https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3186

Women and politics

The feminist challenge to traditional political organisations

- Features - Feminism -

Publication date: Thursday 21 November 2013

Previous contributions spoke of the activity of far left organisations in the socialist feminist, class struggle current in the women's movement. My goal is to show the ways in which that activity as feminists has impacted on those political organisations and made them more effective.

I will argue that the basic principles of radical political organisation, democracy and collective action, are, when truly respected, the most effective way to ensure women as participants and feminist issues as major political questions are really taken into account.

This will aim to reply to the type of argument that has been met with in the "new social movements" from the women's liberation movement in the 1960s and 1970s through the global justice movement to the Indignad@s and Occupy movements of recent years that such forms of organisation are unable to do this.

I will note that as bourgeois, capitalist, patriarchal society cannot be a "school for the proletariat", to use the term of Rosa Luxemburg, a continual effort is needed to ensure that such organisations move towards their goal, using organisational practices such as positive action and women-only meetings, as well political education, as counterweights to the prevailing dynamic of exclusion.

The paper will draw on writings and experiences of women in the women's movement and in the organised revolutionary Marxist left, among others from those who have participated in courses at the International Institute for Research and Formation in Amsterdam. [1]

To start by looking at some criticisms of the very idea of political organisation:

â€¢ That the party form as such, the idea of a political party that organizes at a national level around a general programme, is outdated because in any case there can be no overall project for society as a whole, that movements and networks on sectoral or geographical basis are enough.

â€¢ The whole idea of a class-based party is outdated because the working class has totally changed, or doesn't exist. In any case "the working class" is not a revolutionary class; a process led by the working class cannot defend the interests of all, can't speak for all because such a notion doesn't take into account the variety of experience of the oppressed and exploited;

â€¢ That left parties are elitist because they think that they represent or can have an idea about what are the best interests of the class, that they are hierarchical, bureaucratized, and masculine.

First, on the question of general programme I want to make a very basic point, on which I will quote Norman Geras from his Marxist period, pre-Euston Manifesto, writing in *New Left Review*:

"It's not on account of any special forms of acculturation, historically particular social structures or types of learned behaviour, that people generally do not want to die of starvation or disease, or to lose their loved ones in these ways, or to be cruelly humiliated, or to die, or be permanently damaged physically or emotionally at the hands of a torturer, or to be persecuted for what they are or what they believe, be forcibly confined for it or be violently destroyed." [2]

Those are the values that we would say are what we're fighting for, of a just and equal society. Geras goes on to say, to put this in continuity with Marx:

"Could anyone familiar with his writings really be in two minds as to whether his project of emancipationâ€"whatever else it might be held to be aboutâ€"included the aim of meeting the basic needs of human beings for survival and healthy activity and of eliminating from the world these more terrible cruelties and oppressions?... The principle he espoused of distribution according to need was to cover at least those fundamental material needs consequent upon the common make-up of human beings." [3]

To apply this more particularly to the question of women, I would say that despite the differences in the social, economic and cultural position of women throughout the world, there is a common demand for all women, which is the right to control one's own body. It may be posed in very different ways, in terms of what that means about having children: whether the fight is for the right to have children in good conditions, whether the fight is for the right to have access to contraception or to abortion. But that basic right, that unless you can decide what you do with your own body, who you're going to have sexual relations with, that you have the right not to be violently attacked, how can you possibly live in any sort of decent way? It seems to me that that is a universal value for all women, wherever they are.

Of course once you've stated that as an overall, shared, universal goal it's just a starting point. The programme of a political organisation develops from that to take into account the experiences and aspirations of those it is addressing towards that overall goal. Thus the political programme of a party is something that is not static, it develops with new experiences. Its analysis is continually updating to understand and have some foresight as to where the contradictions in the capitalist system, the breaks in the relationship of forces between the classes are going to give rise to outbreaks of struggle.

The political parties that Josette, Terry and I have all been in have changed programmatically on a very fundamental question: that of support for the autonomous women's movement. [4] While the Marxist movement had historically been very much involved with fights for women's rights the movements it had been in were generally movements it had created as party transmission belts to bring women into political activity and build the party's base among women, not as independent movements deciding on their own strategy and tactics in the fight for women's liberation.

It was the experience of the fights and victories of the women's movement and the politicisation of young feminists who joined those far left parties that brought about this change in the 1970s.

From that important step has come the possibility for party programmes to take on board many other elements from the women's movement and the LGBT movement.

Parties that are concerned to be active, to be "in the swim" of the movements, especially of radicalising youth are likely to be much more open to, attentive to new ideas and new aspirations being expressed. It's one of the reasons why radical political movements historically have placed an important premium on their youth wings in order to be in synch with the youth radicalisation (and to allow new generations to be constantly trained in leadership responsibilities).

This factor, as well as the attraction of radical anti-capitalist socialism, at that period explains in my view why many young feminists joined such groups. Socialist or class struggle feminists by definition had a class based comprehension of how to fight, yes all women were oppressed but it was with a class struggle perspective and methods that the fight had to be waged.

However at the same time it was a struggle within left organisations to change the traditional conception of the

working class and "workers" both in terms of representation such as party symbols, but also and most fundamentally in terms of analysis of society and social processes, the working class is not just heavy industry – a male sector –, and the labour movement is not only the unions that organise those sectors so that they would become a tool fit for purpose for the socialist feminists.

The first and most important step was to organise the feminist work as traditionally such organisations had always organised other sectors of its work - recognising, as Josette says, that it was a political activity of the organisation and not an individual interest.

This brought with it the demand for educational activity for the women and then for the men, or rather for the whole organisation, not all women were necessarily feminists.

And to carry these projects through the question of women in the leadership of the organisation became crucial.

And this is where the thorny discussions started...

As I said, parties that have as their goal to be in the movements of social and political contestation, because they understand their task as to be active, to intervene in such movements to help carry them forward, to help win struggles, to develop anti-capitalist, anti-system radicalisation and politicisation, were able to understand the importance of a movement like the women's movement of the 1960-70s. Marxist education on women's oppression could start with Engels, there were some good quotes in the Communist Manifesto...

But ensuring a substantial presence of women in the leaderships of the organisations was another question. Capable women, it was said, would of course be elected, and if women weren't being elected it was because they weren't. And to decide to elect a certain number of women (quota or parity) would be "artificial".

This meant going back to a discussion of how women's oppression actually functions in society, that it is not just that women have child care responsibilities but that the gendered division of labour in society means that ALL women, whether they have children, partners or not, suffer from a dynamic of exclusion from public space. Class, ie political, consciousness traditionally developed in the workplace. Politics was organized through the workplace and the relationship between the workplace and the outside, so women were in general not involved in that, and not expected to be. And there is the need for an individual readiness, the time to study, to be a revolutionary activist. It's necessary to make a conscious effort to understand society and politics in a systematic way. This is difficult for women, not just because of exclusion from the formal education system where that is the case but because women, either for reasons of family responsibility or for other, more internalized psychological reasons, give individually often less time to that. They feel that they should be DOING something rather than taking the time to study. [5]

Thus women are not expected and so do not expect of themselves to play a role of representation which is what being a political activist is, and even more when it's taking on a leadership responsibility.

So to set quotas or targets is indeed artificial, but as we said, the natural course of events was not to have (enough) women on the leadership. For organisations that are used to being at countercurrent that should be an easy argument to accept.

So childcare for meetings, although that was quite easy to get accepted, didn't solve the problem either. (Leaving

aside whether the provision is or was always adequate the problem for women's involvement in politics is NOT just having to stay at home and look after the children.)

Nor did being careful not to assume that women would do the typing or make the tea.

We pointed out how the sexual division of labour is reflected in our organizations, with women tending to take on more administrative and technical tasks.

But we also noted what happened when women were given political responsibilities. The post of (let's say) trade-union organizer, when it was a post held by a male comrade was expected to entail analysing what was going on in the working class, in the trade-union movement, elaborating political perspectives, that is a very important political role. When it was a role held by a woman, the important thing was sending out the letters to call people to the meetings, getting the documents reproduced in advance and ensuring everything is well organized. And both women and men tended to have that gendered conception of what was the important part of any particular responsibility, depending on whether it was carried out by a man or a woman. Obviously for different reasons: women internalized that aspect of the task because it was safer, getting the mailings out on time just required effort and organization. Writing documents of political analysis: the relationship of forces between the unions and the bosses, within the unions, the likelihood of any important struggles breaking out, and being sure because you've been arguing it has to be done that there's a gender dimension to the analysis, you're taking into account the sectors that are predominantly women, the possibility of struggles breaking out over questions to do with women's rights, it's a nerve-racking prospect. But men of course do think they can do it (except the gendered bit...).

So that's one way in which the division of labour occurs in a less obvious way than simply who's doing the typing.

But there was also the political process among women and the way in we felt that was devalued. Leaders of our women's movement work who had led mass movements fighting for women's rights, mass movements that have been able to create alliances with the trade union movement, with political parties, with a whole range of people; who engaged in educational work where they explained and made a critical balance sheet of Marx and Engels and placed them in their context and explained historical materialism, what it really means and how you can use it to understand women's oppression; leaders of our women's work who have done all sorts of other leading of political movements or political and theoretical elaboration, were just specialists of women's work.

On the other hand, the young male comrade who had led a student struggle had shown his capacities to be a leader of the mass movement, and must immediately be put to lead some other area of work.

Or that oh so frequent occurrence: in a discussion, a woman says something – an opinion or a proposal – and the discussion goes on, and then somebody else makes more or less the same proposal, gives the same opinion. Then all of a sudden and it becomes the buzz and everybody is saying: Oh yes, he was right, he was right, I agree with him.

There's a Greek legend about King Midas, and everything he touched turned to gold. Sometimes we said it's kind of the reverse for us, everything we touch turns to something much less important than it used to be when a man was doing it.

What made it possible for women collectively to identify all these less overt forms of sexual discrimination was to talk together, to recognise that the difficulties they encountered were not a result of individual inadequacy but an expression of general dynamics and to bring the results of those discussions into the party as a whole.

Winning those women-only meetings was a battle, not against men but against women and men who called us "anti-Leninist". Our contention was quite the opposite. That in a party whose principles of functioning were full democracy and collective action then ensuring that women who experience a particular oppression could turn it into a collective concern would strengthen that democracy by helping to ensure that all members could express themselves and be active on as near as possible as we could get to an equal playing field. This ultimately successful argument extended obviously to other party members suffering from specific oppression.

Once again it was an argument about constructing counterweights to what came "naturally". The natural course of events is individualisation of women's experience, we were working towards a collective weight and voice of women on the expression of sexist dynamics in the party.

We also used the traditional forms of organisation to form those counterweights. We learnt in the women's movement that lack of structure is not necessarily at all democratic, and for those who don't know it I'd recommend the 1971 article the "*Tyranny of Structurelessness*" [6] and what it has to say about elites and star systems. The conclusions Jo Freeman draws hold good for political organisations:

1) **Delegation** of specific authority to specific individuals for specific tasks by democratic procedures. If people are selected to do a task, preferably after expressing an interest or willingness to do it, they have made a commitment which cannot so easily be ignored.

2) Requiring all those to whom authority has been delegated to be **responsible** to those who selected them. This is how the group has control over people in positions of authority. Individuals may exercise power, but it is the group that has ultimate say over how the power is exercised.

3) **Distribution of authority** among as many people as is reasonably possible. This prevents monopoly of power and requires those in positions of authority to consult with many others in the process of exercising it. It also gives many people the opportunity to have responsibility for specific tasks and thereby to learn different skills.

4) **Rotation of tasks** among individuals. Responsibilities which are held too long by one person, formally or informally, come to be seen as that person's "property" and are not easily relinquished or controlled by the group. Conversely, if tasks are rotated too frequently the individual does not have time to learn her job well and acquire the sense of satisfaction of doing a good job.

5) **Allocation of tasks** along rational criteria. Ability, interest, and responsibility have got to be the major concerns in such selection. People should be given an opportunity to learn skills they do not have, but this is best done through some sort of "apprenticeship" program rather than the "sink or swim" method.

6) **Diffusion of information** to everyone as frequently as possible. Information is power. Access to information enhances one's power. When an informal network spreads new ideas and information among themselves outside the group, they are already engaged in the process of forming an opinion â€" without the group participating. The more one knows about how things work and what is happening, the more politically effective one can be.

7) **Equal access to resources** needed by the group. Skills and information are also resources. Members' skills can be equitably available only when members are willing to teach what they know to others.

The principle of collective and accountable responsibility that in fact already existed in such groups, at least in theory, could be used to integrate new people, often women, into groups taking different responsibilities, an important step in

gaining experience and confidence.

In the same way the formal rules for meetings, a chair person, a list of speakers, timing speakers rather then being a bureaucratic obstacle can be used to ensure that everybody can express themselves in the same circumstances, without interruption with out having to impose themselves in a noisy or heated discussion. They can be adapted by introducing, for example, alternating between women and men on the list, in order to strengthen their positive contribution to democracy.

The question of leadership election as I mentioned earlier was one of the key questions. Here too in my experience we used the traditional system to good effect. This is going to be very surprising probably to people who have been discussing the democratic failings of one self-proclaimed Leninist organisation in Britain.

In my opinion a slate system of election of a leadership, that is to say where you present list of people for that leadership, is the best way guaranteeing that a leadership will not only be parity (or one-third women, whatever the target is) but will represents the party as a whole in its geographical spread, the areas of activity in which it is involved, of different generations.

Of course the whole question is how is the slate proposed. In the tradition in which I learnt it the outgoing leadership had nothing to do with it. A commission was elected from rank and file delegates that worked on the proposal of a slate. It took submissions from local branches and other bodies or individuals proposing individuals. And it would always check that the local branch of the individual approved their nomination. In the best case it was possible for the conference nominations commission to ask the platforms or tendencies to reconsider their proposals in order to take into account the other criteria. In organizations like ours that are very attached to representation of different political viewpoints that is a very important point.

To my mind this is a preferable method of electing a leadership for what we want it to be than votes on individuals with which it is very difficult to ensure the balanced representation that I am convinced is necessary, and also lead to a "popularity poll" method than can lead to the idea that some members of the leadership are "better elected" than others. How can a leadership work collectively with that sort of concept? However we should also say that it is necessary to ensure that the members can at the different levels (approval of nominations in branches, vote at national conference) give their opinion by secret ballot in order not to be affected by worries about how other people will think about their vote.

The personal is political

Some forms of sexist relations between women and men are difficult to take up because they neither occur in meetings nor cross boundaries of what we would define as our ethics, or in the language of a previous era, proletarian morality.

That is men often don't see women as political individuals. In a meeting, there can be a very lively discussion which continues outside the room. But at least 50 per cent of time, if a male comrade speaks to a female comrade, the discussion will almost immediately become something quite different, not political, but more personal. About their children, or their job, or whatever. But to actually continue to treat women, once outside the meeting, as political beings, is quite rare.

But there are of course much more harmful forms of sexist relationship within the party.

Political parties, whatever their programmes, cannot be islands of socialism. As Rosa Luxemburg pointed out, capitalist society cannot be a school for the proletariat and members even of radical, anti-capitalist, socialist organisations will be products of the society in which they live, and that is a society where sexism, racism, homophobia, islamophobia, discrimination against the disabled, etc are rife.

However they have joined organisations which have taken a political position against all those forms of oppression and discrimination, and that's non negotiable. Joining a political party is an act of free will and when you do it you accept what it sets out as its fundamental programme and statutes. It's the only condition in fact for effective democracy, a party can't start to discuss every question from the start at every moment.

So parties that take such a stance find themselves in a contradiction that means they have to establish some rules that will limit free expression of these internalised attitudes while recognising that it is not possible to eliminate them completely.

The starting point has to be to ensure that all members of the party feel at ease to participate. So no sexist, racist, homophobic, ageist, anti-disabled etc language or jokes, and the response must be collective, not left to those who are the victim of that language.

Then we get into the escalating spiral, which will most often be on a sexual basis, of harassment and violence, up to and including rape, particularly as our approach will not be to ban intimate relationships between party members as has been practised by some parties in a revolutionary puritan approach. Another question maybe how to protect the party if it is underground or engaged in armed struggle.

The party must deal with these from the point of view of defending its own principles and members. Sexist (or other oppressive or discriminatory behaviour of any type) must be sanctioned and if necessary the perpetrator excluded from the party. This is not dependent on how the legal system may or may not judge the act in question, and the party cannot set out to prove or disprove allegations on a legal or forensic basis. It can only decide whether the behaviour was acceptable or not on the basis of its own programme.

How it examines allegations must be a question of clear procedures defined by the party in an appropriate way that respect the criteria of non-bias, confidentiality and transparency.

The recourse to the police and courts to investigate and judge behaviour is a decision for the victim who must be able to count on the support of the organisation whatever the choice.

In our approach to these questions we have learnt a great deal from the women's movement in identifying what is oppressive behaviour, and a number of these gains have also been translated into legislation (e.g. conjugal rape as a crime). We have also learnt from the trade-union movement and how such allegations are dealt with in a workplace setting, notable that the starting point is from the point of view of the victim making the allegations. These are important gains.

But to conclude, our approach is based on making the best effort possible to bring behaviour into line with our programmatic stance against discrimination and oppression, with the idea not of making our organisations islands of socialism but at least prefiguring the socialism we are fighting for.

This paper is based on a Working Paper of the International Institute for Research and Education published in 1997 available here.

[1] It would be stupid to ignore the fact that questions of how far left organisations understand and integrate feminism in general into their thinking and practice, and the safety of women in their organisations in particular, have been widely discussed in the English-speaking and particularly British left this year. However my own involvement in thinking and writing, and acting, on these questions dates back almost forty years as you can see from my introduction to the book *Fourth International documents on women's liberation*, and my proposal to present this paper predates that crisis becoming public.

[2] Norman Geras, "Human nature and progress", *New Left Review* no. 213, Sept/Oct. 1995, p. 153

[3] Ibid

[4] For this see the 1979 resolution "Socialist Revolution and the Struggle for Women's Liberation", in particular Part II. The Fourth International and the Struggle for Women's Liberation Our Perspective.

[5] For a more extensive analysis and practical proposals see the 1991 resolution "Positive Action".

[6] First published in Ms magazine in 1973 and available now here "*Tyranny of Structurelessness*".