

Make Your Own Tea

Women's Realm and Other Recipes and Patterns

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This piece is written for all revolutionaries. This is not the token 'women's bit' that's stuck in for the sake of appearances. This is an attempt to look at how and why the Left, and Class War in particular, has not just failed to attract women, but alienated, patronised and looked upon them as a minority group. How can half the working class be treated as a minority? We're not claiming that we have solutions for the gender imbalance but we are saying that it's time to stop ignoring the problem. Any revolutionary movement which doesn't address why there are so few women in its ranks isn't a true revolutionary movement, just a complacent reflection of the status quo.

DAZED AND CONFUSED

In the early years of Class War, the attitude was that feminist demands did not go far enough. We said why call for equal pay? Equal rights under capitalism was putting out a begging bowl for equal gender exploitation and was spectacularly unambitious. Class War were calling not for equal pay packets but for the abolition of money. The feminist fixation with voting rights was another half measure. Why choose between two evils when there's so much more to be had? Class War tried to support the principle of gender equality while disagreeing with the reformist tendencies of established feminism.

In the mid-1980s the Left was in its victim stage. 'All men are bad, all women are good' arguments were being waged by feminists who wanted the moral advantage and brownie points. Class War wasn't about pushing the politics of middle class guilt. By showing images of women who were taking control of their lives and fighting back, Class War thought it was supporting working class women. Whether it was or not is up for discussion, but the paper's intentions were honourable. The approach was simplistic, but at least it wasn't as confused as other sections of the Left - who were dancing round Goddess-based 'alternative' religions and calling them politics.

Class War's early issues show that there was a commitment to talking to all the working class as opposed to just young white males. Cervical cancer information sat on the same page as 'Battered Bobby'. Articles about sexism (admittedly basic and often moralistic as opposed to libertarian) made regular appearances. The politics were often misguided, with one article offering instructions to working class men to support women's struggles by offering physical protection. This paternalistic attitude reflected society's but it didn't make it right.

But to put Class War in context, other lefty groups and papers had even worse attitudes. Militant and the SWP's politics were so entrenched in old-fashioned rhetoric that women only featured in their papers when they slotted in to the traditional 'worker' slot. Grunwick was their finest hour: workers who were women and Asian to boot. Women Against Pit Closures and 'miners' wives' were the only other photos of a woman they'd use. Those pictures from 1977 and 1984 had to see them through almost 20 years of papers.

In 1987 a Brixton woman wrote to Class War questioning our coverage of the Brixton riots. She said that living in a police no-go area had ended not in Utopia, but in women suffering intimidation, physical and sexual violence. To Class War's credit, the paper responded with an article about the dangers of romanticising violence, and started up a debate about communities providing their own policing.

However, a lot of women who agree with Class War's aims and principles, think the organisation is too Boy's Own to become involved with. Class War's attitude to violence is alienating for women - no amount of wishful thinking will alter the fact that working class men and women

have very different attitudes to violence. Class War's hard image, its music and boots are meant to attract young, white males. It's questionable whether concentrating on attracting one area of the working class (and alienating other sections of it) is worth the price, but even on its own terms this tactic fails.

WHAT DID YOU DO IN THE WAR, MUM?

Looking at Class War in isolation won't tell us much about why the Left has put gender politics on the back-burner. Class War came in to being at a time when the women's movement was in crisis. Without sketching a rough run-down of some of the events that preceded that crisis, it's impossible to challenge the cliché that feminism is merely the plaything of the middle classes.

In lefty circles all you have to do to discredit a movement or an idea is call it middle class. It's become a non-specific term of abuse. The feminist movement did have a lot of middle class women in it, but that doesn't mean that all of them opposed the interests of working class women. Nor does it mean that feminist ideas aren't useful to working class women. In the early seventies feminist ideas began to permeate through society. The media (as always) looked for leaders and personalities. Rather than talk about the anger, the ideas and the needs that were propelling feminism forward, the emphasis was on individuals. Germaine Greer and Co. fitted the media bill.

But this didn't stop women seizing the idea of liberation. Suddenly there were theories which explained why life was so miserable for the majority of women. The middle classes were the first to catch them because they had more access to education, but many working class women weren't all that far behind. The only solution to women's troubles was to change society, which was the last thing that the right wanted.

Women got down to the serious job of showing we'd no longer tolerate male domination and violence. In 1972 the first refuge for battered women opened. In 1976 the first Rape Crisis Centre opened, run on feminist lines. It mushroomed and by the mid-1980s there were centres in almost every city. The Reclaim The Night marches started in Soho in protest against the exploitation of the sex industry. The women's movement was making it up as it went along - and at that point it hadn't had to take account of the views of women actually working in the industry. In Leeds and York the Reclaim The Night marches took on a different significance. Peter Sutcliffe, the so-called 'Yorkshire Ripper', was still on the loose in Northern industrial towns. We were sick of living in a climate of fear, of being told that the only way to stay safe was to stay indoors or under male protection. Last but not least we'd had enough of the state and media distinction between 'good' and 'bad' girls; between the prostitute women who the media implied deserved to be murdered, and the good, asexual, family-type women who didn't. Feminism provided the framework for women to realise that we had a right to be sexual and safe. We were angrily rejecting the hypocritical morality of the times as well as celebrating our presence on the streets.

WOMEN: THEY ALL LOOK THE SAME TO ME

The women's liberation movement had its own internal problems. The rhetoric of 'sisterhood' above all else meant that class and race, other great defining aspects of our lives, were in danger of being buried under the 'all girls together' mentality. Working class and non-white women

fought the fallacy that class and race were less important than gender. They said that middle class women were fighting for their independence from patriarchy, while keeping the perks of their class. Working class women weren't trying to destroy sisterhood; they were insisting that it be made more substantial. Some working class women said that sisterhood had to start with income sharing.

Black women refused to let the reality of having to live in a racist society be obscured by an umbrella of sisterhood. The women's liberation movement was predominantly white and middle class, but to say that the white middle class women constantly held sway is to under-value black and working class women's contributions. They forced the women's liberation movement to take account of them - whether it wanted to or not. In 1978 The Working Class Women's Liberation Newsletter was launched. To go along with the myth that working class women played no part in changing society, is to repeat the lie that we were too thick to read the writing on the wall, and add our own quotes.

Separatism helped create more schisms and split feminism into non-complementary strands. The main bugbear was whether women working or having relationships with men were letting the side down by fraternising with 'the enemy'. In retrospect separatism looks like just more Stalinist power-play. Arguments about desire and free choice were put down to women trying to hang on their 'heterosexual privilege'. Capitalism's privileges weren't given much attention. No wonder the women's movement split. Despite internal sex wars, the women's movement continued to have a positive influence on society. The one good thing about radical feminism was that it taught women to recognise the full extent of male domination. Women who chose not to live or work apart from men finally picked up on the way that trade unions/political groups/partners made few concessions to women. The revolutionary movement was found wanting.

THE ENEMY WITHIN

The women's movement would have survived and still politically progressed if the right hadn't intervened. The American Weyrich was the first of many new right leaders to declare feminist women a threat to state power: "There are people who want a different political order. Symbolised by the women's liberation movement, they believe the future for their political power lies in the restructuring of the traditional family, and in down-grading the male or the father role in the traditional family."

Thatcher and her followers had their own think-tanks which drew the same conclusions. By the mid-1980s equality seemed like a sensible proposition to most women, so the media responded by declaring that feminism was outdated, a 1970s thing like flares. 'Post-feminism' was the new thing. It came complete with a younger generation who hated the women's movement. 'Post-feminist' was anti-feminist and it was set off not by women achieving their demands but by the fact that they looked in danger of getting too stropic, too much of a threat.

The old feminist 'leadership' were now part of the media establishment. Greer and Co. happily went back on their past calls for equality and independence. The new, revisionist line was that feminism had robbed us of our right to be mothers and home bodies. Greer declared that the model woman was the old-fashioned peasant wife up to her neck in onions and kids. One after another the old guard trundled out to tell us that women were at their most fulfilled when their influence was restricted to the home-front. Unsurprisingly, the media loved this U-turn

and printed every word of it. It was the worst sort of careerism, but the right has always diffused subversive ideas by rewarding changes of opinion. Post-feminist theory smelled a lot like old-fashioned servitude.

YOU'LL ALWAYS FIND ME IN THE KITCHEN AT PARTIES

Class War was formed at the height of this period of post-feminism. The entire Left was confused by the infighting and the right's full-scale assault. Class War didn't stand back and look at what was happening, but neither did anybody else. It was a time when one after another all the women's papers collapsed under the weight of the onslaught. Feminism was too old hat to be bought, so most of the radical women's papers folded. The only voices we were hearing were the new right and its lackeys telling us to get back into the kitchen.

It's an elaborate confidence trick. The new right wants us in the traditional wifey mode, but it also wants our wage labour. The post-feminist line is that the modern women can have freedom through work, and still have the 'fulfilment' of running a home.

Capitalism needs women to work. The far right's shift to economic 'rationalism' and the expansion of the low-paid service industries mean that cheap labour is always in demand. And as far as capital is concerned, nothing comes cheaper than women. Capitalism's motto is: if you want to shell out less money and make more profits, employ women - they're worth less.

Nine out of ten single parents are women, and even in two parent households many women are the main bread-winner; yet capitalism still pretends that women's wages are 'pin money.' Women don't need a living wage, because we don't actually have to live off it. Despite a wealth of evidence to the contrary, men are still seen as the main 'providers'. Our wages pay for the little extras: food, shelter and warmth. And as we get older, in a society which judges women on appearance, we become worthless.

Single mothers on benefit are the group who have borne the worst of the post-feminism backlash. Capitalism has outlawed all non-monetary relations. In a capitalist society to have no money is to have no identity. We're not what we eat, but where we work and what we earn. Single mothers have been targeted because their existence threatens the right's social, political and economic aims. Hence the constant media attacks and housing and benefit cuts. 'Back to Basics' blamed everything from loose morals to the rising crime rate on single mothers.

Work and wages - no matter how menial and low - are often cited as proof that we've achieved our objectives and no longer need feminism. Try telling the woman who gets up at six to clean offices, that if she worked harder she too could have two homes and inter-continental air travel. The role models post-feminism holds up as 'successful' women (scum like Anita Roddick) get to the top by promoting ruthless capitalism. Gender plays no part in their story - other than their having to prove that their killer instincts are twice as sharp as men's.

One of capitalism's strategies for reducing wages is to take what has traditionally been 'men's work' - manufacturing etc - automate the plant and then bring in 'unskilled' women at a lower rate of pay. Then it is women, rather than capitalism's sharp practice, who are blamed for men being chucked out of the workforce.

Post-feminism also makes a big fuss about women's nurturing natures - we're supposed to like being dogsbodies. In 81 per cent of (two adult) homes where a woman works full-time, she's still responsible for the washing and ironing and the bulk of the domestic jobs. Maybe 'we've

made it' means the beds. We're still acting as unpaid domestic servants; the only real change is that many men think they do more. There's a million excuses for why not, but men rarely take an equal share of cooking and household chores. Revolutionary groups seldom address the day-to-day inequalities in their own kitchens. Issues around housework are seen as trivial. Twenty years ago the expression for it was 'women's work'. Lefty 'man' may claim to be fighting for the freedom of mankind, but that doesn't mean he wants his girlfriend to stop doing his washing.

Part of the problem is that housework has been tagged 'personal politics'. 'Personal' like 'middle class' is just another way of saying irrelevant to the overall struggle. Class War has always understood that 'politics' is about improving the day-to-day realities of our lives. Unfortunately, that understanding doesn't seem to extend to women. Too often issues are prioritised on the grounds of whether or not they make men feel heroic. Rioting does; shopping doesn't. Washing up just doesn't get the adrenalin going: ask any woman.

GET YOUR TITS OUT FOR THE LASSES

Post-feminism has a cute chorus-line of girls flashing their knickers as a sign of liberation. We've got the Girlie Show, The Pyjama Party and the Spice Girls sticking their tits and their tongues out on prime-time TV. All three were put together by blokes. We're supposed to see them as symbols of the new 'sassy' woman, but all are a bloke's idea of the perfect feminist. They make a lot of noise but never say anything which actually threatens the status quo. They're Stepford Wives with better thighs, and a carefully programmed attitude. They're go-go dancing for equality.

At the same time there's a constant media crusade to show us what a dangerous place the world is for women. Less than eight per cent of all violent crimes are sexual attacks on women (the highest mortality rate is among young working class men), but the media loves to highlight our rapes and murders by deranged strangers. The message is that we need the security of male protection. The sub-text is: 'your relationship might be crap and abusive but look how much worse off you'd be without him'. The irony is that at least a third of all women killed in Britain are murdered by their husbands or boyfriends - the majority just after they declare their independence by breaking off the relationship.

WILL THIS MOVEMENT MOVE ME?

We don't live in an equal world. We need a feminist analysis as much as we ever did. All around us the gains of the last thirty years are under attack. The Left bowed out of women's struggles years ago, and since there isn't really a women's movement to speak of, individual women are left to slug it out alone. The whole point in joining a movement is to fight alongside people who share the same ideals and dreams. There's not much incentive for women to join revolutionary groups when the general ethos is: you can fight our battles but we're not interested in yours.

Women join revolutionary organisations because they want to change the whole of society not just the sexist bit. But to survive within them we end up having to 'put up and shut up'. Just because we've prioritised class and capitalism as major oppressions doesn't mean that we don't give a shit about gender.

The old chestnut about 'single issues' distracting the focus of the struggle has been dragged out too many times when women's struggles come up. The anti-JSA campaign or prisoner support are 'single issues'; race, class and gender aren't. We can't pick up and put down our class, our skin colour or our sex. Whatever comes after Class War needs to take a less one-dimensional approach. We don't know what will make a unified movement, but we do know what won't: ignorance.

No one is 'just' working class, 'just' a woman, 'just' black. Our politics are a mesh of different experiences, and half the time there's no cosy alliance between our different oppressions. A woman's experiences under patriarchy help shape her perceptions of class. We've been guilty of pretending that working class men and women would all live happily ever after once we've banished capitalism. Not if we still have one half serving the other half. Life isn't simple. Those who are our comrades in one area may well turn out to be against us in another. When conflict comes up we're forced to say what matters most; sometimes it's our class and sometimes it isn't. We have to acknowledge difficulties before we can start to deal with them. We don't know if we can resolve these dilemmas but we're certainly willing to try.

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