



Sisters And Slogans

Whatever happened to socialist feminism?
Melissa Benn argues that it hasn't yet clocked the fact that feminism in the 80s is rather different from feminism in the 70s

Two books have recently been published by well-known socialist feminists: Lynne Segal's *Is the Future Female?: Troubled Thoughts on Contemporary Feminism*, and Anne Phillips' *Divided Loyalties: Dilemmas of Sex and Class*. Although the books, and particularly Lynne Segal's, have rightly attracted a lot of interest - extracts have appeared in *Spare Rib*, the *New Statesman* and *New Socialist* - there has been little sense of a *debate* around the issues raised in the books, and particularly the troubled question: what has happened to socialist feminism in the 1980s? Reviews have mostly been calm and descriptive, written in the same sad but wise tone of the books themselves.

What or where *is* socialist feminism in 1987? The difficulty of answering that question reflects the fragmentation of 1980s feminist politics as a whole. Definitions of a 'socialist feminist' - any woman who is active in, or sympathetic to, socialist or left/radical politics who also holds to a distinct feminist position - are elusive in their non-specificity. A socialist feminist could be in any one of a hundred political places. She might be active in the local ward or women's section of the Labour Party, or branch of the Communist Party; she might be active in an anti-deportation campaign; she might be a shop steward in a trade union; she might be in a Greenham group or camping outside the gates of the base; she might be no more than a

woman who reads and thinks a lot...

This dispersal of socialist feminism marks the 1980s out as a very different time from the 1970s. Then, of course, women's liberation as a whole was different. It was more buoyant in the sense of being on an ideological offensive *vis-d-vis* society as a whole and it was more unified in the sense that the movement held national conferences which continued up to 1978, and socialist feminism had a coherent identity within that movement. Socialist feminists themselves met nationally up until 1980.

Two key changes have happened since then. The first is that socialist feminism is now more present within the 'socialist' part of its own politics than it was in the 1970s. Women in trade unions, political parties, single issue campaigns and academia are burrowing away to produce feminist change in whatever way they can in these areas. And are doing good things, undoubtedly. But the second - almost not necessarily logical - aspect of the change in the 1980s is that the 'feminist' aspect of socialist feminism has loitered. Most socialist feminists no longer have an active involvement in the women's movement. Worse, there is even a sense among some of them that the women's movement itself has to be left behind, that it belongs to the politics of another decade.

As a result of all this, much socialist feminism has become privatised, over-academic and pessimistic. And as a

current of thinking, it is often out of touch, not much interested in, or even impatient with feminist, politics of the 1980s.

Let me try and say what I mean in more detail, in reference to three areas: discussions on sexuality within feminism; the relationship between different tendencies within feminism; and women's new involvement in mass politics - particularly the Labour Party - in the 1980s.

The first thing to say about sexuality is that most heterosexual socialist feminists simply don't talk about it any more. If the debate about sexuality has taken place anywhere in the 1980s it has taken place within lesbian feminism. It is almost as if the subject of sexuality has returned to a pre-1970 situation for women on the Left: the unspeakable clothed as the irrelevant, the disruptive dismissed as the merely embarrassing. Yet it is not as simple as that, of course, because socialist feminists have been influenced by feminist debates on sexuality and, as I said above, many have imported them into particular political, campaign or theoretical areas. Two random examples are the important work being done to combat sexual harassment at work, and the development of ideas on the psychology of women in the 1980s.

Yet there is no sense of an ongoing debate about sexuality among heterosexual socialist feminists now. To her credit Lynne Segal tackles the subject at length in her book - although there are ways in which I think she, too, refers more to the past than the present.

For instance: in the 'Sex and Violence' chapter, she talks a lot about a debate that took place at the end of the 1970s - the famous 'political lesbian' argument when a group of revolutionary feminists (women who argue that male sexual power is central to male power in general) argued that to be politically 'correct' women should not only refuse to sleep with men: they should also make a political choice *for* women. This position provoked huge opposition from many feminists but was still, as Lynne Segal points out, responsible for much heterosexual defensiveness at the time.

But that was 1980. Where I would disagree with Lynne Segal is when she implies that this anti-heterosexual morality still heavily influences feminism now. What she neglects is that the revolutionary feminist position of 1979/80 was defeated within the women's liberation movement, and that new factors are shaping a feminist approach to sexuality that mark the 1980s out as a very different period from the clashes of the 'political lesbian' days.

There is now, I think, a greater acceptance of diverse sexual practice among feminists - and among women in general. On the one hand, precisely because of the defeat of a revolutionary feminist 'morality' on heterosexuality in the late 1970s, few women are

defensive about being heterosexual any more. I remember going to a Communist University of London workshop on 'sexual politics' in the early 1980s and there being a huge argument about women who slept with men. There were tears and shouting: a group of us decided to hold a separate meeting out in the corridor because it was so unbearable. Compare this to last year's 'Women Alive' event, where a friend of mine who went to the sexuality workshop told me that, 'It was all a bit bland really. An "Anything Goes" attitude'.

This may seem like a change confined to a few hundred London feminists but it goes much wider than that. Women in general don't feel they have to explain and justify their sexual choice to anybody so much any more. They are far less in awe of men's sexual power than they were (while being more aware of the potentially coercive and violent nature of male sexuality). And I sense that to young women in particular, men simply don't matter as much as they once might have done. They are there: they are not there. So what?

On the other hand, the growth of a women's culture in the last 17 years or so has had another effect. Numerous women-only spaces - from bars, to dance spaces, to bookshops, to peace camps, to reading and study groups - have been created and continue to be created. In these, women have come to appreciate and enjoy the sexual possibilities of one another. Lesbianism is simply not the 'other' to young feminists that it was to women coming to feminist politics in the early 1970s. Young feminists now have a sexual ease about other women, even if they are not in lesbian relationships themselves.

There has, too, been a growth in the refusal of feminism to accept any idea of a 'correct' or 'incorrect' kind of sexual practice, and a new advocacy of women's sexual power. This question was most recently and publicly fought out in a debate over sado-masochism at the London Lesbian and Gay Centre in 1985. It was a debate perhaps incomprehensible to outsiders because the pro-SM position seemed to be about defending the right of women to inflict pain, or have pain inflicted, on each other. Some of the women who advocated SM, particularly younger women, wore threatening clothes and symbols that offended many people. However, despite its complexities, what the argument was really about was a rejection by some lesbian feminists of a prescriptive public morality about sex.

To suggest that there is a new plurality of sexual practice among women is not to say that this amounts to a bland bisexuality among women. These changes take place within a particular context: the growing recognition by feminists over the last decade of what it means to be a lesbian out there in the world. There is now far more recognition than there was in the 1970s that to choose to be a lesbian is not to make a

purely private choice. It is a choice that carries with it all kinds of difficulties and dangers in the world (as well as pleasures!). Thus, feminists now see that lesbianism has to be publicly defended if it is to be privately enjoyed. And, of course, lesbianism does have a more public identity than it did 10 or 15 years ago, particularly in those metropolitan areas where local authorities, like the now abolished GLC, have funded and supported the creation of gay and lesbian projects, like the London Lesbian and Gay Centre itself.

The second area where I would be critical of socialist feminists is in their approach to the development of women's politics in the 1980s.

In the 1970s feminist politics was characterised by a polarity between two politics: a 'radical' and a 'socialist' feminism. Broadly, radical feminism took the antagonism between the sexes to be the prime antagonism in society, while socialist feminists attempted to analyse the relationship between two systems of domination: capitalism and patriarchy. If there was not always hostility between the two camps - and there was a lot of that - there was a clear sense of division. These were irreconcilable politics.

Lynne Segal perpetuates this polarity in her book where she is, throughout, pursuing and then demolishing the image and the arguments of the Bad Radical Feminist (as exemplified in the works of Mary Daly and Dale Spender). She may well be right in her criticism of the work of these women - and particularly the idea that women have some sort of essentially 'superior' nature to men. But in concentrating on such ideas, she is both simplifying and ignoring the much more complex development there has been in feminist politics, and the relationship between the different strands.

How have feminist politics developed in the 1980s? Clearly, there has been a bleeding of the boundaries between radical and socialist feminism to the point where they often erode into non-significance. Many socialist feminists have been profoundly influenced by radical feminism: for example, the recognition that masculinity *per se* is a problem. Plus, many socialist feminists have been influenced by and involved in projects initiated by radical feminists. I am thinking here of work done to combat male violence - rape crisis centres, women's aid refuges and so on - many of which were initiated by radical and revolutionary feminists in the 1970s. It was radical feminism - whatever the dubious nature of much of its analysis of the causes of male violence - which actually did something.

On the other hand, radical feminists have themselves been challenged by changes within the women's movement. Following debates at the end of the decade (debates both Anne Phillips and

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Lynne Segal discuss) women of all politics have taken on a new sensitivity to, and therefore language of, class. Just as crucially, white women of all politics have been knocked back and changed by the criticisms of black women who have labelled so much of 1970s feminism as white and euro-centric.

All this has contributed to the key development in the 1980s of the idea of difference among women. This has been a contradictory development: both important and dangerous. What was, and still is, important about it is that it gives credence to every woman's personal biography; makes legitimate individual women's experience - particularly those without the power to articulate and express that experience. This was something the women's movement in the 1970s patently failed to do. In a series of challenges to the supposed unity of the political category 'woman', working class women, lesbian women and black women have all argued that they have different histories - economic, social and political - and therefore different political priorities which feminism must take account of, if it is to shape a proper politics.

But this process of defining difference within feminism has stopped at a mid-way point between the naming of experience and the creation of a politics. Instead of there being a network of alliances built up on a real recognition of women's different histories, there has instead been the development of a quite hidden politics of 'identity' within the women's movement. 'Who' you are has become a question of more moral and political significance than what your politics might be. Thus, some women have claimed a particular priority within a hierarchy within feminism on the basis of their *being* something rather than doing the more difficult thing, which is to acknowledge both the weight of your own experience while also recognising the diversity of other women's. That is, to connect up to others, through alliance.

Many socialist feminists have been rightly critical of this: but don't we also have a responsibility to challenge those who perpetuate this bad politics within the women's movement rather than to sneer at them from the outside? Those socialist feminists who have been involved in women's politics - I am thinking here of the SM debate at the LLGC - have been crucial in public arguments against this primacy of 'identity' politics over ideas of solidarity and alliance. But the vast majority of socialist feminists have been completely absent from such discussion.

One of the reasons socialist feminists have not been involved in feminist politics is because of their concentration in the Left. This is the third area I want to talk about: women's 'new' involvement in left politics, and particu-

larly the Labour Party.

Much 1970s socialist feminism was about being outside the state or any institutions of power: it was, too, about living the identity of an outsider: radical and romantic. By the end of the 1970s, that was changing. Feminists began moving into the Labour Party where the democratic Bennite Left looked in the ascendant. Women thought they could have more power and influence in the party and it seemed also the only way to effectively challenge Thatcherism.

But women's entrance into the Labour Party has thrown up new problems and new possibilities which need some new thinking. If the Labour Party is anything it is the world of reform: a world of resolutions and plottings, topplings and totting ups. Women who had never been involved in any kind of organised left politics before found - and still find - themselves having to deal with ward meetings, general management committees, local government committees, all the structures and acronyms that saturate Labour politics.

Have some feminists in the Labour Party come to understand and use these structures too well? It is easy to understand why, if they have. There is nothing more exciting than learning the rules of a previously mystifying game and then to play it better than the people who taught you how. But in playing that game - in getting 'your' person elected chair of the GMC - it is easy to forget what feminists are doing in the party in the first place. That is, that they are there to get a feminist argument across, particularly to other women: inside the party and out.

Yet that argument is not being made effectively at the moment. Groups like the Women's Action Committee are exhausted by internal divisions and the inherent difficulty of firing women's enthusiasm for purely constitutional reforms, however crucial those reforms are. Local women's sections are as often as not divided by across-the-left divisions as they are united by a sense of a women's politics. The exception to this is when women are involved in local authority women's committees where party in-fighting often gives way to open and public discussion between Labour women and women in the community and a sense of a common women's agenda.

There are so many reasons for trying to get that feminist argument across at this moment. This is a time of possibility for women in the party. Feminism is recognised as an important strand of thinking by all sections of the Left. Women are moving into positions of power and influence unthinkable in the 1970s. We now have many women leaders, councillors and officers in Labour local authorities. More women are standing for national office. And we are seeing plans for a Ministry of Women develop which, if ever implemented, would bring enormous changes both to the public influence of

feminism, and its own politics.

But if a real sense of a women's agenda within the Labour Party is to be constructed then women in the party need to be in touch with, and accountable to, some kind of feminist politics. Lynne Segal argues there should be a return to the principle of autonomy for women on the Left - the gathering of socialist women for separate discussion. I agree with her: 'autonomy' remains the single most important concept to come out of 1970s feminism. It is one we should retain - although it is hard to suggest the exact form any such autonomous gathering should take, and how it could realistically reflect the relations of women on the Left in what are depressingly sectarian times.

Socialist feminists within the Left, and within Labour in particular, need to keep talking about the difficult issues that face us. For instance, there are genuine problems about women having and deploying power at a local or a national level. We need it too to keep a sense of personal politics within a Labour Party feminism - the dangers of not doing so were most recently shown in the lack of a concerted Labour Party feminist response to Patricia Hewitt's comments on the gay and lesbian dimension to the Greenwich by-election, in which she publicly declared the issue to be a vote loser, a politics-by-opinion-poll approach that most feminists in the party would find untenable.

In their books, both Anne Phillips and Lynne Segal seem very pessimistic about the future of feminism and the Left. But what strikes me is their failure to see the very successes that 'their' feminism has produced: the ways in which the politics of the 1970s and beyond has changed women's way of perceiving themselves for ever. The language of feminism has become deeply embedded in our culture - albeit in often individualistic ways. Feminist ways of talking about women have changed too. There has been some transformation of the notion of woman as 'object' (of oppression/discrimination) to something more complex, to ideas of woman as subject - an active agent of change and holder of power.

This is all a bit paradoxical considering the background against which a lot of younger women have come to life and politics in the 1980s. These women have come well-grounded in a feeling of perpetual and unbreakable outsider-ness: joblessness, Thatcherism, the threat of nuclear war - not to mention the decline of a national women's liberation movement and the bitterness and break up of the Left in recent years. It is a background of utter pessimism, yet somehow younger women are more confident than those of an older generation. Well, they are bolshier. They want a lot from life: to have some kind of satisfying work, to have good relationships and to have children, if they want them. And they expect to get it. •