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## **Taking the entire feminist agenda into the Left. Can we do it?**

**Cynthia Cockburn**

For me, as for many women whose politics were formed in the sixties and seventies of the last century, the first step along the road to feminism was a Marx reading group. We discovered (or found anew, if we had already been there) *Capital* Vol.1 and *The German Ideology*. We read them with admiration but also now critiqued them with a newly alert woman's consciousness. Here was labour - but where was unpaid labour, gender-based exploitation? Here was class inequality - but where was gender inequality? Here was the reproduction of capitalist class relations, but where was biological reproduction? This (re)reading of Marx was a springboard for many of us to research on work (labour processes). And it also served well those of us who, like me, had an interest in gender, skill and technological change (forces of production).

However, looking to understand power, as feminists, meant more than an addendum to Marxist theory. We were obliged to demand of capitalist class domination that it clarify its relationship to patriarchy, male dominion over women. We feminists entered a struggle with each other. Should we see capitalism and patriarchy as capitalist patriarchy (patriarchal capitalism), that is to say a single system with two kinds of effect? Or should we visualize them as two systems in malign interaction (dual systems theory, we called this).

These matters were left unresolved as, by the late nineteen-eighties, Thatcherism/neo-liberalism consolidated its grip on us and delegitimized the goal of socialism, the potential of community and the vehicle of the public sector. That was a bad ideological ingress against us. But for me, and perhaps for others, there were good healthy reasons too, in the late eighties,

for thinking more carefully what we meant by socialism. To be autobiographical about this... In 1987 at a conference in Moscow I made my first true feminist Soviet friend. As we walked arm in arm, so happy to have found each other, we also wept because of the pain we couldn't help but cause each other. She would revel in her new-found 'individualism', something that had been stifled by the Soviet regime. There were stars in her eyes as she said the word, but mine narrowed to slits with suspicion. I would speak of myself as a socialist. She would flinch. I understood more deeply (what of course I had always known) that *my* socialism, now during 'glasnost', as never before, was obliged to promise (even to *guarantee*) to be of a kind that could never, never open the door to Stalinism.

Between 1989 and 1991 the Soviet system reform failed and the USSR collapsed, succumbing to the pressures of the capitalist west. As it died it wrenched the words socialism and communism out of our vocabularies, changing the terms of debate. It is not surprising that academic social, cultural and political analysis took the poststructuralist / postmodern turn it did, around then. I did understand the grace and cleverness of the new way of describing things, and valued some insights it brought. Indeed it seemed to me that feminism itself had contributed to the re-thinking of Left-thinking. But my main sensation was of being silenced. Not only was Marxism written off as a grand narrative, materialism melting into immaterial 'representation', but patriarchy was binned along with capitalism and other such 'structures'. Feminism radically shape-shifted. In some quarters it became post-feminism.

I sense now, this last few years, a desire among some feminists to come back to the struggle of understanding capitalist and patriarchal power, and a recovery of respect for historical materialism as method. Perhaps it's a perverse kind of appetite for chewing over old bones, but whatever this hunger is, I share it, and feel a delighted recognition when I meet other women who are feeling the same. This pamphlet project is a case in point.

However...I can see myself again disagreeing with some of the new-old socialist-feminist formulations. In an article I wrote sometime in the mid-

eighties, and published in 1988, I had complained that those of us who called ourselves socialist-feminists and continued to be active in the Left were muting our feminism to do so. Yes, we were calling for the Left to take account of women's labour, paid and unpaid, and the gender-specific ways we were being exploited by capitalism. But we were failing to bring with us into the Left our *body politics* – concerns that included sexuality and physical violence. I wrote

Among the (highly material) disadvantages and fears of ordinary women today, among 'the details of objective conditions'...is, I would argue, a pervasive and 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 some lads to own a gun, drive a fast motorcycle 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 fear for their own children and anxiety whenever they 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 well as the control of production and distribution, is ordered differently. It is time that 'material' and 'materialist' extended to include this objective condition of the lives of working class and other women (Cockburn 1988:307).

Although my article was a bit incautious, and caused pain and annoyance to some valued friends, I haven't lost this basic conviction over the two intervening decades. Indeed it has grown stronger as my own research focus shifted from gender in labour processes to gender in militarization and war. The narrowing and confining effects of the social construction of masculinities and femininities in complementary and contrasted forms, and the control of women and limitation of women's autonomy by *men* (not capitalism) is still a reality.

Let's take just a few of the facts that have been discussed on the Internet this very week. In Baluchistan, Human Rights Watch confirm that six teenage girls were recently executed. They were wounded by gunshot and then buried alive, by men of their family and community, for having resisted parental choice of husband. In the war-torn Democratic Republic of Congo, 71 women's NGOs appealed to the United Nations Security Council to protect women from rape, citing 880 UN-documented cases in a typical recent month and estimating these at one-tenth of those actually occurring. The effects of rape here, as in many other countries, are exacerbated by the subsequent rejection of rape victims by husbands, families and communities. In case these instances should seem to refer to patriarchies of a brand long superceded in Western 'democracies', let's remember that in England and Wales, on average two women per week over recent years have died at the hands of their husbands or partners. In the USA this week a judge found a woman guilty of murdering her baby. She put the baby in the microwave oven. Why? She told a cellmate it was 'because she feared her boyfriend would leave her if he found out the child was not his' (*Guardian*, 30.08.08).

These few unexceptional stories remind us that there is a dimension of power in human societies that is distinct from economic class power and the racist power of white supremacy. It is the masculinist power of men's dominion over women. So now, in seeking again to engage with the Left I want us to do more than look for the gender effects of capitalism and class relations, and more even than include the dimension of racism. I want us to acknowledge that patriarchy, systemic male domination, was not a figment of our fevered feminist imaginations but a historical reality – and that it is a current one. It functions across the board, intersects with capitalist and white supremacist power relations in every country and in every institution we know – corporations, universities, militaries, churches, synagogues and mosques, municipal authorities, and political parties (not excluding those of the Left). Each of us as individuals, man or woman, white or black, property-owning or propertyless, is shaped by *that* dimension of power, along with others.

This means, in my view, that in engaging gear once again we must do more, this time, than rework the labour theory of value and tot up the time spent, and the rewards received, so that they take account (this time) of unpaid labour, caring labour, emotion work, personal service, reproductive labour, communal commitments. Of course we must do that. But also, this time, we have to consider a whole other dimension of human relations, one that before, in the '70s and '80s, was allowed to dwell outside the domain called socialist-feminism and reside in the separate domain called radical feminism. I mean cathexis (desire and hatred) and violence (coercion, control and killing).

Is it impossible to call for men to take responsibility for their part in perpetuating patriarchal power? Many women of the property-owning class have managed to work in the Left, acknowledging and struggling to transform their relationship to class power. Many white individuals of both sexes have managed to acknowledge and struggle to overturn the racist relations of white supremacy. I believe that it is not unthinkable that men, as men, in progressive social movements, should acknowledge and struggle to transform the relations of patriarchal power, both analytically and programmatically in their political activism, and individually in their political relationships.

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