

Macho Men Of The Left

Feminism continues to stalk socialism. Gender remains an unresolved tension on the Left.

Cynthia Cockburn argues that our rethink must involve, at its heart, a re-ordering of gender relations far more profound than we generally imagine

Rethinking socialism has been the theme of many articles in *Marxism Today* in recent months. Their authors have questioned our relationship to choice, to the market, to the state. But for me the most brain-taxing thinking for a socialist renewal has to be about matters that seem, at first thought, to be rude intrusions into the socialist agenda: body politics, desire, sexuality and violence.

When Hugh Gaitskell was defeated in the Labour Party vote on nuclear disarmament in 1961 he responded to this menace from 'peace' with the militant - nay military - words: 'I'll fight, fight and fight again' to bring the party back to sanity. There is something equally perverse about the way the Left today is seeking to bring the country back from Thatcherism with a socialist machismo that sometimes out-machistas the Tories.

Take for instance the 2000-strong socialist conference in Chesterfield in October last year. The weekend gave the impression of a Left that had learned not a jot from two decades of the women's movement. The platform was swathed in the scarlet satin of Labour's historic march, the banners of male-dominated trade unions. They proclaimed a return to socialist fundamentalism and a political style to match. The barracking and heckling began before the first speaker had said a word. The chair(man) proclaimed, as he was shouted down by trotskysts, 'I am a physically moderate man'. But you could sense the adrenalin flowing as he flexed his muscles for the showdown. No space here for doubts, explorations. Only the loudest voices heard.

Chesterfield was a reminder how much the Left, supposedly committed to anti-militarism, is itself militaristic in its ideology. We fight. We campaign. We form a vanguard. We hold our ground. It seemed to demonstrate that there is really still no Left in which masculinity is problematised and with which women can productively work.

Yet women do have a particular need of socialism and a sex-specific interest in bringing it into being. Women's work is often super-exploited and calls even more perhaps than men's work for labour organisation. Women have a characteristic conflict with the state, too, because so many policies are targeted on the family. Women, as mothers, wives and carers, are clearly designed into social provision as unpaid workers. The Thatcher regime has its own scenario for women and it's not sweet freedom.

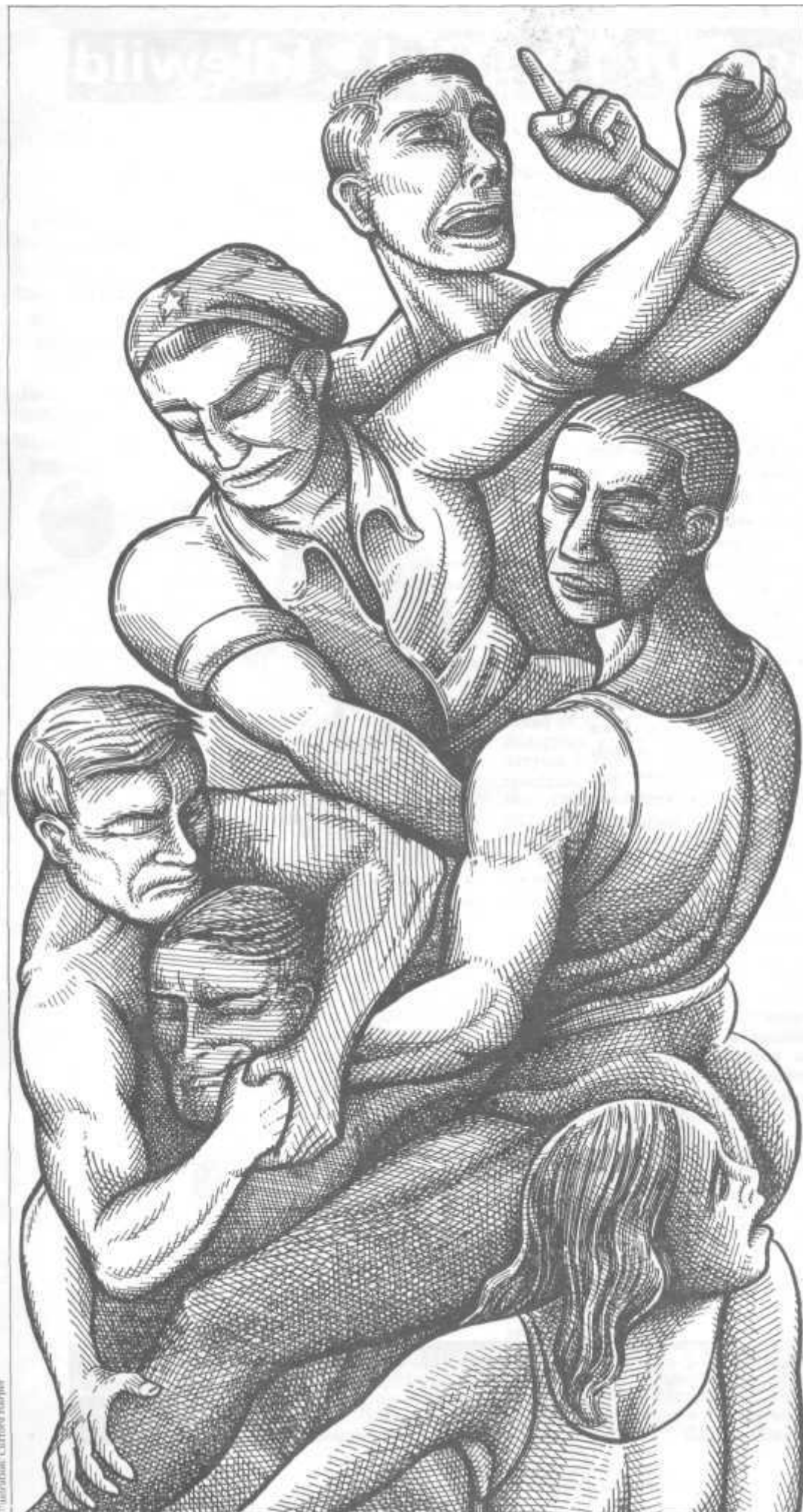
So women cannot opt out of the socialist project. Yet our struggle in that project is so often overlooked, misrepresented or subverted by the men who have defined and appropriated worker organisation and socialist policies that it sometimes seems the only thing remaining to do.

What is thrown in question by such thoughts is the viability of socialist feminism. In some countries of Europe one finds few women today who will describe themselves as socialist-feminists, or even as marxist-feminists. This is not because such women are liberal, bourgeois or rightwards-inclined. Far from it. Feminism in Greece and Spain, for example, was born as part of the anti-fascist struggle and it retains the mark of that today. It is rather because the bitterness of the experiences of many women in communist parties and other left groups in the course of such struggles drove them out of the organised Left. For feminists like this, now separatist in their politics if not always or necessarily in their personal lives, the parties have no longer a claim to be the progressives.

In Britain there is still (just) a socialist-feminist current, though the title is less readily adopted by women than it was in the days of mass socialist-feminist conferences in the 1970s. There is of course a problem of meaning and definition. Some academics, researchers and writers attempting to wed feminist theory to marxist and post-marxist theory do call themselves socialist-feminist, as does the journal *Feminist Review*. Many women who do not think of themselves as socialist-feminists and who are active mainly on 'women's issues' such as reproductive rights and women's health, rather than in the (mixed sex) Left, also maintain a class analysis and a critique of capitalism. Indeed many women would claim that 'the Left' doesn't always mean what many Left men think it does. The main socialist-feminist current however lives, often without carrying the name, among the thousands of women who continue to beaver away as feminists within the Labour Party, the Communist Party, other Left groups and the trade union movement. It is the circumstances and strategies of these socialist-feminists with which this article is concerned.

There is a tension amounting almost to an impossibility in the lives of practising socialist-feminists. The equation is simple: the more aware you are of women's subordination and the scope of the transformations posited by feminism, the more you come into conflict with your corner of the Left (union hierarchy, Labour Party branch) and the more rapidly you become burned-out in dual struggles - against the Right and against men. There is a latent tendency within the British Left to the situation I have described as existing in some other European countries: feminists who are 'in' the Left are rapidly impelled 'in and against' the Left and ultimately forced to consider themselves 'beyond' the Left.

What should we do? Theory doesn't seem to help much. Socialist-feminist writing today seems to be of two kinds. The writing that is most concrete and attached to practice tends to spell out



the difficulties women face but always, in the last paragraph, on the grounds that 'men can change', they urge us to hold on in there. The alliance that results often looks less like an embrace than like the body-lock of two exhausted wrestlers.

On the other hand, socialist-feminist writing that is more abstract - that combines marxism with psychoanalysis, perhaps, or with linguistics or post-structuralism - could well be read as representing masculinity as too deep-rooted to merit any belief in voluntarism. The authors seldom explore political alternatives however.

What I plan to do here is to tread warily into this delicate middle-ground, exploring space that lies between radical feminism and socialist feminism. This implies a divergence from much mainstream socialist-feminist political writing by introducing issues of body and mind: desire, fear, love, loathing. I would like to think such risk-taking might strengthen the link between feminisms inside and outside 'the Left' as presently defined.

The issue of gender (the very word sounds so light-weight and tentative) often seems to be an optional extra we can embroider into our socialist analysis. Yet if we turn things around and ask: 'what does socialism exist to do?', it becomes clear that a restructuring of gender has to be part of the project. There is no choice. If socialism has been about anything in this century it has been about understanding, containing and resisting an organised Right - often armed, often wielding state power. And fascism is primarily about gender. That may sound strange to many a good Red but Wilhelm Reich did warn us that sexuality ranked equally with economics in anchoring the social system.

A good illustration is to be found in a recent analysis by Klaus Theweleit of the novels and memoirs of a number of young German proto-fascists of the early 1920s.¹ These were men who, embittered by the defeat of the German Reich in 1918, continued to wear their uniforms in the illegal Freikorps, the private armies that roamed Germany, dedicated to stamping out proletarian and left-wing movements. These men were killers. Some became the Hitler vanguard of the 1930s. They were idealists and they wrote novels.

The striking thing about Theweleit's book is that he asks first and foremost: what are women's lives? Only in the light of that does he then look to understand their relationship to the fatherland, to Jews, Reds, to fighting, killing and death. And what these soldier-males reveal above all else is a dread of women. In a sense their never-ending war is a never-ending flight from woman.

In their writings woman is represented in three ways. There is the wife

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or lover, who is usually unnamed. She is absent, distant, the one from whom they walk away. For love-making weakens a man; succumbing to the love of woman is incompatible with love of country and the bearing of arms. Second there is the chaste, white woman who appears in the soldier-male's world as sister: his own, or his fellow soldier's sister, a nursing sister or a pure mother. It is she who is the true love-object of these men, but she is portrayed as smooth, inactive, pale as death. The love is never activated. One is reminded of Andrea Dworkin's analysis of the fairy-tale representation of woman. 'When she is good she is soon dead. In fact when she is good she is so passive in life that death must be only more of the same.'²

Third in the fascist ontology there is the 'red woman', the rifle-woman of the proletarian uprisings with which the Freikorps were in hand-to-hand battle. She is equated with the whore. She is the woman most feared and most loathed. She awakens in these men the repulsion that is expressed in their characteristic metaphors: wave, flood, blood, mass. Communism, like womanhood, represents for these men a terrifying melting of the upright and defended posture of the fighting man, a promiscuous mixing, a relaxing of both psychic and national boundaries. It is flowing and various, the supreme danger. Many of the women in this third category meet their death in the course of these men's novels, as they were killed by the authors and other men in reality, by bayoneting, by gunshot or explosion.

Fascist masculinity is of course an extreme form taken by masculinity in contemporary societies. But it is not so extreme as to be altogether marginal. It has been hegemonic in certain countries and at certain periods in the 20th century. It has been manifest in state power and embodied in law. Besides, there is a common thread running through different expressions of European masculinity: active male, passive female; a preoccupation with male potency. Patriarchy may be dictatorial or benign, but it has certain enduring themes.

The point is this: every political and ideological tendency has its gender structure, deriving from or (as feminism) opposing the dominant order. As socialists we have to ask: what is *our* gender structure? The answer, I suggest, is that it is not as different as it ought to be from that of other political movements in Britain today.

In an interesting detour from his argument, Klaus Theweleit turns from his fascist authors to compare the representation of women among some left poets and writers. He analyses the work of Césaire, Lorca, Brecht, Mayakovsky, Guillen, Neruda and others. And here we see a socialist gender ideology emerging that has

many of the self-same themes as in fascist ideology - though in a different form. Wave, flood, stream, flow - the imagery used negatively by the fascists is here too. Now it is used positively in relation to desire. But for both Right and Left these are metaphors for women. And woman is, for Left as for Right, *metaphorical material*. The outcome is that left men do not really see women as part of the socialist project. Rather they are a territory of the imagination, destined to absorb the desires and fears of men.

If masculinity takes a characteristic form in differing political cultures, so too, of course, does femininity. Fascism depends to a large degree on the consent of women, their positive response to a very precise appeal: to their 'natural difference', their 'essential motherliness'. Women all too readily deal with the contradictions of femininity, with the experience of 'weakness', by giving power to male leaders, by seeking power exclusively through men and fostering masculinity. Beatrix Campbell has illustrated this in her portrait of Conservative women.³

The contradictions of the gender order of European society, then, have a tendency to erupt in the horrendous flowers of fascist masculinity. Fascism offers a workable, if extreme, way out of the dilemma thrown up by men's dread of strong women: kill them. A misogynist psyche finds expression to varying degrees across the right-wing spectrum, from the loonier fringe of the Young Conservatives, to the statelier proceedings of the Monday Club. And still the same contradictions lie there, latent and unresolved, in socialist social relations. How can it be that we do not consider gender a central concern of our movement?

Men are the prime movers and the dominant sex in the gender order. Masculinity emerges as its prime problem. Whatever we envisage socialism to be it *has* to involve a restructuring of male subjectivity, a genuine resolution of the contradictions of masculinity that is emotionally realistic and that both defines and satisfies desire in a positive way.

It is not only men of course who fail to grapple with this problem. Socialist-feminists usually avoid tangling with it too. One reason for our blindspot is, it seems to me, even now a confusion of those old chestnuts 'sex' and 'gender'. Sex is what we are born with. (I was going to say 'stuck with', but that is no longer true). We rightly wish to be generous to men, as individuals of the male sex, and to acknowledge those men who support us. But we fail to recognise that that need not hold us back from a profound anger towards that other thing - the social gender that men have learned to live - and from challenging it with all the resources at our command. To express that rage at masculinity is to do men as a sex

nothing but kindness, since our culture cruelly constrains them in varying degrees to be the bearers of an identity that deforms and harms them as much as it damages women. After all, feminists have recognised the same in femininity and much of the energy of the women's liberation movement has been spent on breaking out of our half of the mould.

A second problem however is that when we do affirm that sex is not destiny, that men are not jack rabbits (even when they wear jack boots) and a woman is not a doe, we assume too readily that men can change simply by wishing to change. In actual fact, today, it might well prove easier to modify our sexual nature (you can do wonders with hormones) than to remodel our gender character. The social is the truly intractable material. Intractable, but not totally immovable. There is a dialectical interaction between structure and practice. Undoing the bad experiences of childhood and adult life and the destructive psyche that results from them can be achieved - but only through hard graft on our subjectivity. Above all it calls for collective consciousness-raising work and involves a *political* commitment of thought and intention, time and resources.

A third factor standing in the way of changing our perception of socialism is that as socialist-feminists we have tended to maintain our workable position within the Left at a cost of sticking to a 'politics of equality' in contrast to what left feminists on the continent are happy to call a 'politics of difference'.

We have done so largely because listening too much to one's feelings as a woman makes one very angry with men of the Left, acutely aware of misogyny, and this in turn leads one to intemperate words and actions that are resented and ridiculed by men (and some women too of course) with whom one is committed to work. The problem is obviously worse for such women if they are, say, members of the SWP than if they are active in a leftist constituency Labour Party or a woman-frequented branch of Nupe. But everywhere there is a risk of being no longer a credible comrade.

As a result our socialist-feminism in practice is very often a culturally self-policed and edited version of feminism. It is a feminism that concurs in dealing with the Left within the Left's own terms of reference the structuring of desire, love, hate and body politics.

Related to this is the feeling we have that the main concerns of working-class women - the characteristic addressees of socialist feminism - are those issues we think of as 'material' issues: employment, higher pay, better working conditions, decent housing, schools, a health service. The list may run to street lighting and late-night buses. But the reason *why* that street lighting and

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those late-night buses are more important to women than to (most) men is left to lurk in the shadows.

I would argue that among the solidly material needs of working-class and other women today is a need to be rid of a well-justified fear of men and masculinity. Women are afraid for their own safety at the hands of men. They are afraid of what men may do to their sons: part of their experience is the passion of lads to own a gun, drive a fast motorcycle, get into 'trouble' or join the army. And they are afraid of what men may do to their daughters: the daily news of raped and murdered girls (and boys) screws up the pitch of women's anxiety whenever their young are out of sight. Women worry among themselves about men in the same way they worry about unemployment, poverty and ill-health. In their dreams, surely, such women imagine a world in which gender, as much if not more than 'the control of the means of production and distribution', is ordered differently? It is time that the socialist concept of 'material' and 'materialist' extended to include this objective condition of the lives of women.

Instead, the pain-ridden politics of the body and the emotions remain to stalk and sometimes destroy our personal lives, while in public and on the Left we represent women's needs as issues that do not jar too outrageously the equilibrium of a union or branch meeting.

As a result many socialist-feminists have been obliged to live two lives. A radical and angry feminist is kicking within them, but it gets little expression in their political work. For them, too, insights like 'the myth of the vaginal orgasm' and 'the personal is political' were mind-shattering and life changing. They too enjoy the creative space opened up by the separatism of Greenham Common and the women's peace movement that flowed from there. They don't take seriously, perhaps, the excesses of 'womanism' in radical feminism, though they enjoy to the full its affirmation of women. They don't believe in an *essential* womanliness. But they do feel that somehow women's long march through history has given us, broadly speaking, a gender-specific set of values. They aren't averse to thinking that 'womanly times' might make a good rough approximation to a socialist future.

It is a much debated question whether men are changing their gender identity and how fast. Meanwhile there is no disagreement that women are changing theirs faster. The womanhood (for we can no longer call it femininity) to which socialist men will be called to respond and to match up in the 21st century may be very different from that with which it has been able to pair in the past. It will involve (and here the dreamer in me dreams) tendentially and in broad outline: strong, active, inventive women, as oriented towards

women as towards men, autonomous in their values, economically independent, politically distinct, sexually various, intimate and expressive, with and without children. These women will not play dead or stay pure to please men. They will not invite or serve a sexual desire organised around a fetish rather than a person. They will 'look' all kinds of ways. They will be no-one's symbolic material, unless their own.

Today's masculinity reacts to such a person with distaste and aggression. A reconstituted masculinity might seek to find some complementary mode - a flight towards the feminine perhaps. This is hardly desirable (who wants to be feminine?) but neither is it likely, since this woman is not masculine. She is complete without a complement. It is a change of structure that is called for, a breaking out of the complementarity in which the gender order has us straight-jacketed. We are probably doomed as a civilisation anyway if we do not learn to constitute men who are similar to, not contrasted with, the women described above. Men as lovers and partners of strong women, men who are not afraid of 'mother', nor afraid 'to mother', and for whom other men are as likely to fill the need for emotional support and softness of touch as women are.

The whole gender order has to be deconstructed, and non-complementary female and male subjectivities made available. What we think of as socialism has to be predicated on that and on nothing less. If the 1980s are the decade of 'rethinking socialism' this should be high on the list of matters we are debating.

In practical terms, of course, the logic of this analysis is much more separatism in socialist feminism. I do not suggest this because men are incapable of changing. Quite the contrary. It may only now be feasible, precisely because some men have begun to worry about gender for themselves and sense that it is feminism that has been giving the Left whatever sense of renewal it has. Until women break complementarity, stop playing the female to the political male, stop being the token woman on the committee, progressive men will not face any necessity to be the ones to raise the gender issue and do the consciousness-raising work they need to do with other men. It is possible that 'being the feminist' in the mixed group is the latest twist in the feminine gender role. It certainly ensures that women's energies continue to bleed away into the Left.

Socialist feminism has been afraid of separatism. It has been seen as relevant, if at all, only on matters clearly definable as 'women's issues'. Yet peace is a universal issue and the autonomous women's peace movement has been powerful. Through a productive (if tension-ridden) alliance between radical, anarchist, socialist and

other kinds of feminism, it has come up over a period of six or seven years with insights about the relationship between masculinity and militarism, and a brilliant political expressiveness, that could not have emerged from a mixed-sex movement alone.

There are structures where separatism may seem self-defeating and where a pushy internal autonomy may seem better: the Labour Party, the unions. But even in these cases I believe it is still correct to wonder whether the only significant effect can be had from within. It is arguable that in the long run the lesbians who absailed down from the visitors' balcony in the House of Lords may have more impact on gay rights than the women who watched them from the chamber below.

Women could be independently active, with all those flashes of imagination we have learned to use, on any number of 'socialist' issues: civil liberties; anti-racism; privatisation; education; international solidarity. We will never know the shape and scope of a woman's socialism until we take the space to be inventive of it - not on a limited range of concerns that men are happy to leave to us, but *on socialist terrain* itself.

The radical within the socialist-feminist within us deserves a hearing. She is saying, it seems to me: either we have to go it alone, or we have to set far more rigorous terms for any continuing engagement ('alliance' may be premature) with men on the Left. Our struggle with the Right has to be a conscious struggle with its gender ideology, and that doesn't just mean what the Tories are trying to make of women but what they are trying to make of men. It is impossible for that struggle to happen until we are actually living a new gender politics on the Left.

Should our terms, then, not include making it a condition of any mixed group we are in that its male members are committed simultaneously to meeting and working with each other on issues concerning masculinity? On the quality of their relationship with each other and with women, and the changed perspective that affords them on our shared political work?

It has always somehow been assumed that if fascism is women giving their wedding rings to Mussolini, then socialism is by natural contrast a project in which women are 'liberated'. If women are liberated, then the gender order among socialists must somehow be a revolutionary one. But socialist ideology, the practices of the Left and certainly men's desires, have never actuated that. Until they do, nothing much else about socialism will change.*

1 Klaus Theweleit *Male Fantasies* Polity Press 1987.
2 Andrea Dworkin *Woman Hating* E P Dutton (New York) 1974.
3 Beatrix Campbell *The Iron Ladies* Virago 1987.

This article is based on a contribution to J Rutherford and R Chapman (eds) *Male Order: Unwrapping Masculinity* Lawrence and Wishart, to be published in June.