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Socialist feminism

Dangerous Liaisons: The marriages and divorces of Marxism and Feminism

- Features - Sexual politics -

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This article was written as the prologue to the English-language edition of Cinzia Arruzza's book *Dangerous Liaisons: The marriages and divorces of Marxism and Feminism* published jointly by Merlin Press, Resistance Books and the IIRE in March 2013.

Prologue

"This small book aims to be a short and accessible introduction to the question of the relationship between women's movements and social movements, and the relation between class and gender."

With this as her goal, Cinzia Arruzza devotes the first two chapters to a brief summary of some of the important historical experiences of the first and second wave feminist movements and their relationship to the workers' movement. She then turns her attention to sketching out in the latter two chapters an overview of the theoretical discussions that have existed within the women's movements since the 1970s on the interrelationship between women's oppression, and other oppressions, and class exploitation, notably within the capitalist system. A substantial body of work has tackled the questions dealt with here as Arruzza indicates, thus the bibliography for this English-language edition has been substantially increased to take account of publication in English on these questions. This includes both the discussion in Britain that has developed since the publication of Juliet Mitchell's 1966 article in *New Left Review* "The Longest Revolution" with other notable contributions such as *Beyond the Fragments* by Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright calling for a broad unity of trade unionists, feminists and left political groups, the work of Selma James and Maria Rosa Dalla Costa on "wages for housework" and the corpus of US feminist theory which to a far greater extent than in Britain engaged in a discussion with the "French feminism" or "difference theory" of Luce Irigaray. A glossary of people, in particular those who have contributed to Marxist and feminist theory, mentioned in the book has also been added.

In Arruzza's final chapter she proposes the need for "developing an outlook that can make sense of intersections and decipher the complex relationship between the patriarchal holdovers that drift like homeless ghosts in the globalized capitalist world and the patriarchal structures that have, on the contrary, been integrated, used and transformed by capitalism [which] calls for a renewal of Marxism." As she says, "The point is not whether class comes before gender or gender before class, the point is rather how gender and class intertwine in capitalist production and power relations to give rise to a complex reality, and it makes little sense and is not very useful to attempt to reduce these to a simple formula." These questions of the interrelationship between the specific oppression of women, as the second wave feminist movement correctly characterized it, and other oppressions and exploitations were a subject of great concern to sections of that movement in its initial stages, despite its portrayal all too often as a movement simply of white middle-class women only concerned with their own situation (and some of the notable seminal works were indeed limited to this perspective, such as Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique*). This preoccupation was particularly marked for the currents characterized as "socialist feminist" (in some countries, for example France, where social-democratic Socialist Parties were in power the use of the word "socialist" was rejected in favour of "class struggle feminism"). In Britain this current was for a period particularly strong in organizational terms, holding national conferences of several thousand women, larger than the "national women's liberation conferences" themselves.

The primary concern of these currents was in fact to reach out to working-class women, whether through the trade unions or more directly, including by activity in working-class communities. Women's committees in trade unions raising both the situation of women as workers and concerns of women as women were one of the primary forms this took, most often at the initiative of women activists who were also involved in the structures of the women's

movement. They were thus predominantly in unions organizing white-collar workers in offices, laboratories and schools. (In countries such as Britain, Ireland or Denmark these initiatives could also link up with an already-existing tradition of women's organization within the structured labour movement.) But it should not be forgotten that the Ford women machinists' equal pay strike of 1968 is one of the founding events of the British women's movement. The Grunwicks strike of Asian women workers in the 1970s was another notable event. The support organized by the miners' wives groups in the year-long British miners' strike of 1984- 85 was another indication of how in practice links could be found and forged between the situation of women as women, as workers and as members of working-class communities united in a common struggle to preserve their livelihood. Similar significant strikes of women workers or with women's involvement in major working class struggles can of course be found throughout the world.

An important expression of this interrelationship was the November 1979 demonstration in defence of the 1967 Abortion Act in Britain jointly called by the Trades Union Congress (representing at that point some 13 million workers in Britain) and the National Abortion Campaign, a campaigning structure initiated by the women's movement and bringing together women's groups, trades unions from local to national level and left-wing political groups.

While this relationship was important for socialist feminists from the beginning, it bore particular fruit during the historic miners' strike in Britain. Women in mining communities began to organize in support of the strike and set up their own organization "Women against Pit Closures". Domestic labour was collectivized through strike centres, which provided food and often childcare while at the same time women participated in picket lines and in speaking at meetings all over the world in defence of their communities. Socialist feminists were prominent in miners' support groups up and down the country. Unfortunately the defeat of the miners' strike by Margaret Thatcher's Conservative, anti-union government was a defeat not only for the trade union movement in Britain as is generally recognized on the left but also for women's liberation – and particularly for the socialist feminist current.

The contribution of this current to the women's movement has tended to be forgotten and written out of history by a mainstream discourse that has transformed feminism into counting how many women break through the glass ceiling in various sectors of big business, mass media or parliamentary politics, or dismissed the feminist movement as anti-men extremists, responsible for undermining men and family life and thus provoking all manner of social ills. This obliteration of the class-orientated social feminist current has prevailed to the extent that younger generations of Marxist feminists quite often simply do not know that such a current existed and identify all aspects of activist, militant feminism, such as women-only meetings, with the current known as radical feminist.

Within the women's movement "women of colour" also insisted on the specificity of their situation as such, as well as women, as workers, as lesbians. The British group Southall Black Sisters was formed in 1979 and brought together women of Black and Asian backgrounds. As Jane Kelly pointed out in her 1992 article "[Postmodernism and Feminism](#)" in *International Marxist Review* No 14:

"Lastly the 1980s were marked by the challenge of black women to the white-dominated women's movement. Black feminists pointed out that on many issues their experiences differed from white women. These included the family, the workplace, welfare rights, men, motherhood, abortion, sexuality and, centrally, the state. Although black women had been organizing together since at least 1973, including in several important strikes, and the first black women's conference in Britain was held in 1979, it was in the 1980s that their voice was at last heard. Black women were organized in caucuses within the Labour Movement, in campaigns against deportation, against religious fundamentalism, against racism and in many other ways. Central to the debate between black and white feminists has been the relation between race, gender and class and the relative weight of each. For example black women explained that sometimes they have to put aside a fight against sexism to fight with black men against racism; at other times the struggle against male domination is paramount. This, along with black women's understanding of the racist state, led a significant proportion of black women to socialist conclusions and put black women's organization at the forefront of anti-imperialist struggles such as the campaigns against war in the Gulf."

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One example of how the women's movement responded to women's different experiences depending on their ethnic or national origin is in the evolution of the international campaign for women's reproductive rights. First called the International Campaign for Abortion Rights (ICAR) it then became ICASC (International Contraception, Abortion and Sterilization Campaign) to eventually become the Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights. This change reflected how the understanding of women's concerns shifted from that of notably white women in Western Europe and North America demanding the right to abortion and contraception to the non-white populations in those countries, such as the Bangladeshi women in Britain used as unwitting guinea pigs for the injectable contraceptive Depo-Provera in the 1970s or the Black women whose main concern was to avoid forced sterilization, to that of women globally and the whole set of interrelated issues concerning reproduction and women's health.

In fact it could be argued that the insistence of the women's movement that the combinations of exploitations and oppressions that different women experienced – thus meaning that precisely there was not a “one size fits all” answer to women's oppression – opened the way to post-modernism's rejection of systems and collective identities. This resulted in a complete abandoning (at the level of theoretical discourse and discussion) of the possibility of collective struggle around common demands. [1]

The goal of this book is to look at new ways of integrating the ideas of multiple oppression and exploitations and identities into a more developed Marxist analysis of the social relations in capitalism, that is to integrate contradictions such as women's oppression and racial oppression into the Marxist analysis of class society and thus overcome the separation and hierarchization of oppressions of which many Marxist currents have been guilty.

As an activist, Arruzza's concern is to enable the struggle carried by feminist women to be an integral part of the action of the radical anti-capitalist left in practice, not to remain at the level of a theoretical development.

Important contributions to the theoretical task have been made by Marxist feminists of preceding generations who share Cinzia Arruzza's perspective such as Stephanie Coontz and Lidia Cirillo, and by others through their activist work. In a series of lectures given in the International Institute for Research and Education in the 1990s, using the concept of Marxism as an analysis of a set of moving contradictions, Coontz posited:

“The methods of Marxism allow for self-correction on this issue, enabling us to explore the origins of male dominance and racism and in so doing to reconceptualize class itself. It is not a question of adding gender analysis to class analysis, or even showing how they intersect, but of using gender (and race, though this point needs development in a further paper) to reach a deeper, more historical and more useful definition of class.”

Lidia Cirillo's work started from the debate with the “differentialists” in the Italian women's movement, the work of Luce Irigaray and Julie Kristeva having had a broad impact within the Italian Communist Party (PCI) which was relayed to the broader movement. Cirillo points out in her [“Feminism of the Anti-capitalist Left”](#) (*International Viewpoint*, June 2007):

“Feminism is always born and reborn on the left, alongside revolutionary, democratic or progressive tendencies: on the margins of the 1789 revolution, in the national revolutions of the first half of the 19th Century, within the movement for the abolition of slavery in the United States, alongside the workers' movement, in the radicalization of the 1960s and 1970s, in the global justice movement....”

In one discussion of difference theory published as [“For another difference”](#) in *International Viewpoint* she notes:

“The Italian philosophy of gender difference is very much indebted to the ideas of Irigaray as is openly recognized because Irigaray provides the indispensable element of theory – the idea that there is an innate gender difference in

thought which is a biological fact linked to the morphology of sex and women's specific sexuality. Without this key idea it is impossible to claim gender difference as a value, to adopt it as the "simple" paradigm.

"Traditional feminism – both the radical and Marxist varieties – has usually reacted to male chauvinist difference theory (theoretical male chauvinism is basically a theory of gender difference) by explaining the historical nature of gender difference. Against men who theorized the distinctness of women on the basis of biological existence itself, its savage naturalness, of women's inability to sublimate or transcend it, feminists responded by partly throwing back the accusations, exposing its deprecating and ideological character; explaining what was true in women's distinctness as a fruit of history, a history of women's oppression.

"More culturally aware feminists have never theorized equality in terms of uniformity. This identification is typical of reactionary and conservative thought and is nothing to do with Marxist criticism of the abstract equality embedded in bourgeois laws. The theory of gender difference mixes up the two separate approaches because its ideas have come out of contradictory and diverse political and cultural realities. The better tradition of feminism could not theorize gender difference as a value for a very good reason: gender difference, which coincides with history in the case of women, is oppression and consequently one cannot idealize it or identify with it."

Alongside this more abstract theoretical work, Heather Dashner, in a remarkable article "[Feminism to the tune of the cumbia, corrido, tango, cueca, samba . . .](#)" first published in *International Marxist Review* in 1987, explored the process of radicalization of women in a series of Latin America countries after travelling to and meeting with the women involved, and showed how in practice the intersection of different identities (as women, as inhabitants of the *barrios* or *favelas*, as peasants, as workers in the informal sector, as mothers) could combine without any individual having to choose one identity over another as a "priority".

She expresses it thus:

"In order to successfully deal with the contradictions between the traditional role society imposes on women and their new experiences gained through struggle itself, women have to be able to break the confines of the old social role and create a new one. This cannot be done by simply moulding the old accepted social role to include new behaviour patterns or practices: that, in any case, would be the bourgeoisie's answer. In a liberation perspective, the contradictions can only be overcome by creating a new concept and practice of women's role in society. In political terms, this needs to be expressed by clear demands and proposals which deal not only with general class questions, but also with specific women's questions.

"In order for this to be possible, we have to be clear on the need for the existence of a clearly feminist pole within the women's movement. In practical terms, it has been shown that this need is felt by natural leaders who spring up in the survival and democratic women's movement. When they begin to confront their contradictions as women, they often seek out feminists to be able to talk over and understand what is happening to them. (...) What is needed, then, is to win these women to feminism and create a vanguard of the women's movement capable of correctly posing the fusion of general and specific demands in order to permit the emergence of a movement for women's liberation which in turn can influence all of the social movements."

It is with already existing work such as this that Arruzza can move forward with the shared project of working out "how class and gender can be combined together in a political project able to take action avoiding two specular dangers: the temptation of mashing the two realities together, making gender a class or class a gender, and the temptation to pulverize power relations and exploitative relations to see nothing but a series of single oppressions lined up beside each other and reluctant to be included within a comprehensive liberation project."

Dangerous Liaisons: The marriages and divorces of Marxism and Feminism

For all those of us either still or becoming involved in radical anti-capitalist political activity, within which we want to overcome the contradictions in ourselves and in how we express our own interests – that is, what we are fighting for as women – contributions such as Arruzza's, which give us the tools to understand the dynamics at work in that "social camp" which should be ours, so that we can claim it fully, are indispensable.

In collaboration with Terry Conway

November 2012

[1] This was a far cry from the early days of the British Women's Liberation Movement, which had hoped to unite all women around first four, then six, then seven demands:

Demands One – Four Passed at the National WLM Conference, Skegness 1971

1. Equal Pay 2. Equal Educational and Job Opportunities 3. Free Contraception and Abortion on Demand 4. Free 24-hour Nurseries

Five and Six Passed at the National WLM Conference, Edinburgh 1974

5. Legal and Financial Independence for All Women

6. The Right to a Self Defined Sexuality. An End to Discrimination Against Lesbians.

(In 1978 at the National WLM Conference, Birmingham, the first part of this demand was split off and put as a preface to all seven demands)

The Seventh Demand Passed at the National WLM Conference, Birmingham 1978

7. Freedom for all women from intimidation by the threat or use of violence or sexual coercion regardless of marital status; and an end to the laws, assumptions and institutions which perpetuate male dominance and aggression to women.