

# The End Of The Rainbow

There is a widespread assumption on the Left that social movements are progressive.  
**Anna Marie Smith**  
takes issue

The strategy of building 'rainbow coalitions' may have been welcomed in the 1980s as a radical breakthrough in socialist politics, but it is now regarded with some suspicion. Feminists, lesbians and gays, blacks, the greens and so on, are returning a mixed verdict on the attempts made within the Labour Party and the trade unions to take on board their demands.

I was particularly struck by the ambiguity of 'rainbow coalitions' during the campaign against Clause 28 three years ago. At a rally in Manchester, for example, many Labour Party and trade union representatives spoke out against the clause. Their presence was especially significant in that Labour's front bench was at that time distancing itself from the pro-lesbian and gay rights position of local government socialists and the party conference. Their speeches, however, were often disappointing. One Labour Party spokesperson declared that we were there to show the Tories that we would fight against their attack on the lesbian and gay community. But she then added: 'and we're also here because of the poll tax'.

The speaker assumed that lesbians and gays who were against the clause were, naturally, also against the poll tax. Her claim rested on a further assumption: politics is basically a struggle between two camps, the 'progressive' movements and the socialists versus the Right. This is the basic assumption which underlies the 'rainbow coalition' strategy. But we were *not* there because of the poll tax, and there were probably many people in the crowd who were Tory voters. Her claim only made their protest seem illegitimate.

The problem with coalition politics lies precisely in these assumptions and it is only by taking a closer look at them from a theoretical perspective that we can suggest alternative strategies. Paradoxically, a discussion of marxist class analysis can provide a useful starting point. It is true that many of the socialists involved in coalition politics within the Labour party and the trade unions have never been greatly influenced by marxism. They are nevertheless reproducing the same sort of reductionism that can be found within the marxist tradition.

It is also true that there are types of marxist thinking which are not reductionist. Where reductionism is practised by marxists, it takes the form of class reductionism. From this perspective, social movements are categorised in terms of class. The movements which are supposed to express the true interests of the working class are considered 'progressive', while the movements which are supposed to express truly bourgeois interests are dismissed as 'reactionary'. In other words, class reductionism predicts the political tendency of each political actor depending on its location in the class struggle. Other perspectives on class within marxism reject this kind of straightfor-

ward categorisation of political actors and prediction of political tendencies. Class identity is instead regarded like any other identity: there may be movements in which a shared sense of being a worker is important, but this identity is not taken as a guarantee of a 'progressive' political tendency.

**Coalition politics, of course, does not** reproduce *class* reductionism. It does recognise the importance of the non-class actors, and does not categorise movements in terms of classes. However, if we consider the form, rather than the content, of class reductionism, the continuities between coalition politics and class reductionism are nevertheless evident. Two theorists, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, suggest that class reductionism should be located in a tradition which had its founding moment in the French Revolution<sup>1</sup>. They describe this tradition as the 'Jacobin imaginary'. Within this way of thinking, the social is conceptualised as naturally taking the form of two all-encompassing camps. The first struggles in this tradition were not class struggles, but the struggles between the 'people' and the 'ancien regime'. In class reductionism, it is likewise assumed that politics is basically a struggle between two camps, and that once we have correctly identified the class nature of every political actor, we can establish its location in the progressive or reactionary camps.

Laclau and Mouffe are not suggesting that the social never appears to us as divided into two all-encompassing camps. At times, we can, and do, represent the social in this way, and for very good reasons. Feminists sometimes represent the social as a singular and all-encompassing opposition between sexists and anti-sexists. This approach allows for the extension of the critique of sexism into virtually every social sphere; from this standpoint, it becomes possible to argue that 'the personal is political', and that because nobody can stand outside this division everyone must take a position vis-a-vis sexism. Laclau and Mouffe insist, however, that the two-camp structure of the social is never given to us as an already-established fact. What we actually have as a starting point for political interventions is a complex array of positions, and multiple, even contradictory oppositions. We experience social relations in terms of a two-camp system only in so far as some actors intervene to create this sense of a singular and all-encompassing opposition. The two-camp system will always be momentary and fragile: at some point, the two camps will dissolve, and the original complexity of social relations will be restored.

The problem with class reductionism, then, is not only its location of political actors in terms of the two fundamental classes. It is also deeply problematic in its presupposition that the social *naturally* takes the form of two all-

encompassing camps, as if this were the starting point for all political interventions. It really doesn't matter if we come up with new names for the camps involved; as long as we are interpreting social relations in terms of a natural two-camp system, the possibilities for political strategies are severely limited. For if we assume that politics is but a game of 'us' versus 'them', and that we can know in advance every actor's location in one of the two camps, then our political role is quite restricted: we only need to guide our 'natural' allies to our camp, and to speak effectively on behalf of our camp.

It seems to me that coalition politics all too often takes the same form as class reductionism: it is assumed that the new social movements are essentially 'progressive', and that it is the task of socialists to lead each movement to its natural location in a coalition against the Right. New names are used for the two camps, but the same presuppositions, and the same limitations, are involved.

The strategy of building coalitions rests on three assumptions. First, it is assumed that each of the movements in a coalition is homogeneous: differences may be recognised between, for example, the women's movement and the labour movement, but no differences are recognised *within* the women's movement. Second, it is assumed that we already know how to categorise movements as natural allies or as natural enemies. Not every movement is understood as 'progressive': 'rainbow coalitions' do not include the anti-abortion movement, Christian fundamentalists or racist neighbourhood groups just because they are social movements. Other movements, such as the animal rights movement, parents' groups, and football supporters, are not so easily classified. It is nevertheless assumed that we can be fairly certain that some movements will always belong to 'our' side: the women's movements, black struggles, the lesbian and gay movement, the 'greens', the peace movement, and so on.

Third, it is assumed that the actors which are brought together in a coalition are already fully established. Coalition-building usually becomes a matter of tactics, rather than a process in which goals and methods are questioned, and different constituencies attempt to learn from one another. Take, for example, the important initiatives made by some Labour representatives to speak out in support of lesbian and gay rights at the height of the GLC, and during the Clause 28 debates. They often employed phrases and categories used in anti-sexist and anti-racist politics, as if pro-lesbian and gay politics fitted into exactly the same format. Where the adoption of a pro-lesbian and gay position could have involved the development of a whole new approach to the family, gender and sexuality, this valuable opportunity remained largely unexplored.

In my opinion, social movements

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should not be categorised as natural allies or natural enemies. Social movements are not essentially homogeneous, and it is impossible to predict the political tendencies of the various fragments involved. The statements and strategies of the animal rights movement, for example, are ambiguous. The campaign against the fur trade has developed an impressive critique of consumerism and the fashion industry. This campaign has also successfully mobilised younger people for whom other social movements and party politics may seem irrelevant. However, this critique of consumerism is at times centred on a sexist representation of women consumers as unthinking 'fashion victims', thereby ignoring the complexity of the power structures in fashion and marketing. In some areas, such as northern Canada, the production of furs for the fashion industry is an important component of the local economies of indigenous peoples. Although environmentalists and animal rights groups have made several attempts to support native land claims, the anti-fur trade campaign often demonstrates a lack of concern for the indigenous people's rights.

In the case of feminism, the reduction of complexity of feminism to a singular 'women's movement', and the categorisation of this movement as naturally 'progressive', can serve to limit the development of feminist debate. The differences within feminism on the issue of pornography and censorship exemplify the fragmented and complex nature of feminist positions. Some women argue that pornography legitimises sexism and actually causes discrimination and physical harm to women, and demand new legislation which would enable women to sue the producers and distributors of pornography. Other feminists argue that sexism is not concentrated to an extraordinary extent in sexually-explicit material and that violence against women should not be explained in terms of a single cause. Instead of new legislation against pornography they demand better resources for the production of non-sexist sexual material, especially sex education material.

It is important to note that both sides claim to be arguing as feminists. The intentions of either side cannot be questioned without resorting to damaging games of name-calling and credentialism. What we, the feminists on the anti-censorship side, are trying to show is not that there is only one true feminism, but that an apparently 'progressive' strategy pursued by well-intentioned feminists can actually have an authoritarian effect. We argue that the intentions of the original feminist authors of new anti-porn legislation would be irrelevant to the final wording of these laws and to their application. We have seen that the police, the customs officials and the judiciary already apply existing legislation to lesbian and gay materials, alternative art, and even feminist publica-

tions, rather than to mainstream pornography. Even an anti-porn law written by feminists could be used as a weapon against these marginal discourses, without affecting sexist discourse in any way.

The space for this debate between feminists should be kept open. However, in statements by anti-porn Labour MPs such as Clare Short and Dawn Primarolo, and in the resolutions on pornography in the conferences of many trade unions the issue is discussed as if they were the only feminist position. Because we have become so accustomed to thinking about feminism in terms of coalition politics, this assumption of the homogeneity of feminist politics has become a common habit. In this case, and many others, the coalition politics framework can tend to conceal differences and prevent discussion.

Coalition politics fails to address the undecidable nature of social movements: they always involve conflicting positions, rather than homogeneous movements, and these positions cannot be categorised as either democratic or authoritarian outside specific contexts. A break with 'Jacobin' reductionism involves far more than a shift to new actors. It entails a different conceptualisation of politics as an ongoing process of decision-making in which the political character of every position is never taken for granted, and the rules for engaging with conflicting positions are constantly being re-written. In the terms of Homi Bhabha, this approach can be described as the politics of negotiation, rather than the politics of coalition-building<sup>2</sup>. Instead of dealing with movements as if they were homogeneous, and as if they were either natural allies or natural enemies, the plurality of positions within each movement would be recognised. The project of working with the social movements would take the form of an ongoing process of decision-making, as decisions between these conflicting positions would have to be continually taken. Negotiation does not entail the compromising of principles, but a constant re-examination of the criteria for these decisions, and an open process of exchange and education between the negotiating parties. In other words, negotiation does not just entail a recognition of new political actors, but also the negotiability of every identity. The engagement with the social movements has to become a truly equal learning process, rather than a relation between a knowing representative and the represented. Whereas coalitions are established between already constituted identities, negotiation takes place around identity.

<sup>1</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Verso, 1985.

<sup>2</sup> Homi Bhabha, 'The Third Space', in Jonathan Rutherford ed, *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, Lawrence and Wishart, 1990, pp 207-221.

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