debate. While Jean, I think optimistically, says women no longer accept the gender division between breadwinner and housekeeper, Tricia points out that it is the Tories that have addressed themselves to the practical and emotional tensions caused by women's dual role. Jean points out that unemployment has made men and women ask questions about how work is structured in relation to life and responsibilities outside the workplace. It is appalling that it has taken Tory policies to produce this result when feminists have been discussing these issues for years. The feminist alternative economic strategy should be central but it is not, because it makes too many radical proposals that would affect men's lives.

The Conservative Party appeals to women in their traditional role and to women who have 'careers' but still hold 'traditional' values. But even this is changing. The Women's Institute which represents over 300,000 women supported the Sex Equality Bill and was dismayed at the Government's opposition to it. The male Left must not attempt to retrench their position; men need to accept things have changed and are changing. Women have tremendous potential power. If the labour movement does not implement women's politics it will be in danger of divorcing theory from practice and paying the inevitable price. :