

More Than Equality: Reasons To Be a Feminist Socialist

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I want to talk about feminist socialism, rather than socialist feminism. As a student in Oxford I directly witnessed, and participated in the first conference of the Womens' Liberation Movement, held in Ruskin College in 1970. My whole world was shaken. My vision of the world up to that point was very hierarchical. For women it meant climbing up the hierarchy: being in there, getting up there, and so on.



The way feminism emerged at that point completely turned that over. It challenged those hierarchies, fundamentally.

There was a cartoon saying 'Equality? We've got something better in mind'. And that was the idea: that we weren't actually about 'equal opportunities', or equality within the existing system, we were about something entirely different, and we were experimenting in the process of creating this radical alternative through our daily lives.

At the same time, feminism was very personal. To change the world, we started from our own experience, so we had this immense personal confidence and a sense of power as a result of the quite intimate forms of solidarity created, especially but not only by what we called consciousness-raising groups. It gave us the sense that change would begin with ourselves.

This prefiguration - expressing and working toward in our own daily lives the change we want to see - took the form of consciously changing ourselves.

As a kid, I'd been quite tomboyish and loud, but somehow in these meetings of the left, like the Oxford Revolutionary Socialist Students, I was really quiet, and I couldn't understand it. It was partly to do with the blokes in the room, maybe one or two I fancied. Somehow it made me into this rather quiet, hesitant person, which seemed strange.

Feminism, and sharing the predicament with other women, allowed me to understand the roots of this and how to change the relations and culture that produced it through organising with other women. Politically, that time (and the spirit of '68 was still powerfully in the air, so it was a good time) has given me confidence to keep fighting, keep the optimism that comes from glimpsing a possibility of being part of movements for very radical change.

I'd been brought up as a liberal, but by '68 I had rejected liberalism; I came to realise that liberalism, though it claimed to be about social and economic equality as well as individual freedom, wasn't going to achieve it. It became clear to me that the policies required to take steps towards equality, like wealth taxes and higher taxes on corporate profit, were going to challenge capitalism, and Liberals were generally not prepared to do that.

I became a socialist, but I knew I rejected both the Soviet model and the Harold Wilson, Fabian model. I was experimenting with a knowledge that the ending of capitalism was necessary, but

without knowing what socialism was.

So, for me, feminism, the making of feminism and the making of socialism, converged and fused in my mind. Looking back, feminism provided me with the tools to work toward a new kind of socialism.

I'll mention two or three 'tools' that I learnt through my feminism, and why I talk about a feminist socialism. I think feminist socialism hasn't been realised, and yet I also think that it's so obvious!

I'm repeatedly shocked by the fact that the relevance of feminism for the rethinking of socialism hasn't been taken on board, and that the left has trudged on as usual, making its usual mistakes, pretty much as if feminism had never really done more than 'put women on the agenda'. The left adopted policies towards women, but has not carried out a fundamental rethink of socialism, which is what I felt feminism was enabling us to do.

The first tool is about power, the second about knowledge, and the third about the relationship between the individual and the social. What I learnt about the transformative nature of power was that we had power in a daily sense. We were implicitly - Betty Freidan talks about this - reproducing our oppression as sexual partners, as mothers, and as workers - in all sorts of ways: in our passivity, in our representations of ourselves. We faced a choice between reproducing or refusing; and refusing is only a small step from seeking to transform.

So there was that sense of a power that lay within ourselves and in our own capacity to transform social relations through our own action, in daily life. This helped me become clear about why I rejected the so-called Leninist relations of state power and party power, and the Fabian understandings of power whereby the state delivered concessions and policies, rather than power coming from within ourselves.

That led me to draw on the work people have done distinguishing different forms of power - for example, in very different ways, John Holloway, Steven Lukes and Roy Bhaskar. There's power as domination, which could effectively be what we think about when we think about government - taking power to then use the levers of government to deliver policies. Sometimes that's referred to as 'power over'.

Then there's power as transformative capacity: the power to change things, to do things. Sometimes referred to 'power to'. That was the kind of power the women's movement was illustrating, transformative power and capacity, and I think that's a very useful concept now. Much of what Occupy and the Indignados were about is power as transformative capacity. They have been in the squares, they have been creating a different kind of society, illustrating a different kind of society in their daily practice.

I was also influenced by the shop steward/trade union movement at its most radical and alternative: when they weren't simply refusing redundancies and closures by occupying factories, but saying 'we have skills, practical skills that can be the basis of different kinds of production'. Socially useful products rather than missiles, for example, or working towards the conversion of industry to a low-carbon economy.

This recognition of a transformative capacity that lies amongst the mass of people completely changes the nature of socialism, which has most often been based exclusively on the idea of power over - when you capture the means of power over production, over resources, and deliver it in this paternalistic way, without any recognition of the kind of power people actually have in their own capacity to refuse, and to change. Without any recognition of the dependence of existing power structures on actual people as knowledgeable and creative human beings.

Secondly, knowledge. What I learnt from consciousness-raising groups and from shop stewards - who were mainly men, but interesting anyway - was the importance of different forms of knowledge. Most traditional socialist parties, be they Leninist or Fabian, believe in intellectual leadership. (Beatrice Webb made the classic Fabian statement that, "whilst the average man could describe the problem, he couldn't provide the solution; for that professional experts were needed".)

Knowledge was traditionally understood in a very narrowly scientific way, involving laws understood as the correlation of cause and effect, that could be codified, centralised and then, through a central apparatus, provide the basis of a scientific form of planning.

But the women's movement, with its consciousness-raising groups, often began with gossip - with forms of knowledge that were not acknowledged, knowledge carried in emotion and daily experience, but which ended up producing policies: well-women clinics, a large range of educational projects, rape crisis centres - all kinds of women's centres.

These were policies that were developed through women actually defining their experiences and their problems in a way that was rooted in their practical knowledge. Similarly, radical shop stewards were not writing long papers based on scientific laws, but actually designing alternative products; they recognised their knowledge was tacit, was practical, but nevertheless could be shared and made explicit through practice, and hence socialised.

I once read Hayek, for my sins, and that was quite a shock, because he was writing about 'tacit knowledge', 'things we know but cannot tell'; and he said that, whilst knowledge was constituted by the individual, it could only be co-ordinated through the spontaneous movement of the market. He used a notion of practical knowledge as the foundation stone of his theory of neoliberalism!

I argue that what we learned in the social movements is that it isn't a question of a choice between scientific knowledge and practical knowledge; nor, most important, is 'practical' essentially 'individual', as Hayek insisted it was. Social movements and particularly the women's movement have discovered and generated tacit knowledge as shareable and socialisable. This is what we were doing. Relationships were key.

What are the relationships which are necessary for doing this? Practical knowledge needed to be socialised, to become the basis of a new kind of planning, in the sense of seeing ahead whilst being constantly experimental and responsive to what's been discovered. Understanding power as both capacity and as domination, and knowledge as practical and tacit as well as scientific, laid the basis for a completely different understanding of socialism.

The third tool is to do with the relationship between the individual and the social. The women's movement was about individual realisation; we were there as individuals, because of our own personal pain, oppression and feelings; but we understood very quickly that in no way could we realise our potential as women without a social movement, without a power - often in alliance with other social movements - without changing the structures that underlie those oppressive social relations.

Today, the new forms of organisation emerging in the new politics, particularly in direct action, with their emphasis on horizontality and consensus, are very exciting. But sometimes they're expressed - particularly by young men - as if they're completely new! Now, we weren't using exactly the same language about networks, but our first women's groups were themselves networks, and they in turn were networked. We were exploring, in a practical, rooted way these net-worked forms of organisation.

I don't want to be the person saying 'we knew that first!' but: does it make a difference that some of these thoughts and innovations have their roots in a movement of liberation, a movement that was shaped by the experience of struggling for emancipation against a particularly intimate and socially embedded form of hierarchy?

How can we actually pay attention to the conditions that can realise such insights that people have as they struggle?

Another question is how to combine power-as-transformative-capacity with power-as-domination. In the women's movement we tried to gain public resources for childcare centres, rape crisis centres, women's centres. All of this came out of exercising power-as-transformative-capacity, but we also needed public resources, which we felt we had a right to. In the words of a very influential book we had work in and against the state, to defend and extend its re-distributive, socially protective, and 'space creating' powers, but at the same time radically transform how and with and through whom these public resources were implemented and administered.

At the Greater London Council, where I worked under Ken Livingstone's leadership, we made that a key principle. The state would not deliver all these facilities; nor would we hand them over to the market, because it doesn't have values of care or non-monetary measures of public benefit: everything in the capitalist market is about maximising profit. But we did delegate resources to 'transformative groups': to women's groups of different kinds, for example. And we did work both 'in and against' the market through the Greater London Enterprise Board and our work with co-operatives.

Similarly, now, when parties that are rooted in social movements like Podemos and Syriza (however ambivalently and precariously) are seeking power over the state, what can we draw from the experience of feminist socialism working in and against the state? Was it actually a dead end? Were we emasculated and incorporated?

Or was there a potential for a different kind of state - transcending the usual choice of 'more or less state' - that wasn't realised, because feminist socialism hadn't been thorough-going enough, or was defeated and halted by Thatcher and the neoliberal onslaught?

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