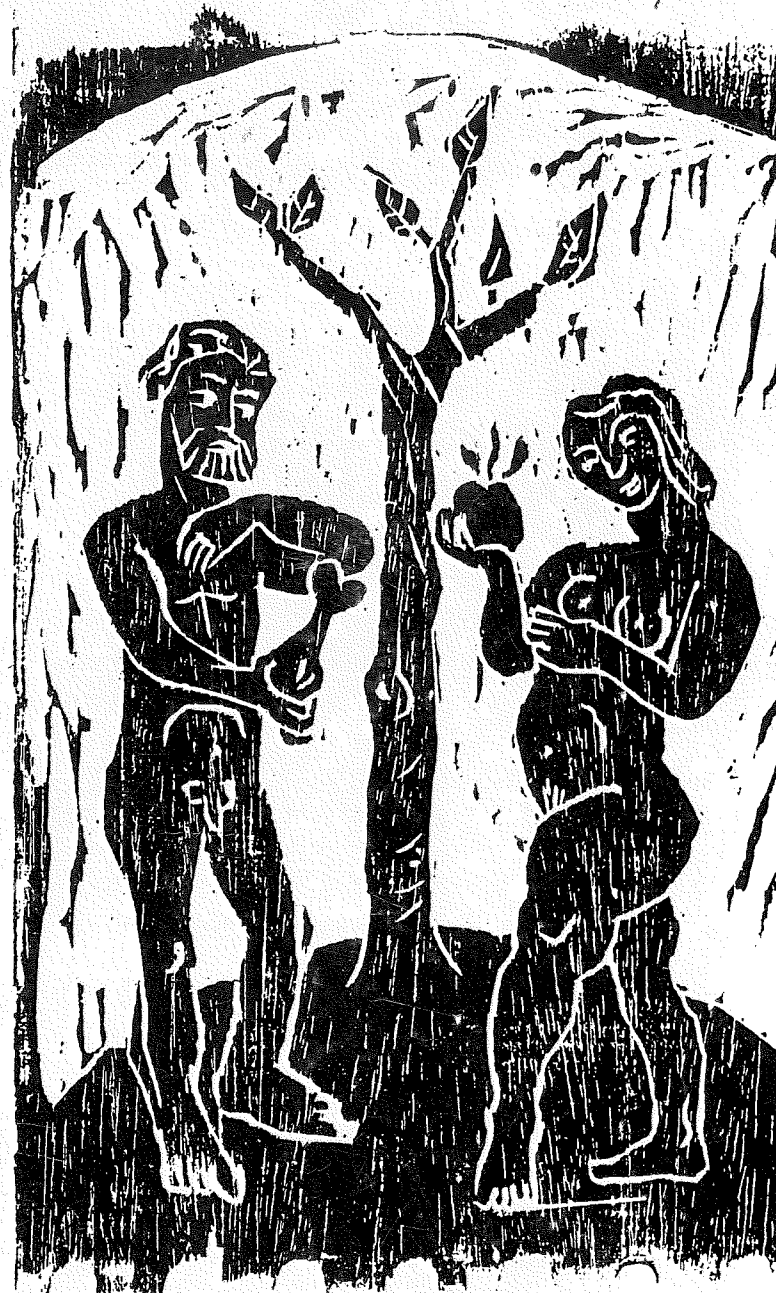


Trouble

The radical feminist magazine

& Strife



Meat, murder and metaphor

Clare Short: annoying men in suits

Getting to grips with the Embryology Bill

Lesbian feminism erupts in East Germany

Helen Lilly: a lesbian life

Growing up in Poland

Charlotte Bunch reviewed

Betty Friedan's classic mistake

No.18
£2.50

Trouble and Strife is cockney rhyming slang for wife. We chose this name because it acknowledges the reality of conflict in relations between women and men. As radical feminists, our politics come directly from this tension between men's power and women's resistance.

Trouble & Strife is produced collectively by Lynn Alderson, Margot Farnham, Cath Jackson, Liz Kelly, Sophie Laws, and Sara Scott, with help from Judy Stevens, Catherine Tidnam, and Alison Dickens. Goodbye and good luck to Susanne Kappeler who is leaving the collective. With many thanks to the Women's Health and Reproductive Rights Centre for the use of their space and resources.

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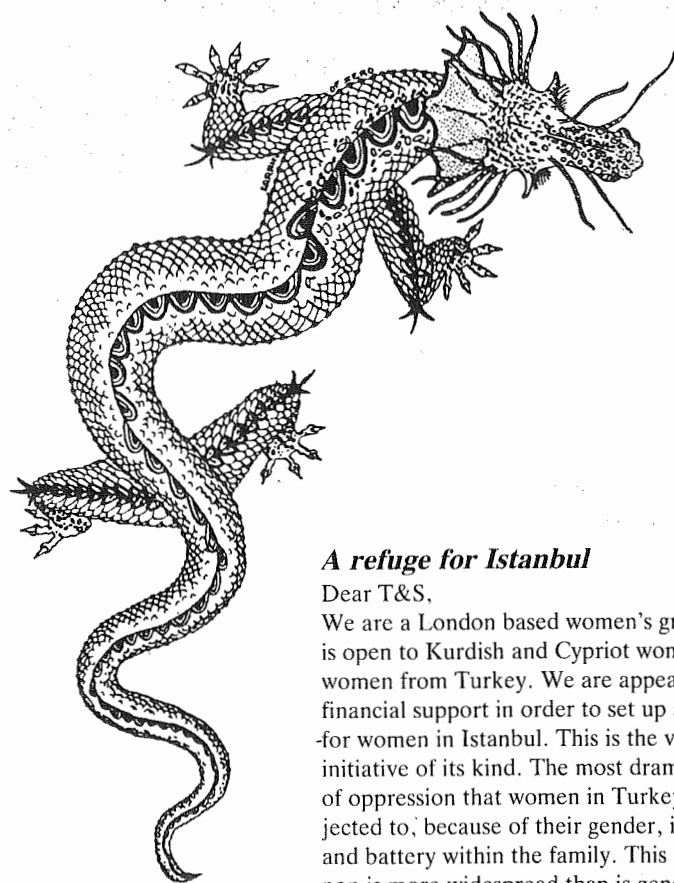
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Letters



A refuge for Istanbul

Dear T&S,

We are a London based women's group which is open to Kurdish and Cypriot women and women from Turkey. We are appealing for financial support in order to set up a refuge for women in Istanbul. This is the very first initiative of its kind. The most dramatic aspect of oppression that women in Turkey are subjected to, because of their gender, is violence and battery within the family. This phenomenon is more widespread than is generally believed. According to one survey, one third of married women are beaten by their husbands or fathers (brothers, uncles etc). Other research shows that 45% of men believe that disobedient women should be beaten.

In Turkey as in other countries, it was the women who brought this problem out into the open and onto the public agenda. A few years ago a judge in the province of Corum in Central Anatolia refused to grant a divorce to a woman battered by her husband. The judge said "Make sure your wife is always pregnant and take a stick to her back."

On May 17th 1987 feminists in Istanbul organised a demonstration which 3,000 people participated in to protest against such legitimisation of wife beating. A series of activities followed constituting the first steps of a campaign against the battering and all kinds of

violence against women. "Raise your voices" (bagir herkez duysun) is the name of a book which was published based on testimonies of about thirty battered women. A solidarity festival was held on October 4th 1987, organised to raise funds for the publication of this book. Lastly, a solidarity network was established as of January 1989 with two telephones where women can call in case of emergencies.

The solidarity campaign gathered experience concerning various forms of support that battered women could be given. However it could not raise the necessary funds required to set up a women's refuge, which we believe is the most effective way to start to combat this problem. The refuge will be important for women not only as a place where their wounds can be healed but also as a place where they can meet other women in the same situation as themselves. Women in this position will have made an important step towards self identity and self confidence.

Women who leave home because of violence do not have many options at the moment other than returning home where they still face the threat of violence. Despite attempts by feminists to campaign for state funding of a refuge, there is a long way to go before there is any chance of success. Therefore we urge you to donate as much as you can in order to establish a women's refuge in Istanbul.

If you need further information about the refuge or the London Women's Group, please contact:

London Turkish Women's Group
c/o 76C Birnam Road
London N4 3LQ.

Cheques should be made payable to London Turkish Women's Group.

Yours in sisterhood

Nuran Dönmez

On behalf of the London Women's Group

Computer foul up at WHRRIC

Due to a hardware fault our database has crashed. As a result, our subscription lists and information kept about various groups and the services they offer, have been erased.

If you subscribe to the WHRRIC newsletter, and have not received our most recent

edition on Women and Ageing (issue no. 7) please get in touch with us immediately. It would also help us if you have details of when your subscription to the newsletter was due to expire. In the event of this information not being available, we will be treating all subscriptions as brand new. If you don't already subscribe now is the chance to do so!

Similarly, if you have a service that is relevant to the thousands of enquiries WHRRIC answers on women's health issues, let us know by sending current information about your organisation.

We apologise for any inconvenience caused, and look forward to hearing from you. Contact: Lorna Campbell, WHRRIC, 52-54 Featherstone Street, London EC1 8RT. 01-251 6333.

Fan mail!

Dear sisters,

Please send me a subscription form for T&S. On reading issues in Bradford University Library, I am happy to find a magazine with so many well written articles on issues highly relevant for those of us involved in a diverse women's movement.

Yours in appreciation and sisterhood
Claire Whiteley

Thank you for such a high quality, well written, thought provoking magazine - keep up the brilliant work.
Donna Thompson

You are doing a really great job with a great magazine. It is a real pleasure to read, both for great radical feminist politics and the good writing and design. Thank you all.
Angela Miles, Canada

I think your magazine is fantastic/wonderful/incredible. I did read somewhere that you were in financial trouble - I sincerely hope not.
Patricia McKean

Letters

In defence of loving too much

Dear T&S,

I was angered by Cath Jackson's article on "Women Who Love Too Much". It appears to me that CJ is saying: women don't *really* get obsessive in sexual relationships, patriarchy is at fault. Well, that's a very fine intellectual critique. But as a guide to living, it's useless.

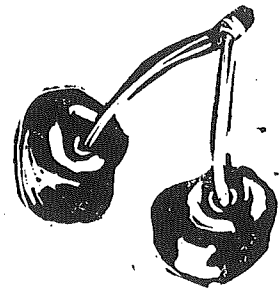
Women *do* get obsessed with their lovers - both male and (sorry to have to tell the truth) female. CJ repeats the common misconception that WWTM is about physical violence. It *isn't*. It's about horrible psychological power games; about obsession which strips a woman of self-respect and purpose. I *know*, it's happened to me. And *please*, feminists everywhere, stop pretending lesbianism is Nirvana. Lesbians can play power-games, and be as cruel and manipulative as anyone else; lesbians aren't female christs. The agony of obsessive love for a cold, distant and manipulative partner is not mitigated by that partner's sex.

CJ is scathing in her analysis of Norwood's theory of the "dysfunctional" family. Why on earth take this stand? I recognise my own family in Norwood's description. Isn't it time that feminists woke up to the truth that a child needn't be raped or assaulted or beaten to be abused - that psychological abuse, row after row, drama after drama, does the trick equally well? I agree; married women are often victims themselves. But married women (including my mother) do emotionally abuse their children.

I agree Norwood's book is flawed, her brain-chemistry theories are laughable, the book is frighteningly over-dramatic and provocative of guilt. But where's your replacement for it, Cath Jackson? To tell women, "Don't bother to extricate yourself, it's *his* fault"? Men and abusive women aren't going to change, and I for one am not going to ruin my life by waiting for them to. Theories, theories, narrow views of right on and right off - it's so bloody easy for you lot, isn't it?

Yours,

Name and address supplied



MEAT AND VEGETABLES

Women as meat. Animals as meat. Who kills and consumes? Carol Adams, author of 'The Sexual Politics of Meat', lays open the metaphors and realities that underpin abuse of women and animals, and reveals an overlapping pornography.

Being a vegetarian reverberates with feminist meaning. That understanding took shape for me one day when I left the British Library and my research on some women of the 1890s whose feminist, working-class newspaper advocated meatless diets, and went through the cafeteria line in a restaurant nearby. Vegetarian food in hand, I descended to the basement. A painting of Henry VIII eating a steak and kidney pie greeted my gaze. On either side of the consuming Henry were portraits of his six wives and other women. Catherine of Aragon held an apple in her hands; the Countess of Mar had a turnip; Anne Boleyn, red grapes; Anne of Cleves, a pear; Jane Seymour, blue grapes; Catherine Howard, a carrot; Catherine Parr, a cabbage.

In western cultures, people with power have always eaten meat. The aristocracy of Europe consumed huge meals of every kind of meat while the labourer consumed the complex carbohydrates. Dietary habits proclaim class distinction, but they proclaim patriarchal distinctions as well. Women, second-class citizens, are more likely to eat what are considered to be second-class foods in a patriarchal culture: vegetables, fruits, and grains rather than meat. A mythology predominates that meat is a masculine food and meat eating a male activity.

Meat textbooks heartily endorse this association. *The Meat We Eat* proclaims meat to be "A Virile and Protective Food", thus "a liberal meat supply has always been associated with a happy and virile people".³ *Meat Technology* informs us that "the virile Australian race is a typical example of heavy meat-eaters".⁴ Leading gourmands refer "to the virile ordeal of spooning the brains directly out of a barbecued calf's head".⁵ *Virile: or having the characteristics of an adult male*, from *vir* meaning *man*. Meat eating measures individual and societal virility.

In fact, men's protein needs are less than those of pregnant and nursing women and the disproportionate distribution of the main protein source occurs when women's need for protein is the greatest. Curiously, we are now being told that one should eat meat (or fish, vegetables, chocolate, and salt) at least six weeks before becoming pregnant if one wants a boy. But if a girl is desired, no meat please, rather milk, cheese, nuts, beans, and cereals.⁶

For men only

Men eat meat, women rarely: a pattern painfully observed in famine situations today. Women are starving at a rate disproportionate to men. Lisa Leghorn and Mary Roodkowsky surveyed this phenomenon in their book *Who*



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The selling should always be specific and mention a definite item.

Wrong: "Anything else?"

Weak: "What about something for breakfast?"

Better: "We have some wonderful ham slices. Mrs Smith - just the thing for breakfast. They're right in the case." Watch her face and if she doesn't show interest then say:

"Or perhaps you'd rather have fresh pork sausage tomorrow for breakfast."

This method centres her interest and attention on one item at time and plainly implies that some meat item is necessary for breakfast.

Hinman and Harris. *The Story of Meat*

The abbess has just put the kipehook on all other purveyors of the French flesh market. She does not keep her meat too long on the hooks, though she will have her price; but nothing to get stale here. You may have your meat dressed to your own liking, and there is no need of cutting twice from one joint; and if it suits your taste, you may kill your own lamb or mutton for her flock is in prime condition, and always ready for sticking. When any of them are fried they are turned out to grass, and sent to the hammer, or disposed of by private contract, but never brought in again; consequently, the rot, bots, glanders, and other diseases incidental to cattle, are not generally known here.

From a nineteenth-century guidebook to brothels²

Really Starves? Women and World Hunger. Women, they conclude, engage in deliberate self-deprivation, offering men the 'best' foods at the expense of their own nutritional needs. For instance, they tell us that:

Ethiopian women and girls of all classes are obliged to prepare two meals, one for the males and a second, often containing no meat or other substantial protein, for the females.⁷

Most food taboos address meat consumption and they place more restrictions on women than on men. The foods commonly forbidden to women are chicken, duck, and pork. Forbidding meat to women in non-technological cultures increases its prestige. Even if the women raise the pigs, as they do in the Solomon Islands, they are rarely allowed to eat the pork. If they get any, it is at the dispensation of their husbands.

This patriarchal custom is found worldwide. In Asia some cultures forbid women to eat fish, seafood, chicken, duck and eggs. In equatorial Africa, the prohibition of chicken to women is common: the Mbum Kpau women do not eat chicken, goat, partridge, or other game birds; the Kufa of Ethiopia punished women who ate chicken by making them slaves; the Walamo put to death anyone who violated the restriction of eating fowl.

Equally, vegetables and other non-meat foods are viewed as women's food, making them undesirable to men. The Nuer men think that eating eggs is effeminate. In other groups men require sauces to disguise the fact that they are eating women's foods.

Men expect to have meat sauces to go with their porridge and will sometimes refuse to eat sauces made of greens or other vegetables, which are said to be women's food.⁸

Gender inequality

What is it about meat that makes it a symbol and celebration of male dominance? In many ways, gender inequality is built into the power structure that meat eating proclaims, because in most cultures men traditionally obtain the meat. Meat is a valuable economic commodity: those who control this commodity achieve power. If men are the hunters, then the control of this economic resource is in their hands. Peggy Sanday surveyed information on over a hundred non-technological cultures and found a correlation between plant-based economies and women's power and animal-based

economies and male power. "In societies dependent on animals, women are rarely depicted as the ultimate source of creative power."⁹

On the other hand, Sanday concluded, in plant-based economies, where men as well as women are dependent on women's activities, by providing a large proportion of the protein food of a society women gain an essential economic and social role.

For example:

The Mundurucu believe that there was a time when women ruled and the sex roles were reversed, with the exception that women could not hunt. During that time women were the sexual aggressors and men were sexually submissive and did women's work. Women controlled the 'sacred trumpets' (the symbols of power) and the men's houses. The trumpets contained the spirits of the ancestors who demanded ritual offerings of meat. Since women did not hunt and could not make these offerings, men were able to take the trumpets from them, thereby establishing male dominance.¹⁰

And again:

The equation is simple: the more important meat is in their life, the greater relative dominance will the men command . . . When meat becomes an important element within a more closely organised economic system so that there exist rules for its distribution, then men already begin to swing the levers of power . . . Women's social standing is roughly equal to men's only when society itself is not formalised around roles for distributing meat.¹¹

Hunter-butcher

In technological societies, the role of hunter has become the role of butcher. Butchering is perceived to be a uniquely male activity. Twenty-two year old French artist Rosa Bonheur learned this when she began going to the slaughterhouses to sketch the animals. She

had sometimes to put up with the scurrility of the butcher boys, who seemed to take keen pleasure in saying rough things in her presence.¹²

Ethel Smyth, British composer and feminist, encountered similar attitudes during her childhood. She bribed the cowman "to let me see a pig killed - conduct which deeply shocked and horrified Johnny who considered such sights a male privilege".¹³ Man's role as butcher reinforces his domination over woman and animals. When a woman is depicted as a butcher, she is shown to be strong and resilient, man-like. And man-like, she must

subjugate her emotions to the task at hand, as in Alice Walker's description: "In real life I am a large-boned woman with rough man-working hands . . . I can kill and clean a hog as mercilessly as a man".¹⁴

One interpretation is that the male role of hunter of animals and butcher has been transposed to the male role of eater of meat and that this accounts for meat's role as symbol of male dominance. But there is much more to meat's role as symbol than this.

Female/vegetable

Meat represents *the essence or principal part of something*, according to the *American Heritage Dictionary*. Thus we have the "meat of the matter", "a meaty question"; to "beef up" something is to improve it. Vegetable, on the other hand, represents the least desirable characteristics: *suggesting or like a vegetable, as in passivity or dullness of existence, monotonous, inactive*. Meat is *something one enjoys or excels in*, vegetable becomes representative of someone who does not enjoy anything: *a person who leads a monotonous, passive, or merely physical existence*.

The word "vegetable" has come to be an expression of criticism or disdain. Colloquially it is a synonym for a person severely brain-damaged or in a coma. In addition, vegetables are thought to have a tranquillising, dulling, numbing effect on people who consume them, so we can not possibly get strength from them. According to this perverse incarnation of Brillat-Savarin's theory that you are what you eat, to eat a vegetable is to become a vegetable.

The word vegetable acts as a synonym for women's passivity because women are supposedly like plants. Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* makes this clear:

The difference between men and women is like that between animals and plants. Men correspond to animals, while women correspond to plants because their development is more placid. (p.263)

From this viewpoint, both women and plants are seen as less developed and less evolved than men and animals. Consequently, women may eat plants, since each is placid; but active men need animal meat.

There is a myth in which the last Bushman flees in the direction opposite from women and their vegetable food. Men's need to disassociate themselves from women's food

has been institutionalised in negative and feminised associations with vegetables.

Meat/woman

A healthy sexual being poses near her drink; she wears bikini panties only and luxuriates on a large chair with her head rested seductively on an elegant lace doily. Her inviting drink, with a twist of lemon, awaits on the table. Her eyes are closed; her facial expression beams pleasure, relaxation, enticement. She is touching her crotch in an attentive, masturbatory action. But a woman does not beckon: a pig does.

"Ursula Hamdress" appeared in *Playbar*, a magazine described by critics as "the pig farmer's *Playboy*".¹⁵ A nonhuman animal has been substituted for a woman in this pornographic representation. Is she inviting someone to rape her or to eat her?

I not long ago described Ursula Hamdress on a panel titled 'Sexual violence: representation and reality' at Princeton's Graduate Women's Studies Conference, 'Feminism and its translations'. In the same month, less than sixty miles away, three women were found chained in the basement of Gary Heidnik's house in Philadelphia. In the kitchen body parts of a woman were discovered in the oven, in a stewpot on the stove, and in the refrigerator. Her arms and legs had been fed to the other women held captive there. One of the survivors reported that during the time that she was chained, Heidnik repeatedly raped her.

I hold that Ursula Hamdress and the women raped, butchered, and eaten under Heidnik's directions are linked by an overlap of cultural images of sexual violence against women.

Meat as metaphor

If animals are alive they cannot be meat. Thus a dead body replaces the live animal. Without animals there would be no meat eating, yet animals themselves are not included in the act of eating meat because they have already been transformed into food.

In many languages, and especially in English, animals are made absent through language that renames their dead bodies as meat before they are eaten. Our culture further refines the term 'meat' with gastronomic language, so we do not conjure dead, butchered





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animals, but cuisine. Language thus contributes even further to animals' absences. Nevertheless, one thing remains certain: one does not eat meat without the death of an animal. Live animals are thus the absent referents in the concept of meat. The absent referent permits us to forget about the animal as an independent entity; it also enables us to resist efforts to make animals present.

There are actually three ways by which animals become absent referents. One is literal: through meat eating they are literally absent because they are dead. Another is definitional: when we eat animals we usually change the way we talk about them; we no longer talk about baby animals but about veal or lamb. The third way is metaphorical: animals become metaphors for describing people's experiences. An example of this is when women who have been raped or battered say, "I felt like a piece of meat". It is clear that meat is functioning as an absent referent when we push the meaning of the metaphor: one cannot truly *feel* like a piece of meat because meat by definition is something violently deprived of all feeling.

A structure of overlapping but absent referents links violence against women and animals. Just as dead bodies are absent from our language about meat, in descriptions of cultural violence women are also often the absent referent. Rape, in particular, carries such potent imagery that the term is transferred from the literal experience of women and applied metaphorically to other instances of violent devastation, such as the "rape" of the earth in ecological writings of the early 1970s. The experience of women thus becomes a vehicle for describing other oppressions. Women, upon whose bodies actual rape is most often committed, become the absent referent when the language of sexual violence is used metaphorically. These terms recall women's experiences but not women.

When I use the term "the rape of animals", the experience of women becomes a vehicle for explicating another being's oppression. Some terms are so powerfully specific to one group's oppression that their appropriation to others is potentially exploitative: for instance, using the "holocaust" for anything but the extermination of Jewish people, or "slavery" for anything but the forced enslavement of black people. Yet feminists, among others, appropriate the

metaphor of butchering without acknowledging the originating oppression of animals that generates the power of the metaphor.

Sexual violence and meat eating intersect in the absent referent. Cultural images of sexual violence, and actual sexual violence, often rely on our knowledge of how animals are butchered and eaten. For example, Kathy Barry tells us of "*maisons d'abattage*" (literal translation: houses of slaughter) where six or seven girls each serve 80 to 120 customers a night.¹⁶ In addition, the bondage equipment



of pornography – chains, cattle prods, nooses, dog collars, and ropes – suggests the control of animals. Similarly, the impact of a seductive pig relies on an absent but imaginable, seductive, fleshy woman. Ursula Hamdress is both metaphor and joke; her jarring (or jocular) effect is based on the fact that we are all accustomed to seeing women depicted in such a way. Ursula's image refers to something that is absent: the human female body. The oppression of one group, women, is reinforced by the oppression of another, animals – and vice versa.

The interaction between physical oppression and the dependence on metaphors that rely on the absent referent shows how we distance ourselves from whatever is different by equating it with something we have already objectified. Keith Thomas describes how infants, youth, the poor, Black people, Irish people, insane people and women are considered beastlike:

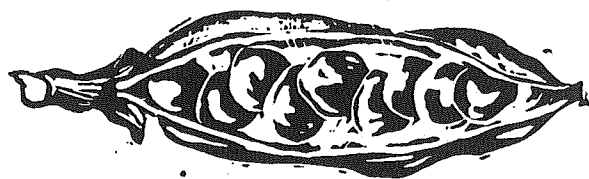
Once perceived as beasts, people were liable to be treated accordingly. The ethic of human domination removed animals from the sphere of human concern. But it also legitimised the ill-treatment of those humans who were in a supposedly animal condition.¹⁷

Sexual violence and meat eating

Returning to the issue of the intertwined oppressions of sexual violence and meat eating, it is instructive to consider incidents of

male violence. Men's descriptions of their own violence suggest the structure of overlapping but absent referents. In defence of the "Bunny Hop" – in which rabbits are killed by clubs, feet, stones and so on – sponsored by a North Carolina American Legion post, one organiser explained:

What would all these rabbit hunters be doing if they weren't letting off all this steam? I'll tell you what they'd be doing. They'd be drinking and carousing and beating their wives.



One common form of domestic violence is the killing of a family's pet. Here the absent referent is clearly in operation: the threatened woman or child is the absent referent in pet murders. Within the symbolic order, the fragmented referent no longer recalls itself but something else. Arthur Gary Bishop, a child molester and murderer of five boys, relived his first murder by buying and killing at least 20 puppies. An example of a man's killing his wife's pet instead of his wife can be found in an early twentieth-century short story, Susan Glaspell's 'A Jury of Her Peers', which exposes this function of the absent referent and reveals that a woman's peers, other women, recognise this function.¹⁸

Generally, however, the absent referent, because of its absence, prevents our experiencing connections between oppressed groups.

Andrea Dworkin states that pornography depicts woman as a "female piece of meat" and Gena Corea observes that "women in brothels can be used like animals in cages".¹⁹ Linda Lovelace claims that when presented to Xaviera Hollander for inspection, "Xaviera looked me over like a butcher inspecting a side of beef".²⁰ When one film actress committed suicide, another said, "They treat us like meat". Of this statement Susan Griffin writes: "She means that men who hire them treat them as less than human, as matter without spirit".²¹ In each of these examples, feminists have used violence against animals as metaphor, literalising and feminising the

metaphor. Thus Mary Daly appropriates the word "butcher" to describe lobotomists, since the majority of lobotomies have been performed on women.

Because of this dependence on the imagery of butchering, radical feminist discourse has failed to integrate the literal oppression of animals into our analysis of patriarchal culture or to acknowledge the strong historical alliance between feminism and vegetarianism. Whereas women may say they feel like pieces of meat, or that they are treated like pieces of meat – emotionally butchered and physically battered – animals actually are made into pieces of meat. Radical feminist theory and discourse thus ignores the literal fate of animals, participating in the patriarchal representational structure of the absent referent and upholding what they seek to expose.

The cycle of obliteration

What we require is a theory that traces parallel trajectories: the common oppressions of women and animals, and the problems of metaphor and the absent referent. I propose a cycle of objectification, fragmentation, and consumption, which links butchering and sexual violence in our culture. Objectification permits an oppressor to view another being as an object; the oppressor then violates this being by object-like treatment – for example, the rape of women that denies women freedom to say no; the butchering of animals converts animals from living breathing beings into dead objects, which can then be eaten. A subject is viewed, objectified through metaphor, then severed from its original meaning and, finally, consumed – obliterated – by being made to exist only as what it represents.

This is what happens to women: and this is what happens when feminists use the metaphors of meat and butchering to describe what happens to women. Feminist theorists take us to the intersection of the oppression of women and the oppression of animals and then do an immediate about-face, exploiting animals' abuse to forward women's issues.

A good example of this is where Mary Daly, in her *First New Intergalactic Wickedary*, defines "butcher" as "a bloody operator, esp. one who receives professional recognition and prestige for his 'successes'".²² Her failure to include animals in this definition is all the



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more notable because her book discusses hunting and vivisection, argues for our ability to communicate with animals, and is dedicated to the late Andrée Collard who has written on violence against animals.

What is absent from much feminist theory that relies on metaphors of animals' oppression for illuminating women's experience is the reality behind the metaphor. There is a model for us of living, breathing con-

nections awaiting incorporation in our theory; a logical next step in the progression of feminist thought is politicising the ambiguity and slippage inherent in the metaphors of sexual violence, as well as their social, historical, and animal origins. □

This piece is taken from *The Sexual Politics of Meat: a Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*, to be published in Britain by Polity Press in April 1990.

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18. Susan Glaspell *A Jury of Her Peers* (Ernest Benn Ltd 1927)
19. Andrea Dworkin *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (Perigee Books 1981); Gena Corea *The Hidden Malpractice: How American Medicine Mistreats Women* (William Morrow & Co 1977)
20. Linda Lovelace with Mike McGrady *Ordeal* (Citadel Press 1980)
21. Susan Griffin *Rape: The Power of Consciousness* (Harper & Row 1979)
22. Mary Daly *Websters' First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language* (Beacon Press 1987)

Notes

1. Robert B. Hinman and Robert B. Harris *The Story of Meat* (Swift & Co 1939 1942)
2. From *The Man of Pleasure's Pocket Book* quoted in Ronald Pearsall *The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality* (The Macmillan Co 1969)
3. P. Thomas Ziegler *The Meat We Eat* (The Interstate Printers and Publishers 1966)
4. Frank Gerrard *Meat Technology: A Practical Textbook for Student and Butcher* (Northwood Publications Inc 1945 1977)
5. Waverley Root and Richard de Rochemont *Eating in America: A History* (William Morrow 1976)

Christina Schenk is one of a small but growing movement of publicly active feminists in east Germany (GDR). Mary Wigzell interviewed her following the first meeting of the lesbian feminist working party of the Independent Women's Organisation on January 8th 1990.

Mary Wigzell: What is the Women's Organisation?

Christina Schenk: The Women's Organisation is made up of various women's groups that existed as independent groups beforehand. The Women's Organisation is standing in the elections together with the Green Party and is involved in the roundtable talks with Hans Modrow, the prime minister. I am the representative of the Women's Organisation in these discussions and we have put various demands forward in an attempt to make sure that women are not forgotten. To look at lesbians' needs specifically, and to put them on the agenda, there is now a lesbian feminist working party as part of the Women's Organisation.

One issue we have raised recently with Modrow is violence against women. Up till now it has not been officially accepted that violence against women exists. A doctor from Erfurt was present at talks with Modrow and was able to relate her direct experience of women visiting her who had been battered. But generally we have no statistics to prove that it goes on here. There is also now a group at the Humbolt University in the department of law that is concerned with the issue of violence against women. So it is beginning to be taken seriously outside, as well as inside, the women's movement.

There are also no statistics on sexual violence. It is, however, accepted as a problem. Criminal law is being revised, as rape for example is not recognised as possible in marriage. That must be changed, and women who have been raped need more rights too. A woman should have the right to be interviewed by a policewoman and to be seen by a female doctor. At the moment she has not got the right to demand this. The law needs to be much more clearly formulated in women's favour.

MW: I gather you must also submit information from other countries where they have already changed, or are trying to change, laws in women's favour – that's very exciting.

CS: Yes, we have talked to Modrow about proportional representation of women in positions of power, we want to establish a quota. We mentioned that Sweden has had good experiences with this method, and Modrow agreed to get the documents from Sweden and have a look at them. I find that very encouraging.

MW: Was there a women's movement in the GDR before 1989?

CS: There have been and still are many women's groups. There were feminist groups that met under the protection of the church. There were separate groups for different concerns, such as violence against women, feminist theology, single mothers. However, it wasn't a movement as such, every group existed on its own. Communication between groups in different towns was difficult as not many of us have telephones, and we don't have fax machines or anything like that. It is only in the last year that we have tried to network with various women's groups. It is now these groups that have formed the core of the Women's Organisation.

Apart from these groups there was the Women's Democratic Alliance of Germany, which I would not describe as part of the women's movement. They organise leisure activities, courses in baking, knitting etc, and deal with problems like 'my husband is going into the army – what do I do now?' It undoubtedly has its place and a lot of women will stay there, but we want something else – we want a political women's movement.

Lesbians in the GDR

MW: What is the legal situation for lesbians in East Germany?

CS: Since summer 1989 there is no law against lesbianism. There is a clause about age – it is illegal under sixteen – but now lesbian and gay relationships are only illegal under particular circumstances; that is if violence is used or it is an abuse say of a teacher/pupil relationship.

The law which forbade homosexuality was abolished in 1968 and replaced with one that applied to women as well as men and made it a punishable offence to practise lesbianism and homosexuality with anyone under 18. This is the law that was abolished in 1989. However, there is still a lot of discrimination, and this comes up particularly in divorce proceedings. It is for this reason that I feel it is important to have a law against discrimination.

MW: So what is the situation for lesbian mothers in East Germany?

CS: Firstly, there are a lot of lesbian mothers, I'd estimate about a third to a half of lesbians in the GDR are mothers. Legally in a divorce case it is not possible to take the children away from the mother because she is a lesbian. You can only say she is less suited to bringing up the children than the husband. To show this you have to bring in experts to testify that the mother cannot bring the children up or that they would bring them up worse than the ex-husband. This has been tried and has succeeded, but you really have to prove it, and it isn't easy.

MW: Has it ever happened yet that a lesbian mother has been 'out' in court during divorce proceedings?

CS: Lesbian mothers on the whole are not so public here yet. Things are in their early stages, but yes I do know of a case. The judge talked to the woman beforehand (the judge was a woman). The woman was young, 23-4, had a two year old son and wanted a divorce. It was known that she was a lesbian and she got custody of the child.

MW: Are the demands of lesbian mothers included in the demands you are putting forward at the round table discussions?

CS: Not directly, but lesbian mothers would be included in the clause we want to pass which would make it illegal to discriminate on the grounds of sexual orientation.

Lesbians in the Church/the Sunday Club

MW: What sort of lesbian/gay activity was there before 1989?

CS: About six years ago the first homosexual working party was set up under the protection of the Church in Berlin. But after only the first or second meeting the women involved decided they wanted to meet alone. The men talked too loud, too often and were always interrupting us. We wanted to speak for ourselves. We have another reality, another perspective, different issues. Since then there has been two groups: Lesbians in the Church and Gay Men in the Church. The Church offered space to meet and opportunities for reproducing material. This was very difficult to find outside the Church, as these groups did not fit into the State's view of things.

The Lesbians in the Church group had its own structure. There were about seven or eight similar groups in the GDR and they met together once a year. We informed ourselves about politics and decided which demands we were going to put forward, and discussed how we could change the situation for lesbians and gays. Up till now we haven't had much success! I am no longer involved in this group, but am now very active in the independent Women's Organisation.

One longstanding group that has existed outside the Church since 1976 is the Sunday Club. They found a place to meet in 1986 after a lot of difficulties. They hold quite structured meetings on specific topics and people in the organisation hold positions of office within it. They seem more concerned to meet and discuss things rather than make themselves more public. They have a programme of events, and many different interest groups, but they don't see liberation as one of their demands.

They also have a network of groups throughout the GDR, and in September '89 they became recognised as an official organisation by the State. Up to now as a matter of principle they have always met together, as lesbians and gay men. However, very recently a group of lesbians in the Sunday Club have





started to meet on their own. So, maybe, they are also beginning to understand that it is two different things.

After the first lesbian group formed in Berlin, it took four years before groups formed in other cities. It took men and women a long time to understand that they had to separate, that we have different issues. Now all of these issues are coming up yet again, from young women in Berlin joining the Women's Organisation lesbian feminist working party, and they also have different demands again.

MW: How do you see the lesbian movement being linked to women's liberation?

CS: I see the problems that lesbians and women face in general as very closely linked. Fundamentally it is sexism, patriarchal structures, the relationship between men and women. I see that lesbians experience these particularly acutely.

MW: And what is the situation for Black lesbians here?

CS: The issue is taboo, or has been. It has always been said that we are open to everyone and in solidarity with all, that there is no problem. But Black people here do have difficulties. There are certainly problems for children in schools, especially if their parents are of different races. And Black lesbians face double oppression, firstly as Black women and then as lesbians. But there aren't enough to form a group of Black lesbians. I know of two or three who are isolated, but not in a group. There is racism here, but racism has not generally been accepted as a problem by most East Germans.

There is racism here

MW: Not accepted in relation to Polish or Jewish people either?

CS: Yes, although Jewish culture is not really much in evidence any more. 'Jewish' is still used as an abusive term, but nobody really knows any more what a Jewish person is. There is racism towards Polish people, but up till now it has not been recognised. It has always been clear to me that a lot has remained, in fact, from fascist times. The government has now introduced restrictions on foreigners buying goods. This was because a lot of Poles (although not only Poles) bought subsidised goods here and resold them

in West Berlin, and then exchanged West German marks for East German marks over here. There was a very high profit margin involved, so they limited foreign nationals to only buying what they needed for everyday living. Shop assistants started demanding people show their passports and there were some unpleasant scenes. They then wouldn't sell Polish people anything but the bare essentials, and so it all came to a head.

People come here from Vietnam, Mozambique and other African countries to work in the GDR, but only for a maximum of five years. This is not a very multi-cultural society. People don't settle here, they remain invisible and they leave few cultural traces behind them. There is also violence against Vietnamese and African people, these incidents are now reported in newspapers, but before they were not. So perhaps racism is beginning to be recognised as a problem.

Exciting times

MW: What is there in terms of women's culture in the GDR?

CS: There is one official women's newspaper called *Für Dich* ('For You'), but there is also a lesbian newsletter called *Frau Anders*. This was started by a group of women in Jena, and has been running for a year. Up to now it has not had state permission to be reproduced so it has been circulated through the Church. It covers a wide variety of issues from lesbians in education, women's language, alcohol and tranquilliser dependency. It has information about lesbian groups and events, contact addresses and book reviews.

I think lots of things will start to happen now it is possible to publish something without state permission. Lots of women have ideas for films, books etc. These are very exciting times for us, and there is a lot of work for the few women who are actively involved in politics. We want to see changes in the law and generally want questions about lesbians and gays that have remained closed for so long to be dealt with now along with other issues. □

Since this interview took place a law has been passed in the GDR concerning membership of political parties and organisations, which forbids discrimination on several grounds including age, race and sexual orientation.

of eggs and men

The government's Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill is currently progressing through parliament. As the opponents of the bill argue over which amendments to support, and the Socialist Workers Party abandons any pretence of defending the rights of lesbians, Pat Spallone examines the implications of the legislation for women and asks whom it seeks to protect.

Estranged husbands or unmarried fathers will be given a veto over what happens to the frozen embryo they have fertilised under the Government's controversial Embryo Bill.¹

That's what *The Times* predicted last September, and it indicates what is at stake for women under the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill 1989. The Bill regulates use of IVF (in vitro fertilisation), other techniques that require the removal of women's eggs, surrogacy, human embryo research and related matters such as 'egg donation', the freezing of eggs, sperm and embryos. It regulates donor insemination by the same mechanisms as well, not because insemination is a scientist-controlled reproductive technology like IVF, not because it is open to commercial exploitation like surrogacy, but because lesbians and single women use it as a reproductive option. The unique biological, social and ethical implications of IVF provided a golden opportunity for state regulation of insemination under the rubric 'artificial' (non-coital) reproduction.

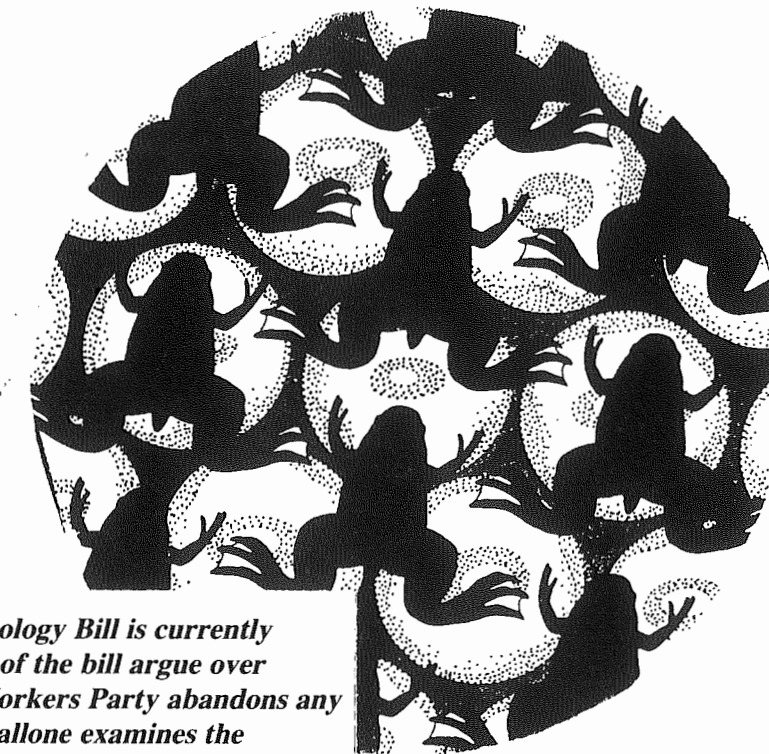
This is protectionist legislation, but if women are protected at all, we come at the bottom of the heap of contesting interests: scientists, doctors, fathers, the state, and each of their claims on the 'embryo'. As the case

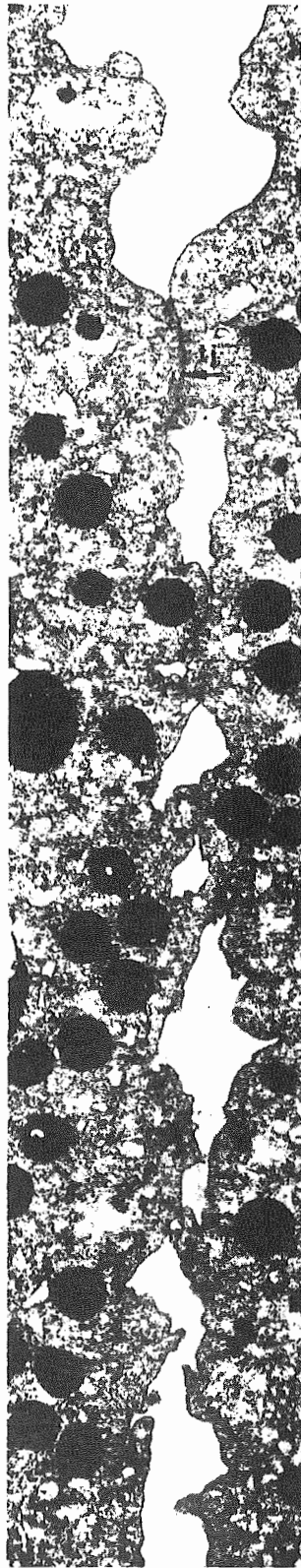
quoted above illustrates, government intent is firmly placed in re-asserting or expanding men's reproductive 'rights' at the expense of women's: if men are given 'equal rights' over a frozen embryo, would they some day be allowed to veto an abortion?

That all women are being affected is becoming clear, if not from the words of the legislation itself, then through what it ignores, and the support legislation and amendments that may come with it. Since last autumn, we have witnessed intentions to use the bill to lower the time limit of legal abortion and to deny legal access by lesbians and single women to donor insemination services. Further, as a worker at British Pregnancy Advisory Service recently noticed, women who would otherwise not be involved in issues around abortion and reproductive rights are concerned about other repercussions, such as the registration of individuals as infertile, or the possibility of needing marriage certificates to receive insemination. The Embryology Bill might as well be called the Status of Women (Reproduction) Bill.

Abortion connection

This legislation has been long in coming. Its terms were set out in the Warnock Report





(1984), the report of the Committee of Inquiry on Human Fertilisation and Embryology. The government, which is guardedly pro-embryo-research, did not want to touch it with a barge pole because of the certain anti-abortion activity it musters. They finally offered the Bill with a free conscience vote on embryo research offering two options. One clause bans embryo research altogether; the other allows licensed research up to the formation of the embryo's primitive streak² at about 14 days after fertilisation.

These, the only options available, are grounded in terms of embryo protection. Both clauses support a claim that 'society's' (read: men's) interests are served by protecting embryos. Women remain excluded, unprotected and worse, vulnerable to state and medical sanctions on women's behaviour in the name of the protection of 'embryos'. The two clauses may differ clearly in implication for anti-abortionists and embryo researchers, but not for women.

Erosion of women's rights

It is difficult to predict what will actually happen after the Embryology Act is passed – it is destined to pass in some form or other – but there are many doors left wide open for attacking women's rights. Consider what happened in the USA. Women have been forced under court order to undergo caesarian sections against their will when their doctors claim that otherwise the fetus would be put at risk. The legal basis for the court orders comes from the Supreme Court's 1973 decision in *Roe vs Wade* which, on the one hand relegalised abortion, but on the other hand established the idea of legal protection of fetuses after 24 weeks' gestation. The most vulnerable women in the US population – poor, Black, and Hispanic women – are overwhelmingly the ones who are subject to court ordered caesarians. The lesson is that any legal decision which philosophically rests on the status of an embryo or fetus, as does the Embryology Bill, is dangerous for women.

There is another dimension to the 'anti' vs 'pro' research debate. Many feminists, including me, do not support embryo research because of what it means for women. Despite the term 'embryo research', what we are talking about is research on women and using parts of women's bodies. It requires that

many women take superovulatory drugs to stimulate the ovaries and control the menstrual cycle so that many eggs can be removed and made available, not only for infertility treatment, but for all kinds of research aims. Many questions that have yet to be properly discussed arise: the ethics of using human subjects, women, as the source of such research; the risks the interventions pose, such as the risks of the fertility drugs and hormones being used; the lack of re-assessment of the medical worth of IVF and related procedures in the face of continuing high incidence of multiple pregnancies and low success rates (less than 10% of women who enter programmes go home with a baby); and not least, how much control of reproduction is taken away from women, and put in the hands of medical scientists as the uses of these methods expand to include, say, sex-selection, or IVF-surrogacy, or, some day, gene manipulation.

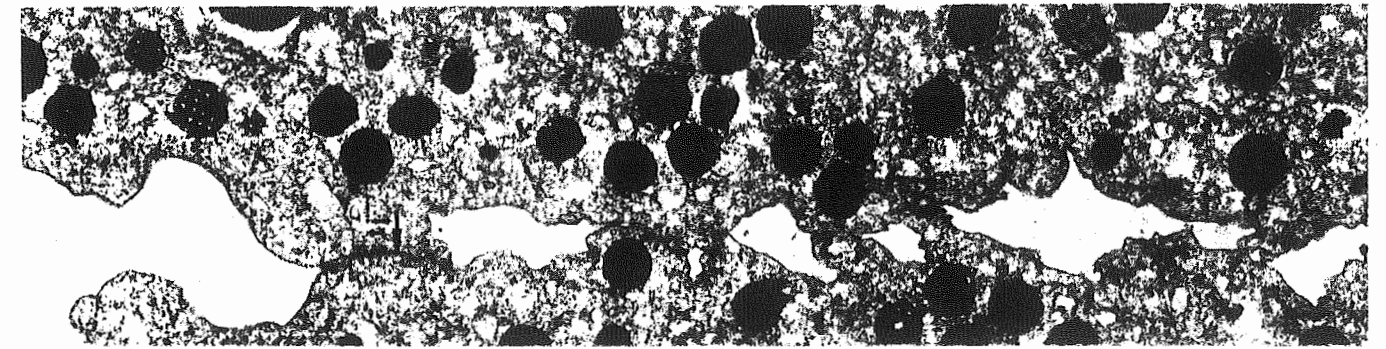
Of course these are questions that should be basic to biomedical ethics in the whole area of reproductive medicine, not just IVF and embryo research, and not just because these matters are the subject of legislation. But it is most significant that they can be ignored in the legislative process.

The Bill passed through the House of Lords in February, which voted overwhelmingly (234 to 80) to allow embryo research, after two and a half hours of impassioned speeches by, among others, the Archbishop of York, who read science at University, Lord Hailsham, the former Tory Lord Chancellor, and Lord Walton, a former neurologist. Baroness Elles (Con) objected, with the rarely heard argument that the research affects the bodies of women in adverse ways, but these claims were called "incredible".³

Loyal to science, not women

The Bill creates a Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority, under the Secretary of State for Health. This will replace the Voluntary Licensing Authority (VLA, also known as the Interim Authority) which has been operating since 1985.

The VLA was formed by the Medical Research Council (MRC) and the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG) in anticipation of Government moves to create a binding Authority. The VLA's chair and many members are lay (non-medical) and



women, but it remains that the scientific and medical bodies most interested in expanding the use of IVF and embryo research, the MRC and RCOG, nominated its members, so that a heavy measure of its loyalties lie with research scientists.

The VLA is supposed to be working in the interests of the public and society, and hopefully (but don't hold your breath) women are included here.

True, the VLA has addressed concerns of women on two issues by coming down on certain practitioners for dramatically unethical practices such as using financial incentives to induce women to donate eggs, and inserting too many embryos into a woman's womb at one time. But multiple births are still a big problem. The protection of women is measured.

Indeed, one of the most woman-insulting threats in the 'embryo research' debate has come from the VLA. Remember, they are not supposed to be a lobby for the medical research establishment. Yet in a recent report, the VLA promoted the 'pro-research' clause of the Embryology Bill, saying that a vote banning embryo research "is likely to mean that . . . Women undergoing any new treatment related to IVF (and their pre-embryos)* will become experimental subjects. They will have to undergo the risk, anxiety and expense of new 'procedures' which could be potentially damaging to them and their babies, untested by *in vitro* research"³ (p11). Who do they think have been the experimental subjects all along? Who do they think has been paying the high costs of mostly private practice IVF? Will they actually allow acknowledged unethical practice, that is, having women undergo risk, anxiety, and experimentation?

This is sobering: not only do they finally put their foot in their mouths that women are the invisible experimental clinical and re-

search subjects, but they predict that women will remain unprotected should embryo research be banned. Are they saying that there is no mechanism to ensure that acknowledged unethical practice does not happen?

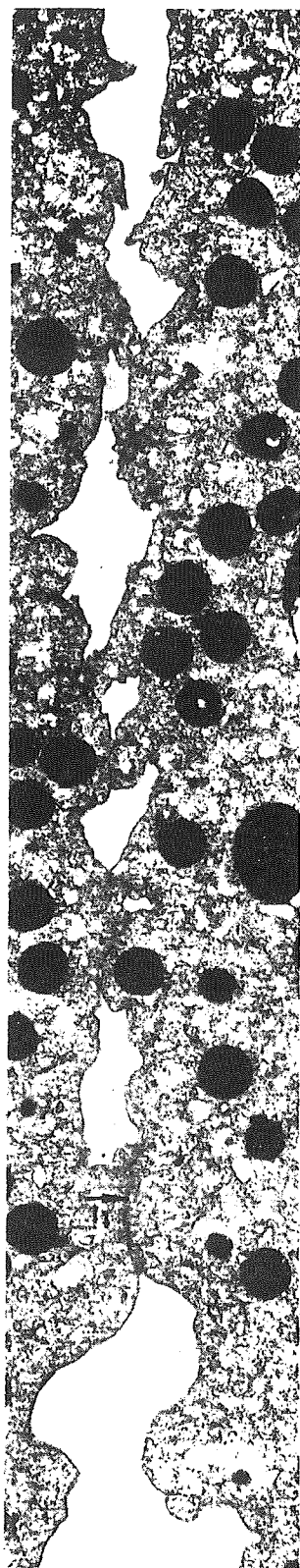
Certainly the Embryology Bill creates no mechanism for protection of women. While page after page of the Bill delineates the accountability of doctors and scientists to the licensing Authority, and the powers and role of the Authority to regulate doctors and scientists who use eggs, sperm and embryos, there is no question of medical and scientific accountability to women. There is no recourse for women, no special place to turn for support or complaint.

I suppose someone will make the argument that present codes of practice and hospital ethics committees provide a place for protection of the human subjects of medical research, but that is a cop out. The same argument can be made for everything else in the bill. The point is, the state has said that it must make special rules about some aspects of these practices, but not other aspects. If the social and biological effects of these 'medical' developments are considered so extraordinary (and they are, but not entirely in the way that government and the medical establishment sees the problems), why are they not seen in terms of their social, including physical, effects on women? In short, because the present Bill accepts the terms of science, and it serves to protect it to an extraordinary extent.

Protection of science

For example, on the subject of 'embryo research', the Bill lists acceptable reasons for granting a licence, namely, studying infertility and causes of miscarriage, inventing new contraceptives, and for genetic research and screening. But it adds that a licence may be

*The term "pre-embryo" was invented by the VLA to mean the embryo up to 14 days after fertilisation.



granted "more generally for the purposes of increasing knowledge" about embryos⁴ (p26). Since almost *any* biological research on cells (here, embryo cells) can be said to inform a 'medical' event, almost *any* research is, in principle, acceptable.

For another example of the acceptance of scientific self-definition in matters that affect women and society, although the bill bans genetic engineering of human embryos, it also leaves room for it to happen: "A licence under this paragraph (ie for research) cannot authorise altering the genetic structure of any cell while it forms part of an embryo, except in such circumstances (if any) as may be specified in or determined in pursuance of regulations"⁵ (p26). There are a number of supposedly acceptable scientific reasons, such as growing genetically specific embryonic tissue for transplants. Again, any promising reason can be drummed up.

Who is the mother?

Meanwhile, the Embryology Bill invests the medical world with more authority over reproductive practices in the name of therapy. While commercial surrogacy is a criminal offence under the Surrogacy Arrangements Act 1985, the question of surrogacy as an infertility therapy is left open and in the hands of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority. Surrogacy-for-therapy, if allowed at all, will be under state and medical control. Just like donor insemination will be.

Whether the criminalisation of non-licensed donor insemination services and sperm banking will hinder women's self-insemination groups is not clear. The consensus seems to be that the law will not bother with women doing it ourselves – in groups or alone. But the new law will undoubtedly hinder the access of lesbians and single women to the services of clinics, which will require a licence to keep sperm and administer insemination, and therefore will have to comply with the Authority's new code of practice, which will likely include restrictions on eligibility, as well as the registration of parents, children and donors, and biological information on all of these.

Since 1987, a consenting male partner of a woman receiving insemination is the father in law. The Bill establishes that the same will hold for women who give birth in conjunction

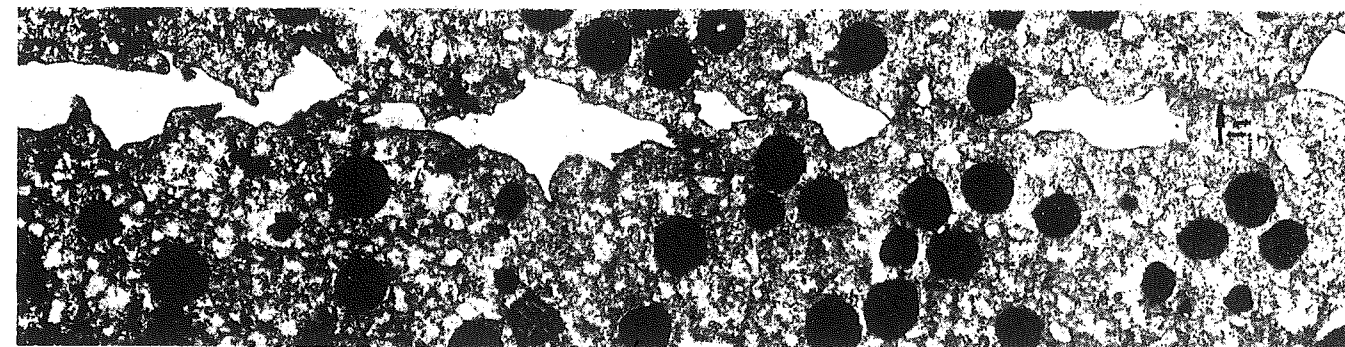
with the use of eggs from another woman. Egg donation is made equivalent to sperm donation. But, of course, there is more to reproduction than this. Women's social status has been affected by the egg-removal approach to reproduction in a unique way. For the first time in human history the question 'who is the biological mother?' is asked. Is it the woman who gives birth, or the woman whose egg was used? Due to the importance placed on genes and heredity, this has become a significant question, but has not warranted much reflection. The Bill takes care of the question of motherhood by simply stating that the mother in law is the woman who gives birth, no matter where the eggs come from. On the other hand, paternity identity and rights have received a lot of attention.

Genetics and reproduction

It probably comes as no surprise that the state promotes control of those reproductive practices which can be used to reassert patriarchal norms: the primacy of the heterosexual nuclear family, and men's rights as husbands and fathers. But the scope of state investment in biomedical technology runs deeper. From the beginning, high on the agenda of research have been the promises of genetic science.

Infertility specialist Robert Winston of Hammersmith Hospital has criticised the hype surrounding IVF as infertility treatment, considering the shabby state of infertility services generally,^{**} and IVF's low success rates. But Winston is also chief of the country's best known embryo screening research team. He is pursuing IVF's potential for 'preimplantation diagnosis' (genetic screening of IVF embryos). But why they insist on preimplantation screening when it means that yet more women will have to be willing to undergo IVF, with its low success rates, and attendant risks to women and the babies born? Will all women and men in the population who are carriers for, say, cystic fibrosis, be supposed to consider that the woman of the couple go through high-cost, high-intervention, low-success, possibly risky IVF?

The expansion of eugenic screening is part of a further shift toward looking to the individual's biological faults and looking away from the social and economic factors of illnesses – be they environmental pollutants (eg dioxin or radiation contamination), standard



of living, primary health care, prescribed pharmaceuticals. (The day after I wrote this sentence, a headline in *The Guardian* read "No babies, advice at Sellafield", referring to the finding that the children of fathers exposed to radiation are at greater risk of leukemia).⁶

What does this mean with regard to the status of disabled people? Feminists speaking as disabled women have also been challenging the assumptions at the bottom of unquestioned eugenic screening. The screening that occurs today already can be seen to have social repercussions.

I do not wish to negate the wishes of those women who seek prenatal or preconception screening because of personal fears about giving birth to a child with a hereditary condition. But I do think that there is much that has to be discussed behind the present relentless push toward genetic medicine being forced by clinicians and genetic scientists at present, with little public debate, not to mention a gender-sensitive discussion of how all the interventions into female fertility and pregnancy will affect women's lives, and the pressures to undergo these treatments. Certainly, there is a complexity of women's feelings and experiences, and some women feel there is no choice in the matter, with social services for the parents of disabled children dwindling.

Conflicting interests

Reproductive technologies go hand in hand with genetic technologies. It is, scientifically speaking, a given. And the pursuit of embryology and genetics are, commercially speaking, part of the growth field of biotechnology. Pharmaceutical companies, many of whom have expanded their interests to include other biotechnologies, are funding research and clinical practice in the fertility-drug and IVF arena. This represents a huge conflict of

interest. So where is the discussion? Not in the so-called ethical debate on the Embryology Bill. It is as if the motivations of industries and companies in promoting these methods do not exist.

The Embryology (sic) Bill is not simply about embryo research and medical treatment. It is not even simply about embryo protection. It is about who will control certain reproductive practices, who will be protected and who will have authority over certain forms of reproductive behaviour. It is about the terms of the partnership between state and medicine and science on many planes. It rests on patriarchal assumptions about who shall have children, who shall not, and how, and why.

The effects of these regulations on women have been ignored precisely because state, medical and scientific concern is centred on the 'embryo', not women, as the subject of 'human fertilisation and embryology. You would hardly know from it that embryology is the study of pregnancy.

One thing is clear regarding this Bill: women are the losers. The York Women's Reproductive Rights Campaign has decided not to support the Bill in any way, but to work at raising consciousness about it and at recasting the debate in terms of what effects these developments have on women. There can be many levels of raising awareness, from examining the health risks of the drugs to questioning the role of doctors and scientists in shaping and justifying reproductive controls that are oppressive to women.

I suppose it would be too much to expect laws regulating biomedical technology that would protect women. It would let too many cats out of too many bags. □

For ongoing information about the Bill and the Campaign for Access to Donor Insemination contact WHRRIC, 52 Featherstone St, London.

Footnotes 1. *The Times*, 4/9/89, John Lewis, 'Embryo Bill's veto for fathers to open up legal minefield.

2. The beginning of the formation of the spinal column.

3. *The Guardian*, 9/2/90, Patrick Wintour, 'Peers back experiments on embryos; and Lords vote for embryo research'.

4. MRC/RCOG, *IVF Research in the UK*, November 1989 available from the ILA Secretariat, 20 Park Crescent, London W1N 4AL.

5. *Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill*, HMSO, 1989 (ISBN 0 10 400190 9).

6. *The Guardian*, 22/2/90, 'No babies, advice at Sellafield'. Patricia Spallone is author of *Beyond Conception*.

** See *Infertility Services: a Desperate Case* (1988) by Naomi Pfeffer and Allison Quick, a report for the Greater London Association of Community Health Councils, 100 Park Village East, London NW1 3SR.

Thanks to Debbie Steinberg for her help and comments.

annoying men in suits



Labour MP Clare Short has won a reputation for championing women's rights in parliament – most notably with her “Page Three Bill” to ban ‘girlie’ photos from the tabloids. Here she talks to Cath Jackson about feminism, action against pornography and Labour's new Shadow Ministry for Women.

Cath Jackson: You have a reputation as probably the most feminist of MPs in parliament. Would you say that's right?

Clare Short: I wouldn't claim that. I don't know about all, but the majority of Labour women would call themselves feminist so I wouldn't dream of claiming to be more feminist than anyone else. And there's at least one Tory – Emma Nicholson – who would call herself a feminist.

In the early days of the women's movement I wasn't active within it; didn't belong to a women's group. I was very active on the issue of racism, prisons, Northern Ireland, things that had bumped into my life. I was totally sympathetic to the demand for equality for women, but that was because I was brought up quite like that in my family. I've got five sisters and we're a very close family, so in a sense I had some of the closeness of women's groups from them.

So it isn't that my practice wasn't feminist, but I felt much more deeply part of the movement of women after I was elected. It wasn't just meeting all these men in their silly suits. I can remember early on I made a speech about low pay and got a flurry of letters from women saying “Thank you so much, I've been low paid all my life and I'm thinking it will happen to my daughter and it's so good that you're there”. I felt deeply moved and responsible because there's so few of us here – but also there was something very comforting and strong that those women

looked to me and wrote to me or said things to me at meetings which made me feel very good – that I was sort of bonded to them. The way people wrote and spoke at meetings and got excited – it really strengthened my commitment to the whole agenda.

But I've been fairly uncompromising all my life about women's equality. I can remember when I was in the civil service and we went on this trip round the Indian subcontinent – this was the Home Office, to do with immigration – and there was a dinner with my minister and then the men expected the women to leave because they were going to have port and I made a great big scene and broke up the whole gathering and it was a total embarrassment.

CJ: What do you mean by a movement of women?

CS: I think feminism is touching women on a fantastically broad spectrum, from wealthy and privileged women to groups which a lot of people would see as the most oppressed, probably least liberated women.

Representing a constituency, lots and lots of women come to my advice bureau – I guess more than would go to the average male MP – with all sorts of issues, some of which are very intimate. I've had a significant number of child sex abuse cases, for instance, just coming through the door of the advice bureau. I have a substantial Asian population in my constituency and I worked at going round the temples and groups saying to the women,

“You don't have to bring anyone with you, just come yourselves” and they do.

I feel there is a great movement of ideas and mood that's very powerful taking place amongst women, across class, ethnicity and age group. I go into my schools and colleges quite a lot and some of the 15 and 16 year olds – a lot of black kids, not very well off – they're brilliant. I feel it's a movement of that kind now. Not just a few little groups. That it certainly has caught into a deep mood amongst women – a certain anger and a knowledge that things have got to change.

I can go to Asian gatherings and there's a tradition that people like me are sort of honorary men and we sit in the front room and have Bell's whiskey and the food brought in by the women and children. I always go in the back and make the links and the women have a bit of a moan and say “How come you're quite nice when you've drunk a bit of whiskey and they all aren't?” That's what I'm saying I feel deeply part of.

CJ: Can you isolate the three main issues facing women today which you think are most important?

CS: I think it's really hard saying what is the main issue because it's a whole cumulative syndrome of lack of access to income, power, freedom.

One of my priorities is low pay. Overwhelmingly the fate of women is to be low paid workers, with the lack of respect and income and freedom that goes with it. Plus taking the prime responsibility for caring for children, elderly people, people with disabilities. With that goes access to training and equal opportunities which I think is doing something to raise the bottom level for everybody, which will massively benefit women.

Childcare – the big expansion of access to child care, to enable women to work, to have a social life, to have the freedom to move about. I also think that as the family has shrunk in size and the networks of families have broken up, it's really important for children to have contact with other children.

It's really crucial that the choice for women isn't either to have a child and give up the rest of your life or not have a child. We should have the right to have children like men have children – have your children but have all the rest of your life and abilities and talents and enjoyments.

So that's two. And then the third is the brutal stuff that's obviously a lot more complex but that has to be challenged and transformed. The rape, the domestic violence, the pornography, the sexual abuse of children.

It's all a continuum of being secondary people, powerless people, less respected people, used people. The powerlessness is linked to the brutal end.

CJ: How did you come to focus on pornography so much?

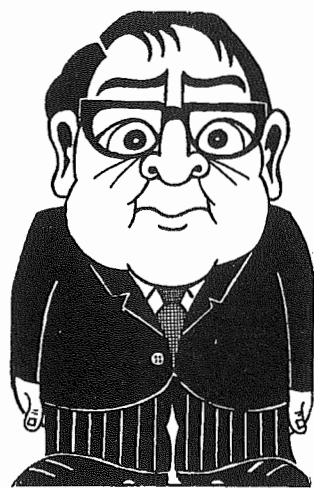
CS: I first started with it four years ago, with the first Page Three Bill. Which I know because the bill came up the day after my father died and it's about to be the fourth anniversary.

It was really an accident. I was around in the sixties, like I said, and I was very much of that generation and that era and those values. I can remember those trendy American underground magazines that often had lots of stuff about Vietnam or racism – stuff that we'd all agree with – and then horrible pictures of women and horses or whatever. And I can remember flinching and cringing and not feeling the confidence at that time – 17, 18 – to articulate my dislike.

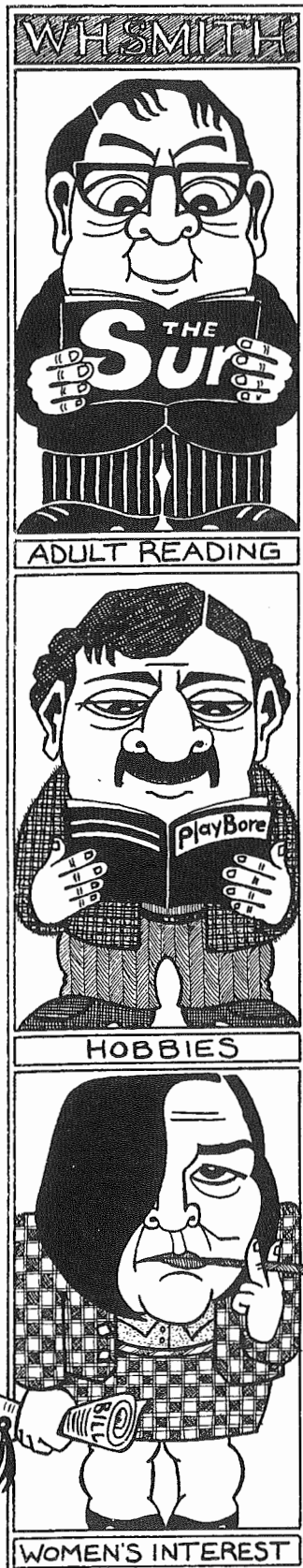
I went to a girls' Catholic grammar school – I come from an Irish Catholic background – and there was that sense that everyone would say “Oh well, you're screwed up about sex, you're a prude blah, blah” – you know, “brought up by nuns”. So I left it and went along very much with the “let's have total freedom of everything”.

And then I can remember walking out of a film which I hated. It was a Fassbinder film and it was called “Night of the Wolves”. It was about Berlin after the war and gay men. Someone seduces men and brings them in and chops them up and sells them for meat on the black market – scenes of bodies being chopped up and I couldn't take it, it really distressed me. I thought “I don't agree with that”. It doesn't mean I'm saying that film shouldn't have been made, but it was just something about the level of it that in my own mind I thought “No, there are some limits”. I just turned an intellectual corner.

And I can remember going into a house with a bloke I was going out with at the time and they were playing cards with some cards with pornographic pictures of women on the



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backs and it really annoyed me. I suppose I was getting a bit older and more confident.

So there it was lurking, this kind of distaste but you know what it's like – you just turn away from it and don't look at it.

Then when I became an MP, there's a lot of rooms in the House of Commons full of every newspaper that's published and when the press is attacking you, you tend to flip through and see what they are saying about you. And I was very struck by the quantity of porn in the daily press because if you flick through all of them, there's a hell of a lot of it – and I sort of flinched and felt hurt by it and a bit angry about it.

So that's all just working round in my head and I haven't done anything or concluded anything and then I'm just sitting in the chamber on a Friday having not gone to Birmingham because we were trying to fight Enoch Powell's so-called "Prevention of Research on Embryos bill" – which is prevention of assistance to people with infertility problems and hereditary genetic diseases, which I felt very passionately about. The way you fight private members' bills is you talk it out by speaking on the bill before, and there bill before was the Winston Churchill/Mary Whitehouse bill – the famous "laundry list bill" – which had a whole list of visual images which would always count as obscene and be a criminal offence to replicate. It was the most crazy and ridiculous bill. Some sort of sordid mind had put it all together. There were things like anal-genital contact, defaecating. It would have outlawed medical text books, sex educational materials, war reporting . . .

There was a whole series of speeches coming from the Tory benches about how passionately women were feeling about being unsafe in the streets and in their communities and about how women in the country would never forgive the House of Commons if it didn't pass this horrendous bill. And the whole thing made me increasingly angry and I got up and made this brilliant speech saying women *are* feeling angry about all that but it doesn't mean we want this kind of rubbishy, dangerous, nonsensical legislation. I said "If you really want to do something that symbolises the House of Commons' opposition to the way in which women's bodies are constantly degraded, why don't we

remove the page three pictures from the press?" And I said "In fact I think I'll introduce my own bill on this".

Well, it was late in the day, it wasn't widely reported but I got what seemed quite a lot of letters at the time – 130 or so – rom women saying "Please do, please do" and I thought, "Well I must".

So I trooped off and got my bill and made my speech – just one of the many, many political things I do all the time – and I got savaged by these juvenile Tory screwed-up-about-sexuality men and then it provoked this fantastic response – this avalanche of caring women saying "Are you all right? We agree with you but weren't they vile?"

There was the initial kind of sneering press reporting and then the argument went on and on and some women's magazines took it up and more and more women started writing saying "We agree". I was just making my own little protest and obviously it connected with a lot of feelings of women all over the country. It just took off as a debate that I wasn't in charge of. I was just part of whatever was going on in all of us at the time.

I didn't plan it and of all the work I've done in my political life it's a smaller part than many others. But it's the one that evoked all this passionate response. I think there's hardly a household in the country which hasn't had the discussion, which is remarkable. But that's not me, that's the issue and all those women who feel very strongly about it.

CJ: And it was from that you came to be involved in the Campaign Against Pornography and the Off the Shelf campaign?

CS: It was like this enormous responsibility. These letters kept coming in – thousands and thousands of letters. Women telling me about how they had been raped, sexually abused as children, had their breasts removed in cancer operations yet their husbands bought these papers; women saying their husbands brought porn into the house and expected them to act it out and they weren't going to do it any more. There was this tide of incredibly trusting and moving, passionate feelings from women saying "Please carry on".

I couldn't just cope with it all on my own and I thought "We need an organisation to structure this thing and take us forward". That was when I got involved in the formation

of the Campaign Against Pornography.

It was the staff at CAP who suggested the Off the Shelf campaign. I was part of the consultation but what we wanted – and what I think is good about it – is that women can do it. It's their buying power, their local shops, they can use their voice and their objection. You don't have to get parliament to do it for you.

CJ: You seem to be making quite clear links between pornography and male violence, sexual abuse.

CS: As I've explained, I didn't make this great intellectual analysis and then plan an organised campaign. I just felt the revulsion and the objection and the sense that it degraded us; that the proliferation of that image of woman creates a sexual culture in which women are seen as there to be used and disposed of. It's that which helps to generate the culture that is linked to lots of sexual abuse and attacks on women.

I also started getting letters from men who worked in prisons with people convicted of sexual crime saying there's no doubt there's an enormously heavy use of porn that goes with it. Plus the letters from women – I just had one today – saying "I was raped and he was saying 'You ought to be on page three'" or 'You remind me of someone on page three', or this one today – this man pulled her into a house and there was this porn video on and she was raped in the course of it.

It seems to me if you delve at all the links are clear. I don't mean in the sense that one man looks at one picture and rushes out and rapes someone. I mean in the sense that the spread of that image of woman right across society goes deep into its sexual culture, shaping the attitudes of young men to their own sexuality and how they're supposed to relate to women as they grow up. And that's linked to values which debase women and see them as things to be used.

People send me all this distressing stuff. Someone sent me recently a postcard on sale when she went to the Canary Islands. It has a picture of a naked woman with very large breasts and a silhouette of a man running away and it says "Find her, fuck her, forget her". And that's a postcard which she says is on sale in all the shops. I was a bit angry about this and I pinned it up on my wall and we wrote to the Spanish ambassador and then

some of my male MP colleagues said "Don't you know that? All young men grow up with that. "Find her, feel her, fuck her, forget her". It's absolutely standard school playground young male talk.

But I don't think it's just mechanical and just the pornography – that somehow you can be moved by pornography and not all the attitudes that go with it that make it legitimate in this society, that make it a vast industry, that mean it's produced and sold and consumed in vast quantities. It isn't those pictures and those videos and if you removed them or made them illegal or made it an underground industry you would necessarily have dealt with it. It's symbolic of that whole set of attitudes and by challenging it, we're challenging them.

CJ: What support do you get from male MPs in the Labour Party?

CS: There is a party loyalty thing that operates here. If one of your own is getting savaged you tend to be supportive of them and that is certainly how it worked that first time with the Page Three Bill. Nobody knew about it. I just turned up in the chamber; I hadn't asked anyone to be there or vote for it. There were maybe 50, 60 Labour MPs sitting on our side and they were quiet and supportive and overwhelmingly voted with me for permission to bring in the bill. Only two Labour MPs voted against and got a lot of flak in their local Labour parties.

So broadly they've been supportive and helpful, though I suspect that in private when I'm not there some of them might have things to say.

CJ: If Labour were in power would it put a Page Three Bill through?

CS: In the policy review, in the bit to do with controls on the concentration of ownership of the press, I moved an amendment to review the controls on the representation of women and black people in the press. So it's in the policy review. And there were a number of motions moved at the Labour Party conference by women's sections.

It still needs to be watched and taken through but I think the odds are high that we will do it. Jo Richardson, who's Shadow Minister for Women in the Shadow Cabinet, feels very strongly about it too and would be committed to it. No doubt like all issues you have to battle it through when you get there



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but the right words are in the policy review and we've got a good chance of getting the time to do it.

CJ: What about support from the Tories? Jill Knight for example, whose reputation for supporting gays and lesbians isn't exactly good? She's supporting the Off the Shelf campaign.

CS: At first on the Page Three Bill there was minute support from Tories. Some of them appeared in the Sun picking out their favourite Page Three girl and got a lot of flak from Tory women in their local associations when they went home and had to publicly apologise, which was rather nice.

But there's something deep and complex going on here. Traditionally – and I'm referring back to the sixties – there was a sort of Mary Whitehouse brigade who were against sex: if it happened at all it should only happen for procreation; pro the family, against gay people and pro a whole bundle of censorial attitudes that went with that attitude. They were very happy to draft legislation that was supposed to expose people dealing with pornography but it had to have a long tail that would catch lots of other material. They were the people who talked about porn and the Left didn't because we wanted to be seen as libertarian.

Now I think more and more Tory women are saying, "Women must object to porn as part of the freedom of women" but clearly they didn't go with all the bits about dignity and enjoying sex fully without it being oppressive within a relationship and so on. So it's the same issue with a very different agenda attached to it.

I think people like Jill Knight are caught in the middle. She's a traditional Mary Whitehouser in every sense. The first time I did my Page Three Bill I asked all the women in the House of Commons and only one Tory woman would support it. The second time round Emma Nicholson did, who is the only Tory woman who ever calls herself feminist. Basically they wouldn't have anything to do with me or my kind of agenda. But when we launched Off the Shelf – and this has been a matter of some controversy – CAP wrote to all women MPs and Jill Knight amongst others said she supported the campaign.

My own view is "Fine". If we set the agenda and the ways of talking about it and

it's not the Whitehouse agenda, if Jill Knight wants to scrabble along behind us, we're not going to chuck her out.

It becomes a question of how you build political movements. I think if you only let people support you who agree with you on everything, you end up in a room with three other people. But if you stake out your campaign and your values clearly and then some people whom you are surprised to see associating themselves with you do, then fine as long as they're coming on your agenda. That's how you win space and grow.

That's where I would put Jill Knight. Of course she believe in capital punishment; she has racist attitudes; we all know about Clause 28. She's wrong about virtually everything in the world and in the past she wouldn't support motions on rape that Jo Richardson and I have done because they said things like rape in marriage should be a criminal offence. She certainly wouldn't touch the Page Three Bill at first. Then Off the Shelf comes along and she feels she needs to write a letter and say she agrees. I think that means we're winning.

CJ: Can we talk a bit now about the Ministry for Women? Why did Labour launch it?

CS: The Shadow Ministry for Women is a Labour Party commitment. We are committed to setting up a new Whitehall department to represent the interests of women, with regional representation and the capacity to consult women around the country. But we're conscious that it isn't just a question of taking over lots of programmes that are just about women and running them through the Women's Ministry. You have to affect and transform virtually every aspect of Whitehall policy, from transport to overseas aid, low pay, childcare provision, health care.

The Ministry for Women is meant to act as a new focus for women's demands for change. It will be a sort of watchdog and an energetic force within the new government, making sure that the women's perspective on all new policy making will be upfront and women's interests embedded in all the new policy developments across other departments.

We are going to have to do something about the imbalance of control and the imbalance of history until we get to a stage where half the people who work in Whitehall

are women and half the ministers in the government are women.

CJ: Do you think it will open the way for more women to enter parliament?

CS: Hopefully it will raise the whole question of women's rights on a broad policy and political agenda, but it isn't the mechanism to deliver more women in politics and in positions of power. To do that you have got to get the parties to transform their behaviour. We are looking at introducing quotas. We're going for 40% women's representation at every level of the party's organisation, because obviously you're not going to get them as MPs if you haven't got them everywhere else. I didn't know why we didn't go for 50% but I suppose that's a bit too frightening. We're just moving towards consultation on that and hopefully we can bring it to our next conference to implement it. It's that kind of mechanism that is needed.

CJ: Is part of it a belief that a lot of women aren't voting at all – that there's a lot of votes to pick up?

CS: Traditionally in Britain, ever since women got the vote, women have voted Conservative in bigger proportions than men. But now women are moving more progressively in their voting behaviour than men – right across class, ethnicity and so on. In the last election women moved towards Labour and men moved slightly against. We made a slight increase and the increase we made was women. It's still not quite a majority but there seems to be movement there.

Labour did a study of women's political attitudes and it showed that women are more likely to say society shouldn't be so divided; the market isn't the only thing that matters; we must have proper provision for children and elderly people; we must be more caring – all the things that virtually everyone in the Labour Party would say are the fundamental things we believe in.

But it also showed that women in Britain see the Labour Party as the most male-dominated of all the parties. For example, they think the Tories have more women MPs than we do, which isn't so. Obviously they have more MPs than we do, but we proportionately have more women. They think the Ministry for Women is a very good idea but they don't see it as a Labour proposal.

So the conclusion is that large numbers of women appear to be changing their political attitude in a way that is different to men, towards a more caring, equal society, but not connecting that with the Labour Party. And that makes the Labour Party think in a very deep way that there's something wrong with our image because that's what we think we are – even our men. Therefore we've got to feminise ourselves, both for good reasons and for electoral reasons.

CJ: One final thing. Obviously you have much broader interests – you are shadow spokesperson on social security – so how do you feel about your reputation that you've acquired for championing women's rights?

CS: To be honest, sometimes I find the porn thing a bit of a burden in that I get hundreds of letters all the time saying "Please will you come and speak?" and the media love it and everyone wants to talk about it because of the issue it is. Sometimes I get a bit irritated if they think that's all I'm made of. But that's porn, not women.

I'm very pleased and proud to be identified with the women's agenda, though it's not my only one. I'm deeply into Northern Ireland, the Middle East, defence policy. I'm on the national executive of the Party. I'm one of those terrible people who appears to have views on most things.

But I personally believe that the movement amongst women is a deeply progressive force for the whole world; that there is no way women will be satisfied with a few more women doing well and a few more men doing less well; that it profoundly requires a much more equal society and world for women to be satisfied and it's beautiful. I mean, it's good for women but the potential for the world is about all the best dreams that socialists have.

So I'm more than happy to be identified with women, both because it's right and good and important and because of all the warmth amongst women that surrounds it and because I think that seriously, at this historical period right now, it's a profound force for major change. □

Notes

1. 'Off the Shelf' is a campaign launched by the Campaign Against Pornography and the National Union of Students to persuade W.H. Smith to stop selling pornographic magazines.

By air mail
Par avion

Letter from America

Deborah Cameron writes the first of a regular 'Letter from America'. Here she suggests that women in Britain should adopt the strategies used successfully in Virginia to fight the anti-abortion backlash.

The Commonwealth of Virginia, my temporary home in the US, is well-known for its conservatism. It was the centre of the southern confederacy in the Civil War, and later resisted desegregation all the way; it has the death penalty, a "right to work" (that is, anti-union) law and a sodomy statute applying to both male homosexuality and lesbianism. Whole areas of the state are dominated by the military. Yet in the last few weeks, all eyes have been on Virginia as a barometer of political change in the USA. As I write, the state has just elected (by a small but decisive margin) the first Black governor in the history of this country; and it is widely agreed that the most important factor in his victory was his open support for women's rights, especially the right to choose on abortion, as compared to his white opponent's hardline "pro-life" position. Feminists played a crucial part in setting the agenda for the campaign and mobilising women voters – a development which has implications for the US as a whole, and from which we in Britain may have something to learn.

Abortion has become a major issue in state politics here because of a Supreme Court ruling in July 1989. (Each of the 50 US states has its own legislative body, and the job of the Supreme Court is to ensure that state laws are in accord with the principles of the Constitution; if they are not, the court strikes them down.) The July case involved a law made by the state of Missouri restricting the availability

of abortion. The court allowed this law to stand, thus saying in effect that each state was entitled to make its own decisions on abortion.

The Court ruling had essentially made it inevitable that pro-choice and pro-life groups would fight it out in each individual state. Elected state officials and legislators would be called upon by both sides to take up a position on abortion rights. The position of state governors would be particularly important, since governors have a veto on all state legislation – a liberal governor can override a conservative legislature.

In Virginia, the first sign of this issue becoming important was in the Republican primary (the election where party members vote to decide which candidate will be the official party nominee in the "real" contest). To win at this stage, a candidate has to court various interest groups and make promises to them; the more of an outsider s/he is, the more vigorously s/he must canvas support. One of the less-favoured candidates to be nominated as state governor was a conservative white man named Marshall Coleman. His strategy was to win an initial advantage by getting support from the well-organised right wing and fundamentalist groups. He therefore adopted some extremely conservative positions, including total opposition to abortion except where the mother's life was at stake. This appealed to the kind of voter who turns out for a primary, and Coleman won the nomination. Unfortunately for him, anti-choice fanatics are by

no means typical of the overall Virginia electorate, and his strategy eventually cost him very dearly.

VOKAL About Abortion Rights

Virginia feminists and pro-choice men had formed a coalition in the wake of the – Supreme Court ruling, called VOKAL (Virginia Organized to Keep Abortion Legal). Just like the fundamentalists, VOKAL wanted abortion to be a high-profile issue in the state governor election. When it became clear that the Republican nominee was anti-choice and the Democratic nominee, a Black politician named Douglas Wilder, pro-choice, VOKAL began to play an important part in the Wilder campaign. One of their specific aims was to target women who normally voted Republican and persuade them to cross party lines on this one issue. The Democrats helped to make this strategy a success by deliberately prioritising abortion in the wider campaign, and aiming an enormous amount of their advertising specifically to women voters.

Wilder took the offensive early in the campaign, by running a TV commercial entirely about abortion. His slogan was "Marshall Coleman wants to take away your right to choose. Don't let Marshall Coleman take Virginia back". As VOKAL worked away behind the scenes, canvassing Republican women, Wilder was able to follow up with an ad in which a woman explained that though she normally voted Republican, abortion rights were so important to her that she planned to vote for Wilder this time. The punchline of this ad was an interesting one: "Douglas Wilder trusts the women of Virginia". In other words, VOKAL had found conservative women voters responsive to the idea that Marshall Coleman considered them too irresponsible to make weighty moral decisions on what they felt was a private and personal matter. There was also indignation that Coleman was planning to outlaw abortion even in cases of rape or incest, and both ads played up this point.

Coleman was severely rattled. Having adopted a certain position to win the far-right, he was finding that his stance did not appeal to the wider electorate, and most importantly to women in his own party. (Polls have consistently shown that in America as in Britain, most people do not favour restrictive abortion laws.) He tried at first to play it down, saying

to Wilder at a public debate, "it's the only issue you've got". But as the campaign went on and the abortion issue began to receive nationwide coverage, the Republicans themselves were forced to respond and make concessions.

The conservative woman running for the number-two state office, Lieutenant Governor, ran an ad in which she said that although she was a mother and a grandmother, she was a woman first, and she had no plans to change the abortion laws in Virginia. This was an obvious attempt to court both sides, and especially the Republican women who were being swayed to vote for Wilder by the activities of VOKAL. It misfired, of course, because given her conservative voting record, no-one believed her. Coleman then ran an ad in which he said he would not outlaw abortion for women pregnant as a result of rape or incest. This also misfired since he was then viewed as a cynical pragmatist who didn't know what he believed. Finally, Coleman was reduced to begging voters not to decide on a single issue, and to hinting that Wilder's record on other women's rights questions was poor. At this point he made much of his own commitment to pro-woman policies on, for example, daycare.

The actual election was a lot closer than most people had predicted, and the reasons why are still unclear. As I write, the result – a narrow win for Wilder – is still unofficial: there will be a recount. But few doubt that Wilder is the victor. The other Democratic candidates won decisively, which suggests that Wilder's race may have been a factor, swaying some white Democrats to vote for Coleman. But exit polls and interviews do indicate that abortion was an important issue, especially for women voters of both parties. It was important enough in the end to outweigh the racial question, which, in the state of Virginia, is an extraordinary breakthrough.

The knock-on effect

If this worked in Virginia, to favour a relatively progressive Black candidate in a historically racist and conservative state, we may be sure that the lessons will be learned elsewhere. Conservative politicians will be more wary about courting the right at the expense of the female vote, while progressive ones will be more willing to court feminists in future. The implications of this are wide-ranging, and

feminists may now start to organise to wield the power of women's votes effectively, not only on abortion but other issues too.

It is my observation that the success of feminists in this mainstream political campaign is having knock-on effects in politicising women, and in some cases encouraging them to look beyond traditional concerns (like lobbying legislators or working in elections) to more radical activities. This is true, for instance, of students on the rather conservative campus where I work. Last year they formed a chapter of NOW, the moderate feminist National Organisation of Women, partly in response to nationwide anxiety about the conservative backlash on abortion rights. Some of them have participated in marches in Washington, and there they have observed forms of politics which were previously quite unfamiliar: diverse and radical feminist groups with very radical politics. As a result, the campus NOW group is itself becoming more radical, taking up issues like sexual violence and sexuality that are by no means mainstream in the American south.

The Republican women mobilised by VOKAL are another case in point. Doubtless they will not be forming discussion groups to talk about lesbianism, but they have questioned their previously accepted values in other important ways: many of them were persuaded to vote not just for a Democrat but for a Black Democrat, and this is no mean achievement.

In the light of all this, I think there are implications for feminists in Britain too. While mainstream political activities like election campaigning have obvious limitations for feminists, perhaps more so in Britain than the US, there are also certain advantages in pursuing them. After witnessing the strength of women and feminists in this Virginia campaign, I am painfully aware that I and many other British women have been giving party politicians, especially Labour politicians, a free ride for years. How many of us are willing to withhold our support or change our vote on a single issue? How effectively have feminists ever been able to demand pro-

woman policies as the price of our vote? How importantly have "women's issues" ever featured in any major British campaign?

It could of course be argued that American women are able to wield power because there is so little real ideological difference between the two main parties, whereas few of us would want to vote Tory just to punish Labour for its enduring sexism. But it seems to me we might try to intervene in, for instance, the selection of candidates within parties we belong to, and in local-level elections, especially where there are minority party and independent candidates who might stand some chance of winning if they could get the support of feminist women in significant numbers. It seems to me that we might use this as a threat to the more powerful parties in cases where they blithely put up candidates who are known sexists or who have views unacceptable to feminists (eg anti-choice or anti-gay).

In the US, it is clear that most candidates take positions because they need the votes, and not necessarily because of their own strong principles: as the British political scene changes, making coalition politics more imaginable than previously, feminists must consider whether we, like the women of Virginia and many other places in North America and Europe, are prepared to organise ourselves as an interest group and reach out to women who, though not politically active, have been touched by feminism and are prepared to make that count. In Virginia, it counted for a great deal; but without the work of organised feminists and the willingness of the parties to recognise this, the silent majority might well have remained silent. □

In T&S No. 17 we omitted author's amendments to the article *Back from the brink: abortion rights in the USA*. We apologise to Marge Berer for the omissions which would have updated her article.

By air mail
Par avion

Taking the Long View

Charlotte Bunch is one of the most influential radical feminist writers of our time. Liz Kelly reminds us of the power and eloquence of her work in reviewing 'Passionate Politics: Feminist Theory in Action'.

Passionate Politics is a record of one white American radical feminist's political journey. It is both a historical document and a source of inspiration and challenge: a book which speaks of passionate desire for the liberation of all women. Yet like many recent publications which might renew western women's vision and commitment to activism, I doubt many readers will have heard of it, let alone found it on the bookshop shelf.

The pieces of the book are organised in sections, chronologically with some additional commentary locating each piece within Charlotte Bunch's political history. For any woman who, like me, cares deeply about understanding our own history, being able to trace the insights and shifts in other women's politics provides a way of reflecting both on one's own changing perspective and on that of the wider movement generally. I want to concentrate in this piece on Charlotte Bunch's place in the early history of radical feminism, her lesbian feminism, her critique of identity politics and her vision of feminist activism, locally and globally.

Original insights

One of the revelations of the book for me was how many of the pieces written in the early and mid '70s are as relevant in 1990 as they were then. Many of the ideas and concepts we easily attribute to later writers have their origins in Charlotte Bunch's work. Feminism is a collective project, and we are each indebted to the work of other women, but the

insights of less famous activists tend to be forgotten, whilst those who build on them, and are able (or choose) to publish in more mainstream channels become the theorists, the 'known' thinkers.

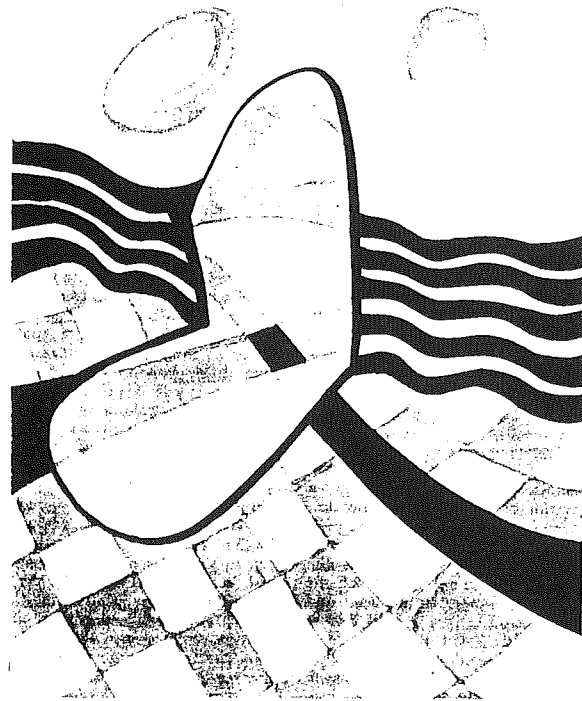
I am not suggesting that Charlotte Bunch's ideas were 'stolen'; the process is more complex than that. When ideas strike a chord of recognition and insight you integrate them into your own thinking and forget where and when you originally encountered them. But I do notice an increasing tendency to not give tribute to those who have made our own work possible; to use the insights of others without mentioning the original source, thereby transforming a collective endeavour into an individual enterprise.



Selective history

Charlotte Bunch is one of the founders of this current wave of western feminism. She took part in the first protest against the Miss America pageant in 1968 and began speaking and writing about "women's liberation" that year. From the outset she, and many of the women she worked with, attempted to integrate issues of class, race and sexuality in their emerging analysis: conflicts about a simplistic model of sisterhood which neglected differences between women were occurring as early as 1970/1. How and why were the insights of radical feminists like her lost so easily? Why do so many of us accept inaccurate re-constructions of that period? Versions of history which deny the participation of Black women, working class women, lesbians and older women; which make invisible the writings and groups which tried to address power between women?

Books like *Passionate Politics* tell a different story, one which is as important for those who took part at the time as it is for young women and women new to feminism. The histories to which we have least access yet



need most desperately, are those of women who committed themselves to working for women's liberation. Why aren't mainstream feminist publishers more committed to publishing the reflections of activists, the speeches of activists? Why has *Passionate Politics* no British publisher or distributor? There is a bitter irony in the fact that it is precisely those white western feminists who have criticised radical feminism for a false "universalism" who are commissioned to write histories of the women's movement: histories which, without exception, fail to mention the work of women like Charlotte Bunch, Robin Morgan or the Redstockings collective (see *T&S 1*); women who influenced radical feminist politics in Britain far more than Shulamith Firestone or Kate Millett ever did. Radical feminists must ensure that we too do not fall into the trap of constructing selective history.

Practical theory

Charlotte Bunch was a member of The Furies collective, which set itself the project of developing a "lesbian feminist political analysis, culture and movement" (p9). They published ten issues of The Furies newspaper in 1972/3. Internal conflicts and political differences resulted in The Furies being disbanded in 1973. Her commitment then, as now, was to what she calls "practical theory" – theory which reflected and developed the experience of movement activists. *Quest: A Feminist Quarterly*, her next project, was founded with this in mind:

We decided to create a journal as a forum for the exploration of ideas and strategies from various feminist perspectives. We sought to address issues of class, race and sexuality as well as to explore questions of power, leadership and organisation . . . We viewed *Quest* as a tool for expanding theory in order to develop more effective strategies. (p11)

Whilst the journal folded in the late 1970s there is a published collection of essays,¹ and the Feminist Library has a set of the original journal. *Quest* represents some American feminists' attempts to tackle complexity in the 1970s, and is testament to the centrality of activism to feminist movement. In 'Not by degrees: feminist theory and education', an essay written for *Quest*, Charlotte Bunch outlines her model of feminist theory: "It relies on the underlying assumption that it will aid

the liberation of women" (p242). In teaching feminist theory she says "it is part of an educational process that is connected to the feminist political struggle" (p248). I doubt whether much of what is currently taught as 'new' theory on women's studies courses in Britain would qualify. What, for example, has 'French feminism' (the work of a particular group of French women academics which draws on psychoanalysis) contributed to our developing "more effective strategies"? How is it connected to political struggle? Charlotte Bunch is passionate about theory – because we need to understand women's oppression in order to fight it.

Not for lesbians only

Charlotte Bunch was one of the courageous women who was out as a lesbian in the early '70s. With other lesbian activists she networked to make sure that lesbianism was discussed at the Mexico International Women's Year conference organised by the UN in 1975, and was on the agenda of the more liberal women's rights organisations in the US, such as NOW (National Organization of Women).

Some of her early writing on lesbianism reveals the insight of her politics and offers a way of reflecting on lesbian politics of the late '80s.

In 'Lesbians in revolt' published in *The Furies* in 1972 she speaks of lesbianism as a political choice whilst also insisting that "Lesbianism, by itself, is not enough" (p162).

Of course, not all lesbians are consciously woman-identified, nor are all committed to finding common solutions to the oppression they suffer as women and lesbians. Being a lesbian is part of challenging male supremacy, but not the end. For the lesbian or the heterosexual woman, there is no individual solution to oppression. (p162)

She uses the term "feminist-lesbianism" which suggests that to challenge oppression she thinks politics come first, identity second. But she asserts the central role feminist-lesbians have in giving the WLM "force and direction".

Women's liberation lacks force and direction now because it has failed to understand the importance of heterosexuality in maintaining male supremacy, and because it has failed to face class and race as real differences in women's behaviour and political needs. (p166)

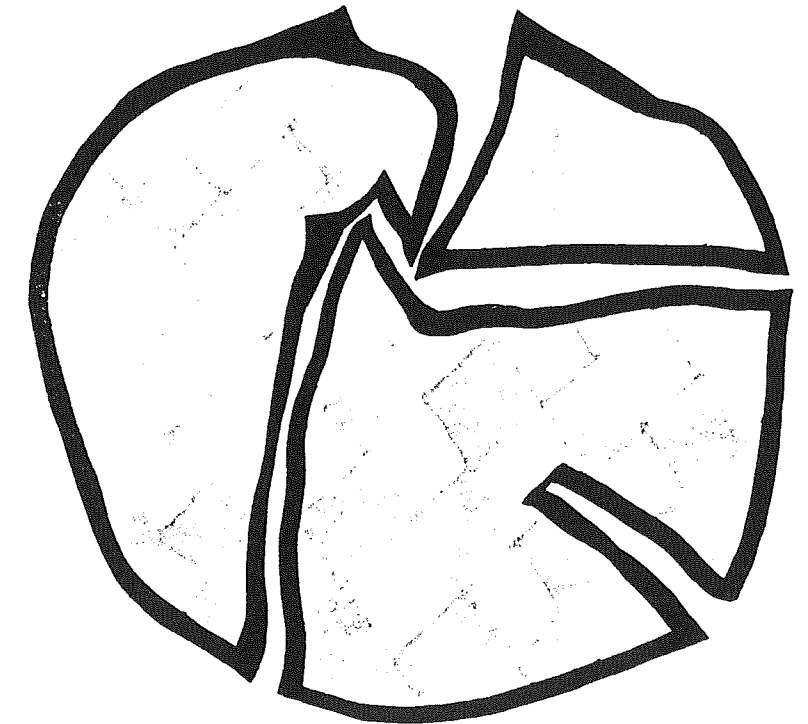
In just over a page (166-7) she summarises all the arguments which will later be

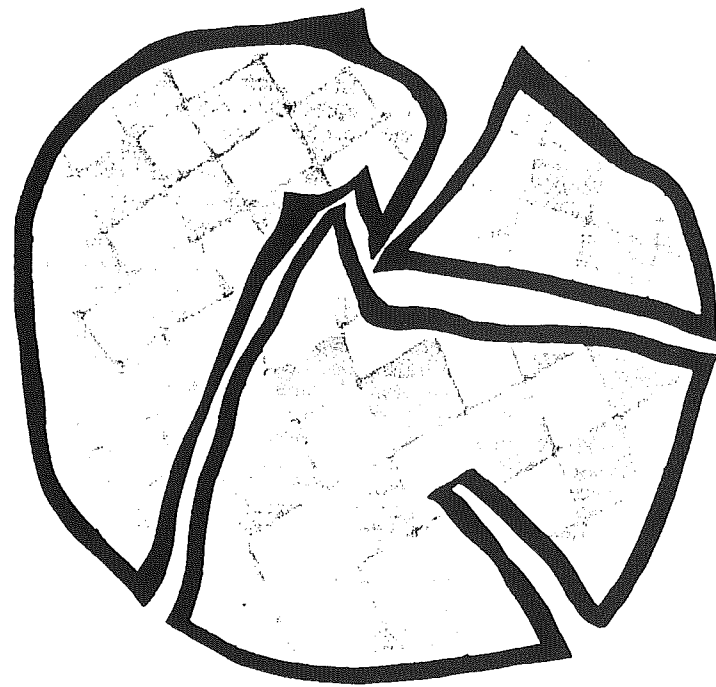
developed in relation to heterosexual privilege and lesbian oppression. She argues for the necessity of a lesbian movement to both develop this analysis and to give positive meaning to lesbian existence. She gives due credit to lesbian separatism in a piece published in *Ms* in 1976 in which she introduces the term "heterosexism". However, a simplistic separatism is not part of her vision – rather she sees it as something to be moved into and out of when groups are under threat and/or where there is a need to develop insights and analysis.

In 'Not for lesbians only', a speech given at a socialist feminist conference in 1975, she anticipates the analysis Adrienne Rich was to publish four years later:

Lesbian-feminist politics is a political critique of the institution and ideology of heterosexuality as a cornerstone of male supremacy. It is an extension of the analysis of sexual politics to the analysis of sexuality itself as an institution. (p175)

In making this analysis she insists that women have to fight heterosexual domination. Rather than lesbians being more politically correct, 'morally pure', she points out that it is the difference in material reality, in the experience of a compounding oppression, which





explains why lesbians were the ones to analyse heterosexuality as an institution.

Lesbian-feminism is not a political analysis 'for lesbians only'. It is a political perspective and fight against one of the major institutions of our oppression – a fight which heterosexual women can engage in. The problem is that few do. (p178)

Whilst this unfortunately still remains the case, retreating into lesbian-only politics and focusing on anger and bitterness at past failures and betrayals will only reproduce this pattern.

Charlotte Bunch stopped working on sexuality as a separate issue in 1977 "and worked instead to incorporate an understanding of lesbian feminism in other areas".

Identity politics

One of the pieces which had the most impact on me, and which was the spark for this review, is 'Self-definition and political survival' written in 1975 for *Quest*. It could be read as a commentary on the impasse western feminism, certainly in Britain, is currently facing in relation to identity politics. She begins by reflecting on who we are – the social givens of sex, race and class, our own histories of childhood, and our individual skills and personalities.

We have no control over the social givens of our birth. We have limited control over our individual traits. But we can control what we do with those givens and traits. We can use our privileges to change society or to maintain it. We can pity ourselves for our oppression or we can embrace its good effects and struggle to change those that are bad.

The facts of being middle class, white, heterosexual, able bodied are less important in her view, than how women understand these aspects of self and act in relation to them.

The transformation from recognising and understanding our oppression/s into using them as symbols of 'victim status' is one of the more distressing developments in '80s western feminism. Who we are, our relative claims to powerlessness, has come to matter more than what we say and what we do. This is part of what fragments us so easily and bitterly, since bonding (or exclusion) occurs around similar experiences, rather than shared politics. It bothers me, for example, that survivors groups tend more and more to be focused on bearing witness and support, rather than understanding in order to fight back. Self-help and mutual support was a way of enabling us to move away from individual pain and responsibility, to seeing ourselves instead as one among many, as part of a collective struggle. We believed that taking part in that struggle was a positive way of 'healing' the damage that is inevitably part of living and being treated as a woman in patriarchal societies.

As if predicting the invasion of therapism into the movement, Charlotte Bunch questions individualistic, personal quests for self. A sense of self for her, is the fusion of the personal and political: how do we improve our own and other women's lives, how do we make ourselves and the movement stronger?

If . . . the search . . . becomes self-indulgent, consuming all our energies, then we have defeated ourselves. We understand and change ourselves not in isolation but within the everyday context of our female existence – in our work, play, love, dreams, actions and interactions with others. (p83)

The "double-sidedness" of oppression is central to her analysis: it destroys a positive sense of self whilst at the same time demanding strength and creativity to survive. But transforming individual coping and resistance into a challenge to structures of domination

requires a collective movement for change.

In the final section of this essay she reflects on the failure of western feminism to develop alternative models of self. This has resulted in many of us constructing our identities through what she defines as four "substitutes for self": our oppressions; the movement; ideal models; or relationships.

When we focus our self-definition on our oppressions:

We concentrate too much on discovering the intricacies of these oppressions instead of working to get out of them . . . In doing so some women become 'professional victims' of societal givens.

We become dependent on our oppression to give our lives meaning; to give us the 'right' to speak or act: "we have not achieved liberation but remain limited and defined by the categories of our oppressors".

Using the movement as a substitute for self results in:

hours of endless meetings, offices to be run, conversations to be had, articles to be written, good deeds to be done becom(ing) not only what we do but who we are. (p89)

I recognise myself here, the sense of personal desolation at splits or failure to keep projects going and I appreciated her warning against depending on the movement as our only source of identity, self respect and pride, whilst also insisting that we can and must find ways of combining feminist work with our struggle for self-definition.

Constructing our sense of self in relation to ideal models is both a commentary on rigid 'right-on-ness' and the way we tend to seek approval from others. It can result in floating from one fashionable trend/issue to another, rather than integrating new ideas into a broader framework. It also contains the potential for romanticising identity – wanting to be 'a writer', 'an artist'. Having ideal models prevents us from looking at ourselves, valuing what we like and do well.

There is nothing new in women's identity being constructed around relationships – feminism simply gave it a new twist.

Relationships, whether heterosexual or lesbian, sexual or non-sexual, are often the primary preoccupation of women's time and energy, at the expense of self-development and other political work. (p91)

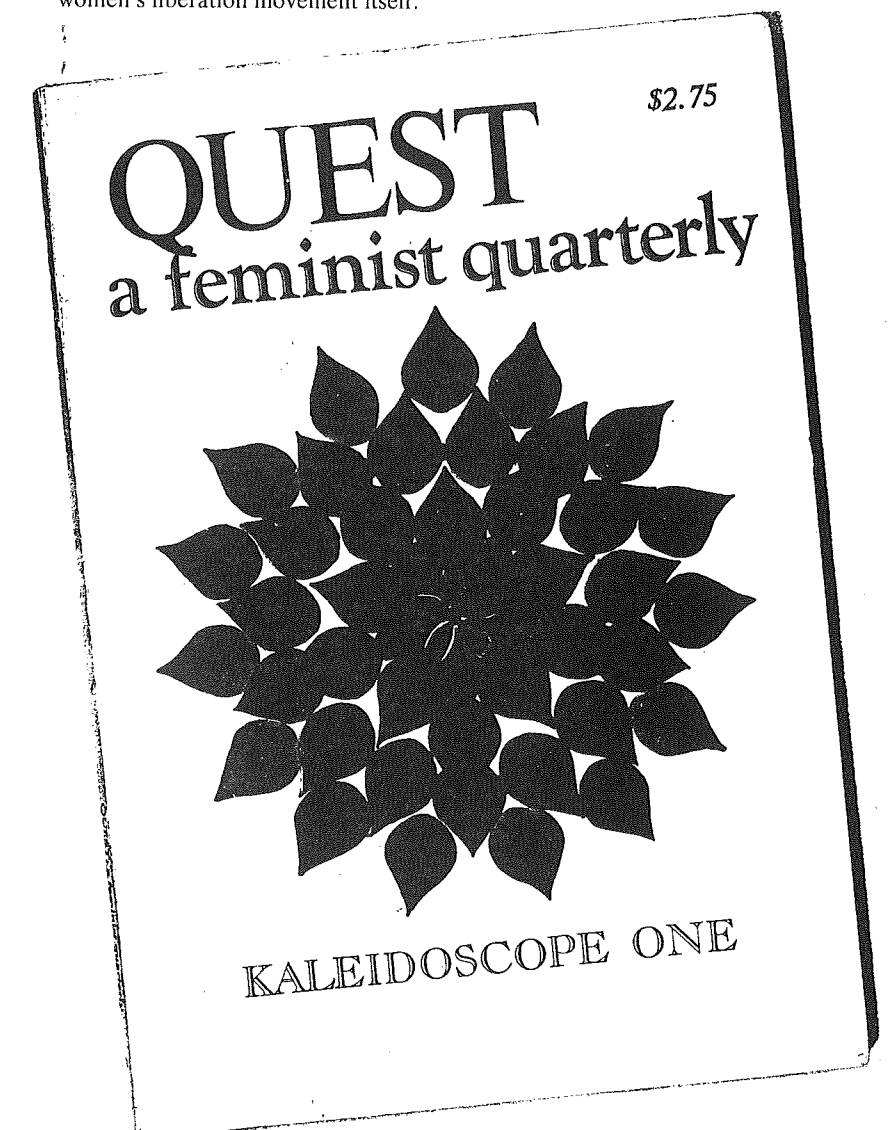
Dependency on, particularly sexual, relationships seems to have increased in the '80s, and friendships are now seen more in terms of

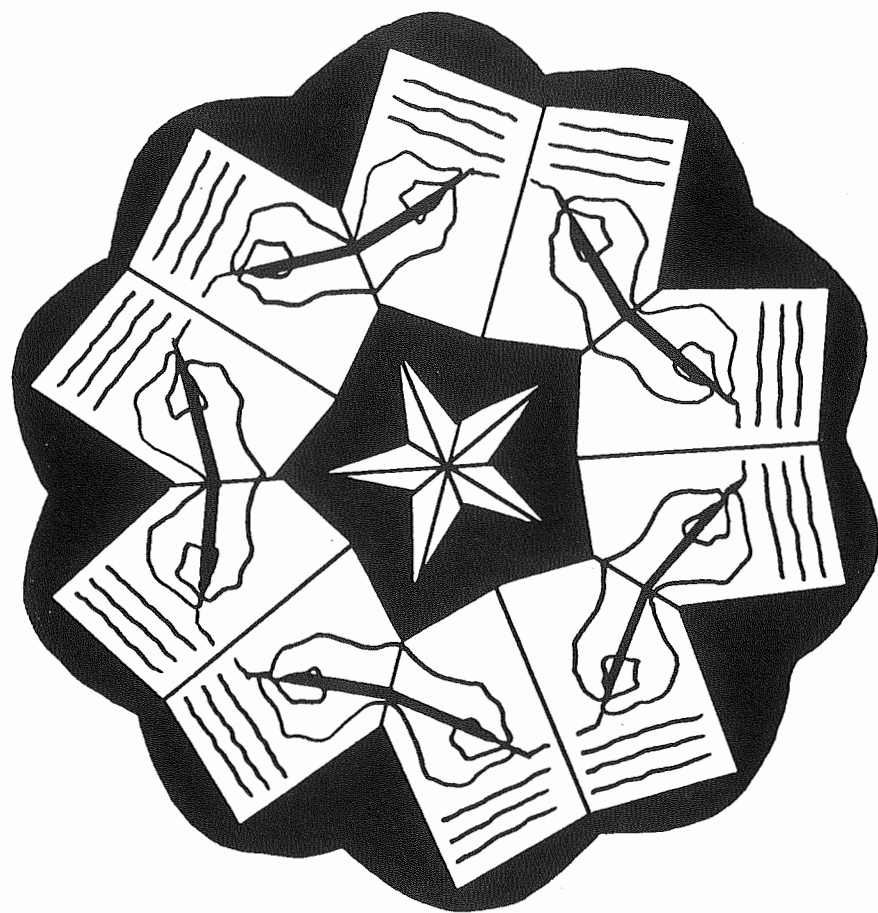
support than sources of challenge.²

Charlotte Bunch not only suggests that, in fact, our 'self' is a combination for these four areas, but also that we are each more than the combination of them. We are all engaged in a process of constant change and development. This is part of the challenge and vision of radical feminism – to reach closer to the women we might have been had we been born into conditions of equality.

Practical politics

During the mid '70s Charlotte Bunch's work took on a more internationalist focus. She also began to explore the importance of government policy on women's lives and to struggle with the fragmentation within the women's liberation movement itself.





I wanted ... to meet the growing challenge from the Right and to advance our own agenda for fundamental change. The more I cared about unifying disparate forces, the more I realised how separate they were. More importantly, I recognised that many in each sector wanted to keep it that way. Whether because of political differences or for the personal ease of being with those most like themselves, I saw that many feminists did not feel the need to deal with our diversity. (p14)

In 'Making common cause: diversity and coalitions', she asks why it has been necessary for so many groups of women to find:

a separate space and identity in order to create conditions where their perspective would be seen by others. Why do we have such difficulty responding to diversity, and how can we move beyond the necessity of separatism to building inclusive coalitions? (p150)

She addresses the fear that learning from diversity implies a watering down of feminist politics, arguing that it means engaging in a wider debate about those politics and shaping

them so that they include the realities of *all* women. Moving beyond liberal guilt to asking how we are going to change ourselves and the world in the light of new challenges and insights is, for her, the lifeblood of feminist movement. She notes four common ways in which coalition and activism can be blocked: guilt; overpersonalisation (striving to be so free of any oppressive behaviour that we are unable to act publicly); withdrawal (taking criticism so personally that we leave groups or even the movement itself); acting weary and resentful (at having to deal with the same issues/conflicts again). Coalition is for her about taking action, coming together around a shared concern and through coalition developing a more inclusive analysis and challenge.

The reform tool kit

Both 'Going public with our vision' and the 'Reform tool kit' argue for a bolder and more imaginative approach to public politics. She

urges us to develop feminist perspectives on everything: to develop a "transformative politics" (a term used by bell hooks, who acknowledges the influence of Charlotte Bunch on her feminism). She suggests, for example, that we produce feminist budgets for our towns and nations, a feminist approach not just to militarism but to defence. These are however, only ways in which we can reach out, campaign and organise. Whilst giving tribute to the array of small projects and groups which make up activist feminism, she asks how we can join together to have a broader impact – in local or issue based alliances, some of which can span the globe. She worries about dependency on funding which threatens the long term survival of feminism in the west.

This movement did not start with government money. This movement started in the streets and it started with the support of women, and it can only survive if it is supported by us. (p73)

She also recalls what happens when you live passionate politics.

We talked about feminism – incessantly. We talked in the laundromat, we talked on our jobs, we talked to everybody because we were so excited about what we were discovering. And that talk spread – it excited other women whether they agreed with us or not. The primary method by which women become feminists is through talk. (p75)

One tendency I have noticed amongst 'feminist elders' (those of us who have been involved for some time) is to presume that this no longer happens. But for every woman the discovery of feminist politics is a profoundly changing one, one she wants to share. The challenge for those of us for whom it is not new, is to remember this and to retain some of that passion. We also have to find ways of talking about our history which do not exclude those who weren't there at the time, as well as welcoming challenge and change: "if we hoard or try to hang onto it, we will only take it to the grave with us" (p76).

The "tool kit" is a way of assessing which reforms might be part of a radical rather than a reformist political agenda, and should be required reading in women's groups and women's units. She begins by saying that to re-form means to form anew, to change.

Whilst highly sensitive to the dangers of co-option, Charlotte Bunch also warns us of the other danger of purism: "taken to its extreme it leaves us immobilised and cynical". Wanting everything or nothing leaves little room for taking action, making change now, and Charlotte Bunch argues for an exploration of the connections between reform and revolution, and against the "either/or" debate.

Global feminism

The final section of the book contains eight pieces on global feminism (a term first used in a 1978 essay for *Quest*) as Charlotte Bunch searches for ways through the limitations of western feminism. Several cover the unwritten history of the UN Decade for Women, and one concentrates on an area of work she is still engaged in: international resistance to female sexual slavery. She chooses global rather than international "because I see feminism as a movement working for change across and despite national boundaries" (p301). She notes how rare it is for activists to meet, how international conferences tend to involve "experts of government or of the university" and how this has perpetuated a view of western feminists as white, privileged, and liberal women. She notes how whenever activists meet, these stereotypes are rapidly abandoned and exciting interchange develops.

The challenge for western feminism is to not hive off international work into some specialised category. This false division prevents us from making vital connections between the local issues we are struggling with and the struggles of women elsewhere.

Charlotte Bunch's passion for women's liberation shines throughout her writing but she is idealistic neither about the struggle nor about what it requires of each of us.

We are the inheritors of a proud and living tradition of creators, dreamers, resisters and organisers who have engaged in the struggle before us, and we shall pass it on to the next generation. However long each of us lives, that's how much time we have, for this is a lifetime process and a lifetime commitment. (p78) □

Charlotte Bunch *Passionate Politics: Feminist Theory in Action* (St. Martin's Press 1988)

1. Charlotte Bunch (ed) *Building Feminist Theory: Essays from 'Quest'* (Longman 1981)
2. See Joan M. Ward 'Therapism and the taming of the lesbian community' *Sinister Wisdom* 36.

home hens revolt

girls growing up in Poland

Maria Jastrzebska recently spent several months in Poland where she met and talked with young women. She found many similarities and some important differences between their lives and hopes and those of young women in western Europe.

In Spring 1988 I visited Poland on a research scholarship. While I was there I interviewed girls and young women in schools and talked to others involved in working with them.

Since then dramatic political changes, unimaginable even a year ago, have swept through Poland and through the whole of eastern Europe. Last year Tadeusz Mazowiecki, a Solidarity adviser and staunch Catholic, became the first non-communist prime minister in eastern Europe since 1945. After seven years of being outlawed, during which its supporters were killed, interned, tortured, imprisoned, beaten by riot police on the streets, sacked from their jobs and victimised by the authorities, it is incredible that Solidarity could come to even partial power and join in a new government.

It is still too early to tell how the changes will affect daily life in Poland. Everyone is saying things are going to get much worse before they get better. Economic conditions have remained as bad, or worse still. While I was there shortages of the most basic foods and commodities were common. Now there is

more in the shops, but people can't afford to buy it.

The new freedoms are double-edged – particularly in their implications for women. The lifting of censorship, for example, has meant publication of long prohibited authors and topics, but has also brought ventures like the launching of a new porn magazine, 'Seksi'.

Already there has been a powerful anti-abortion lobby led by the Church. Women responded by taking to the streets in protest and last year saw the formation of the independent Polish Feminist Association, allowed only now to register and campaign as a legal organisation.

Women have traditionally borne the brunt of the economic crisis in Poland, praised for their "courage" by both the Party and the opposition, neither of whom have come up with any real proposals for change. At the time of my interviews all the girls I spoke to expected to find work outside the home. Women I spoke to complained about the "double shift" of outside work followed by housework, but what they wanted was a

change in social attitudes and conditions, not a return to being "home-hens".

But as Poland moves towards a market economy and unemployment rises, it is likely that women will be forced out of jobs. Growing emphasis on 'family values' and the pressure on women to give up work will obviously increase.

For girls growing up in Poland today, the role of *Matka Polka* (the Polish Mother) remains a model on which the different political sides have no difficulty in agreeing.¹

During my visit – I was there for four months, longer than any of my previous visits – I was cushioned by the generosity and hospitality of family and friends. But the harshness of everyday life in Poland and the huge economic divide between eastern and western Europe were brought home to me. While class differences undoubtedly exist, with a ruling elite that has enjoyed considerable privilege, overall people are much poorer than here. It's known as "downward equality". In this context, it is not really surprising that girls I spoke to were enthusiastic about life in the West: no-one in a poor country wants to remain poor.

While children in schools everywhere probably complain of too much homework, within the Polish system the girls' lack of free time, the rote-learning, over-timetabling, lack of encouragement to think for themselves, rigid curriculum, little or no privacy, plus an instilled sense of responsibility for others seemed to be preparing them for Polish 'adult life' – for following in the footsteps of their overworked, exhausted mothers. Pitted against this was the girls' spirit and strong desire to live differently.

I spoke to three different groups of girls: one group attended an 'average' lyceum in Warsaw (Lyceum Zwykle, LZ); one was from a small town outside Warsaw where the girls attended a business school which prepares its (mostly female) students for the retail trade (Szkoła Zawodowa, SZ); and the last was a group of girls at a 'progressive' lyceum in

Warsaw with a high academic entry selection (LA). It's virtually impossible to recreate on paper the atmosphere of the conversations, punctuated at every turn by laughter and a lot of wit. The girls took pleasure in expressing themselves and did so clearly and freely. If there was any one subject they were reticent about it was perhaps the Church. This is understandable: many Poles feel loyal towards the Church which has been the only seat of opposition to the state and still holds ideological dominance.

School days

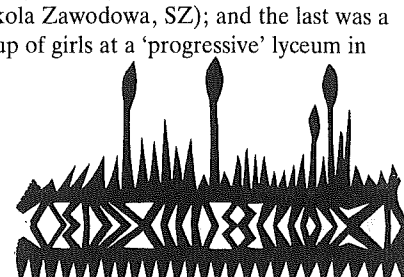
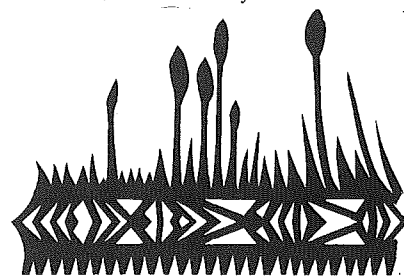
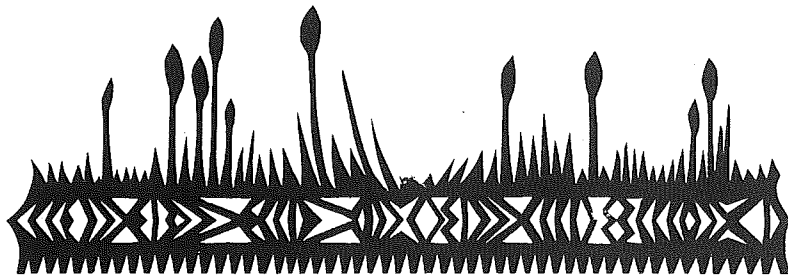
The biggest, most immediate problem in their lives which the girls identified was school.

Seven hours in school, then homework. Last night I went to bed at half eleven and this morning I feel wiped out.

Half eleven – that's early! (LA)

On working Saturdays, you don't stand a chance. You have to come in, feeling tired, then spend Sunday on homework, and be back here on Monday. (LZ)

You have seven hours of school, then you go home at 2.30, then you've got homework and you have to help out with household chores. The next day you do work experience – that's eight hours. You come home tired and it's school the next day and so on. We're so tired we don't feel like doing anything. It's well . . . hard . . . maybe when we finish school it'll be different, working, but for now . . . (SZ)



I can't go out to things that interest me, because if I go, the house is a mess, the dog hasn't been taken for a walk, my homework hasn't been done and everything falls on my mother who doesn't have any time for herself either.

Of course they (parents) bring up the homework angle if you want to go out - 'No homework tonight was there?!' (LA)

In general Polish students seemed to worry or care about their school marks more than students in Britain. Children are graded often from their very first year in *podstawowa szkola*, on a scale from two (unsatisfactory) to five (very good), a system which has been criticised as being too narrow and rigid.

If you get a two.

That's the end.

I never tell them I've had a two, till I've made it up to the next mark.

Why worry them! (LA)

Ironically, with the introduction of the national curriculum, the UK seems set to move precisely in the direction of conformity and greater emphasis on testing.

Out of school

The girls wanted more opportunities to learn foreign languages, see more foreign films, listen to radio programmes. They liked going to the cinema, if there was something "decent" on.

Not those Russian films, which no-one goes to see. Three sessions a day! Why do they bother showing them? (LZ)

Television was not popular.

It's all politics. (LZ)

Agricultural programmes. (LZ)

The news and Parliamentary Review, ugh! (SZ)

They read all the magazines aimed at them and read books over and above school requirements. *Filipinka*, the only magazine for young women of school age, was popular. I gained the impression that Polish students were more avid readers - and more literate ones - than their British counterparts. *Filipinka* is full of humour, advice, agony-columns and articles of general or literary interest. British magazines for girls, in contrast, are full of 'style', 'image' and what pop stars have for breakfast.

One of the reasons for *Filipinka's* popularity is that it provides some outlet to express social problems facing young women, such as conflicts at home or school. Laura Bakalarska, *Filipinka's* editor, told me:

They (teenagers) don't have any real contact with the adult world or with each other for that matter. They have no time to get to know each other. There's no group identity. They're endlessly egged on by teachers to compete with one another - quite unnecessarily. The rivalry between them becomes so great we can't imagine what stress they're living under. Parents don't have time for them because they're too busy making money. I don't mean it's some whim of theirs to get rich - they're just trying to make ends meet. Young people simply feel terribly lonely with no support anywhere.

Certainly school does not seem to offer that support. The girls were quite clear teachers could not be trusted with confidences of a personal nature. It could lead to "complications". They were dependent on the teachers for good marks. A failure - a "two" - in any one subject can mean not passing the year and having to repeat everything. This gives the teacher a great amount of power and the girls said it was unwise to alienate them or give them too much information. They saw student councils as a complete sham:

If we speak up, it's even worse. (LZ)

Work experience

As students they were treated as inferior and what they had to say carried no weight. Those doing work experience encountered this outside school too, where they felt they received little training and many orders to fetch, carry and clean up.

Girls felt that men were more "sought after" by employers, but generally they felt they would be treated equally at work.

There's this idea that men do all the heavy work. It's not like that here. Often it's women doing heavy work, the man could be sitting behind a desk. (LZ)

No spectre of unemployment haunted the schools I visited, in stark contrast to Inner London schools. Instead the prospect of a soul-destroying, poorly paid working life hung like a shadow over them although a few girls believed there would be interesting openings for them. Nevertheless, the motivation to 'finish' school seemed very strong.

Home life

An even bigger problem than work is the question of housing. This was seen by the girls as a problem for all young people but for young single mothers in particular.

The girls attending business school experienced this the most deeply.

There isn't any point even dreaming of getting a place when we leave school. For now we're just dependent on our parents. (SZ)

Unless we find a husband with a flat.

They're counting on us and we're counting on them! (Laughter) That's the trouble! (SZ)

I live in one room with my parents . . . and we've got a dog as well. Fortunately we all get on. (LZ)

The difficulty of finding the most basic commodities came up. I asked Laura Bakalarska about the lack of sanitary products. Did it create extra embarrassment for girls?

It depends on the family. In some ways it's a bit like during the war when people lived at such close quarters they couldn't afford to be squeamish about each other's personal habits. Here if you see something in the shops you just get it before it sells out for whoever in your family might need it. So that means fathers and husbands buying cotton wool or pads sometimes.

I saw some sanitary towels in a chemist once. I didn't have a bag or anything. I just bought as many as I could carry. I walked all along Marszalkowska Street like that. What else could I do? On the stairs I met my neighbour who'd never spoken to me in all the years we'd lived there. She said "Where did you get them?!" So I told her. "Right upstairs, boys", she said to her children. "Get your own dinner. I'm off to the shops", and she rushed out the door.

Women's role

I asked the girls who they identified with or chose as role models. They were fairly dismissive of film stars or famous personalities: - *We don't really know what they're really like off screen.*

Instead they modelled themselves on older girls at school whom they admired. The most poignant part of my discussion came when I asked if they wanted to live like their mothers. The answer was an overwhelming and vehement "No!"

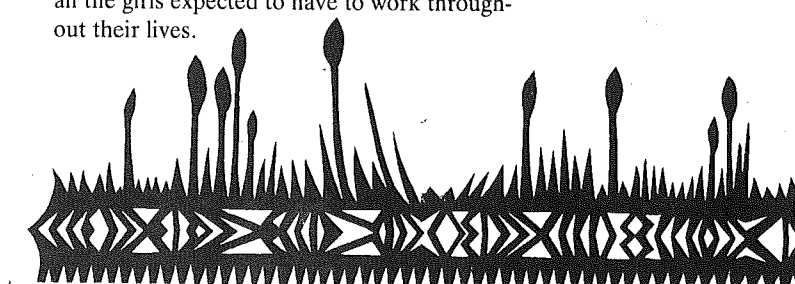
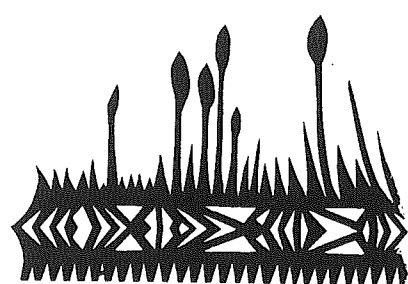
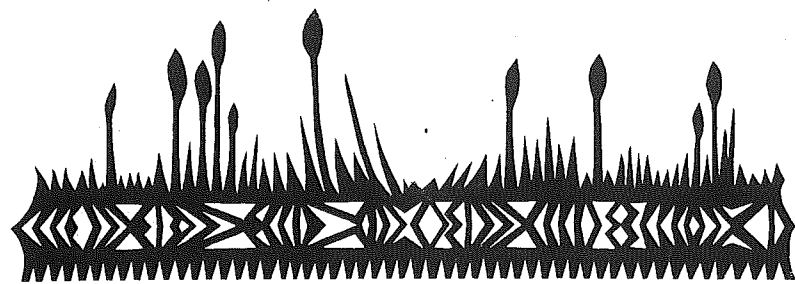
We want to achieve something more, right? So we ask ourselves where our mums have got to - not very far.

She's brought up the kids and that's it.

She slaves away at home and what has she got for herself? (LZ)

Comes home from work and then there's standing in the queue.

All their mothers went out to work and all the girls expected to have to work throughout their lives.



My mum comes in exhausted and she has to start doing things. (SZ)

That's what her daughter's there for – to help her! (SZ)

No time for herself. No time for any pleasure. (LA)

What's important for women are things like make-up and taking care over their appearance. Women in Poland have stopped caring how they look. They're so overworked, it's sad to see it sometimes.

I recently bought some Polish eye-shadow, quite expensive actually . . . after two hours it wore off completely. It's not just money. You can't always get the better brands of cosmetics.

And you don't have time. Women don't know how to relax. They're tense all the time. Work, home, everything falls on them. A woman can't even admit the possibility of doing something for herself, as though she's got this feeling anything she did would detract from her work and her home. (LA)

They saw women as more mature, stronger emotionally and thus responsible for maintaining the stability of the family, as their mothers did. But the strength they recognised was borne of duty, rather than choice.

Only one girl saw her mother's life positively and spoke of her with obvious pride.

My mum came from the country, but she got where she wanted. She finished school and earns quite good money now.

Education was important in her life?

Yes! (SZ)

Another girl points out:

Cleaners get more money than office workers and they don't need qualifications.

Hopes and fears

Housework was clearly seen as the province of women.

My dad . . . doesn't really know . . . how to clean up, so if he did it the place would be in an even greater mess than before, so I prefer to come home and tidy up ready for when my mum comes in.

Round here, it's like this when a girl leaves school, once she's married, then she's

just got one direction to her life, cooking, kids, washing nappies, nothing else. (SZ)

Girls of our age don't want to be housewives. We're different from our mothers; we think in a more modern way. There are very few girls who are going to keep quiet and be subservient, with the husband coming home to read his paper and her having to fetch his slippers.

Or run his bath! (LA)

Say I like poetry or I want to have my head in the clouds, I don't want him complaining that the kasza's (buckwheat) not cooked. (LA)

In my class none of the girls wants to stay at home. Everyone wants a profession, to have her own achievement, but the boys say they're going to be the breadwinners and the girls should stay home to look after the children. (LZ)

Nearly all the girls saw marriage and having children as either an essential or an inevitable part of their future. Only one girl spoke out against this:

I want to do medicine and I don't think you can reconcile a career and a home – that is to be a good doctor and look after your children at the same time. I can see it in my mother. She didn't want to neglect me but she did it without realising. You just can't manage both. You have to make a choice. (LA)

Does that mean you've chosen?

Yes.

A rather stunned silence, then laughter.

Well, we'll see.

If you meet a man you love . . .

Sex education

Shortly before my arrival in Poland a text book published for middle schools called "Preparation for Family Life" was withdrawn, owing to pressure from the church. A number of girls had seen the book before it disappeared from bookshop shelves. Mostly they thought the whole affair was ridiculous; there was nothing "that bad" in it. Sex education was not part of their curriculum. Some girls had had a gynaecologist visit their school and talk to them in a "superficial" sort of way. But it wasn't just a question of the school pro-

gramme-being so full: sex was a "taboo subject".

At home our parents still treat us as children under their feet, so they don't talk to us about it, and in school the teachers are too embarrassed . . . there isn't any personal contact between the teachers and the pupils.

My dad is terrified any time I come home with a (male) friend and we're alone together. He says to my mum, Lidzia, we ought to go in, knock on the door, offer them some cakes.

The famous cakes!

And those questions they ask you, afterwards!

Afterwards they're surprised by all the teenage pregnancies. (LA)

They were so upset about this book. But what about all the pornographic films around. No-one seems bothered about them, in cinemas and everywhere.

Young single mothers they felt got a raw deal. In most cases girls who got pregnant were expelled from school straight away. The supplementary allowance they were entitled to is known in Polish as "funny money". Some young women returned to study at evening classes after having their baby but a lot depended on the support of their families. State-provided child-care was notoriously inadequate. Girls questioned the need for a "piece of paper" which legitimised relationships, though many believed in true marriage (based on love) and considered the ceremony important.

Illusions and aspirations

Finally I asked all the girls how they viewed the West.

As something better!

Definitely!

With envy.

There's more freedom, less restrictions.

You get to have your own say.

Mothers treat their daughters more like friends.

There's more understanding . . . not the same outrage as here, say if a girl gets pregnant. Greater tolerance.

There isn't the same pressure on children to do better than their parents. If I got a four

then you've got to get a five.

Here you've got to study. You've got to have that piece of paper.

I'm learning to play the organ. We want to start a group. But it's just problems and more problems. I've heard that in the West if a young person has ideas society goes out of its way to help them. I don't know if that's true . . .

Here we have to do everything ourselves from scratch. (LA)

I asked if they had any criticisms of the West.

Yes, people go over the top there, they run riot.

They saw drugs as a much greater problem in the West. It existed in Poland, but on a much smaller scale, they said. Young people take a solution known as compote, but mostly drugs simply aren't available.

Vodka finishes people here off anyway. (SZ)

After all the really awful things like Aids and drugs don't come from the East, from us. They (in the West) are destroying themselves. (LZ)

Some were less impressed by the materialism of the West. One girl compared herself to the foreign students who had been visiting their school.

I'm happy if I see one flower growing in the grass, say . . . I can appreciate it, while they have to buy an enormous bouquet . . .

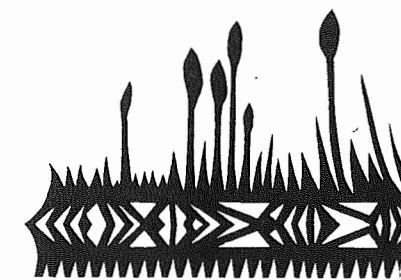
. . . and have it all wrapped up!

. . . and make a big show of it – they don't seem to know how to be happy. □

Maria Jastrzebska has been working as an Equal Opportunities Advisory Teacher for the Inner London Education Authority. This is part of a larger article written on return from four months in Poland.

Postcards from Poland and other correspondences, a collection of poems and pictures by Maria Jastrzebska and Jola Scicinska, will be published later this year by Working Press. Contact 01-471 5711.

1. See 'The Situation of Women in Poland' by Jolanta Plakwicz in *Forum Polek*, a bi-lingual anthology of Polish women's work. (Forum Publication Group, Turnaround Distribution).





vive
la
liberté!

A CLASSIC MISTAKE

Carol Ann Uszkurat critically re-examines 'The Feminine Mystique' by Betty Friedan, placing it in relation to the politics of the period and her own compulsory ballroom dancing classes.

This is a book I had long meant to read. Written in 1963 it is described in its tenth Penguin reprint as "the classic text of the modern Women's Movement . . .". Looking at this book today I found that my responses were very mixed, since I read with an awareness of race, class and the political positions around lesbianism. On the whole I was very much appalled and have no difficulty in fitting this book into the kind of liberal feminism that has historically focused on obtaining access to the professions for middle class white women.

No way is this a radical text. Classist, homophobic, mother/women-blaming, pro-capitalist and WASP in its orientation – it has little of value to offer the radical feminist of the nineteen nineties. Before examining these aspects of the book, however, I want first of all to outline the one area in which Friedan can be said to have offered the beginnings of a constructive analysis: her unpacking of those influences set to make femininity, domesticity and motherhood the be-all and end-all of a woman's existence. This aspect of the book



"So I
put
my foot
down . . ."

made an impression on me. Why? Because in 1963 I was feeling the influences myself. How?

I was fourteen then. White, working class and in the concerned hands of parents who longed to turn their tomboy daughter into a lady. Ballroom dancing, it was explained to me, would offer me a passport to society. A necessary skill. Looking back I can see that they wanted to make me socially mobile. I can also see that the underlying patriarchal project was to have me socially mobilised into the kind of female who is always led by the man. I hated the Saturday morning lessons they so graciously paid for me to attend. My rebellion was muted and acted itself out in the classes. I was supposed to spend my first Saturday in the beginners group learning to dance the waltz. Embarrassed, awkward, taller than all the spotty boys who were instructed to lead me, I spent a wretched year never moving beyond the status of beginner and never managing the automaton moves of the waltz.

In terms of being trained, against my will,

for a gender based existence, school offered yet more to fuel my anger and contempt. Here I was forced to do cooking and sewing for what added up to one school day a week. That accounted for 20% of my learning time! Reading *The Feminine Mystique* some twenty three years after all that offers useful insights into the pervasive nature of the patriarchal ideology that sought to fix all women into a defined, oppressive and sexually determined separate sphere. One of the major tenets of the book is that sexism is woven into the very fabric of our society. Friedan shows how education, popular magazines, advertising, psychoanalysis and ideology interact to provide a sexist rationale. A rationale that promotes the wife/mother role of women as common sense and natural. She was, of course, not the first woman to do this. In her own time Mary Wollstonecraft (1792) did exactly the same thing in relation to education.

In *Vindication of the Rights of Women* she criticises the so-called enlightened ideas of Rousseau because he claimed that:



Liberté

She's
made up
HER
mind—
**HAVE
YOU?**



... the education of the woman should be always relative to men. To please, to be useful to us, to make us love and esteem them, to educate us when young, and take care of us when grown up, to advise, to console us, to render our lives easy and agreeable — these are the duties of women at all times and what they should be taught . . .

Adjustment to marriage

Over a hundred and seventy years later, Friedan shows us precisely how this 'liberal' philosophy wove itself into the higher education courses in nineteen fifties America. In a chapter entitled "The Sex-Directed Educators" she informs us that:

The one lesson a girl could hardly avoid learning, if she went to college between 1945 and 1960, was not to get interested, seriously interested, in anything besides getting married and having children. (p.137)

She backs up this assertion by giving us access to the kind of curriculum women students of the time were exposed to. Courses like

"Adjustment to Marriage" and "Education for Family Living" are heavily criticised by Friedan because they seek to limit the female student's future to the domestic sphere.

In her look at the content of magazines and the aims of advertisers — a look that pre-dates more recent critiques that have arisen from Cultural Studies — Friedan deftly unpacks the perpetration of patriarchal values. By scanning the story content of women's magazines in the States from the twenties through to the fifties she charts a downward slope from acceptable career woman heroine to biddable housewife:

By the end of 1949, only one out of three heroines in the women's magazines was a career woman — and she was shown in the act of renouncing her career and discovering that what she really wanted to be was a housewife. (p.39)

Advertisers are only too happy to make a meal of this captive market. Looking behind the scenes at the reports compiled by the advertisers themselves, Friedan discovered a blatant sexism. One such report blatantly states that "the art of good homemaking should be the goal of every *normal* woman". (1984) (my emphasis).

Together with the growth of psycho-analysis, the pervasive influence of education, popular magazines and advertising are shown to create and peddle the Feminine Mystique:

I talked to women who had spent years on the analyst's couch working out their 'adjustment to the feminine role', their blocks to 'fulfilment as wife and mother'. (p.18)

Reading that reminded me of just how wary we need to be in relation to therapy.

Friedan's deft analysis of how all these pressures were brought to bear on the woman of post-war America, caused me to make illuminating connections with all that I was going through in England at the time. That said there is much about the book that had my ideological toes curling in embarrassment and it is to those aspects that I now want to turn.

Heterosexism

First, its main focus is on the position of one section of American women. It is far more interested in the position of the educated middle class housewife than of women, per se. One major strand informing the book is the answers to 200 questionnaires that Friedan sent to ex-classmates from Smith. Smith is one

of the prestigious women's colleges in the States. We are, indeed, dealing with a narrow section of women here. Although she rightly tells us that they are being denied the right to use their education this denial is framed in a humanist, rather than any radically feminist, frame. In 1963 Friedan takes exception to the fact that, in relation to women, "our culture does not accept or gratify their basic need to grow and fulfil their potentialities as human beings . . ." (p.68). Denied her rightful place in a man made market place that she accepts uncritically — and to which I shall return later — she identifies a discontent in the lives of women who are prone to suffer "the problem that has no name". This analysis did spark off recognition in the book's readership — and, again, I'll return to this later. But for now I want to turn to another un-named oppression of the time: heterosexism

Friedan deduces that these women are suffering boredom because they are unable to put their higher education to professional use. Very much not on her agenda is the possibility that the woman who "lay beside her husband at night" and "was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question: 'Is this all?'" (p.13) might have been on the way to a critique of heterosexuality itself. Yes, she was writing before the rise of the Gay Liberation Movement but, even in 1963, there was a lesbian awareness of the oppressive nature of relationships with men. In one of her lesbian romances Valerie Taylor has a married woman note that sex with her husband "makes an obligation out of a free gift."² Further, she goes on to state how the material comfort afforded her via dependence on a husband gives her everything "except the right to be herself" (p.24). Such nuances escape the heterosexual lens of Friedan. Needless to say heterosexuality as institution is never questioned. Instead anything that is not heterosexuality is very much condemned.

Lesbianism does not get a mention and for those of us who are aware of Betty Friedan's anti-lesbian stance in NOW (National Organisation of Women) this is no surprise. The woman who was to urge lesbians in the movement to placate a lesbian-baiting press by keeping quiet about their sexuality³ gives here a clear indication of her aversion to homosexuality. Regarding the treatment of this issue several points can be made that

point to how very un-radical this text is. First, within the rhetoric we can easily discern that homosexual women are definitely not being addressed. Secondly, it is here that mother-blame makes a somewhat questionable entrance. We are alerted to the fact that "homosexuality . . . is spreading like a murky smog over the American scene" (p.239). Building on the work of Freud (who elsewhere she chooses to denounce for his cultural assumptions) she makes a highly questionable claim:

... the mother whose son becomes homosexual is usually not the 'emancipated' woman who competes with men in the world, but the very paradigm of the feminine mystique — a woman who lives through her son . . . (p.239)

The first point that needs to be addressed here is the attack on mothers that is being made. Due to the fact that they cannot fruitfully employ their college degrees these women are being blamed for placing too much of their attention on their sons. It is a heterosexist consciousness, indeed, that can employ such shaky psychology to indict mothers for the sexual choice of their male offspring.



**LIFE
is
easier,
cleaner,
tastier,**

moi...j'ai choisi



Throughout the book, Friedan performs the un-radical feat of charging women themselves for their own subjugation. Addressing the book in the mid-seventies Kathie Sarachild notes how it "... left men out of the analysis" and, instead, "somehow blamed the psyches and intelligence of the women themselves for what she constantly refers to as 'the problem without a name', never once giving it the name de Beauvoir gave it - male supremacy."⁴

Buying into America

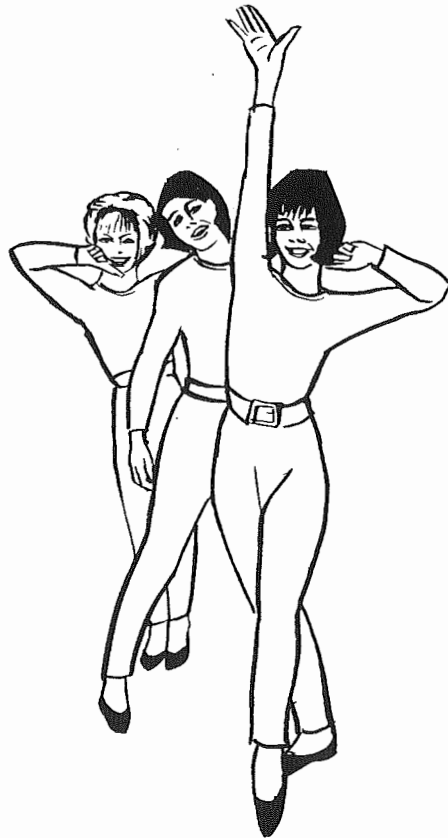
The second point that has to be addressed here is the idea that women's emancipation can be lined up with going into competition with men. Here I found myself reeling under the uncritical stress on competition. In American ideology this implies an implicit faith in capitalism.

As the Black feminist bell hooks has had occasion to point out the kind of emancipation that Friedan refers to above has moved beyond the original nineteenth century white middle class feminist goal of parity at the ballot box to the desire to join in with "American capitalism".⁵ It is in her oft repeated stress on the assumed need for women to "compete" with men that Friedan's acceptance of capitalism can be seen. For Friedan the "meaningful pursuit" that should engage the energies and intellect of the educated housewife "necessarily means competition, for there is" she asserts "competition in every serious pursuit of our society" (p.328). We might well wonder how the radical moves toward collectivity were ever envisaged in a movement that is said to have had its second wave of inspiration from this book!

Friedan's white Anglo-Saxon protestant bias is evident throughout but nowhere more evident than when she draws comparisons from the holocaust. In a chapter entitled "Progressive Dehumanization: The Comfortable Concentration Camp", she talks of the housewife as trapped within a home that she compares to a Nazi Concentration Camp. This really made me feel uncomfortable not because the middle class home can't be seen as some kind of enforced existence but because the two forms of containment are very different. To use the Nazi Concentration Camp as a mean of comparison is to diminish the holocaust. As with comparisons of

women's subjugated state with slavery Friedan's co-option of a specific oppression brings her dangerously near to making women's liberation an exclusive enterprise for the white woman. In the America of 1963 there really was little excuse for ignoring the specifics of those women who were not white and/or middle class. In that same year Martin Luther King published *Why We Can't Wait* - a cogent assessment of the need for Black civil rights. Any attention he gives to women is a million miles away from Friedan's plea for the college graduate to be allowed into the work place. Instead he notes that "The average Negro woman has always had to work to keep her family in food and clothes."⁶

Taking all this into consideration it becomes increasingly difficult to accept the accolade afforded this text by its latter-day publishers. They claim that the book "still remains a powerful and illuminating analysis of the position of women in Western society." But, as I have shown, there is a world of difference between the limited number of women Friedan looked at and the world of women that radical feminism has on its agenda. □

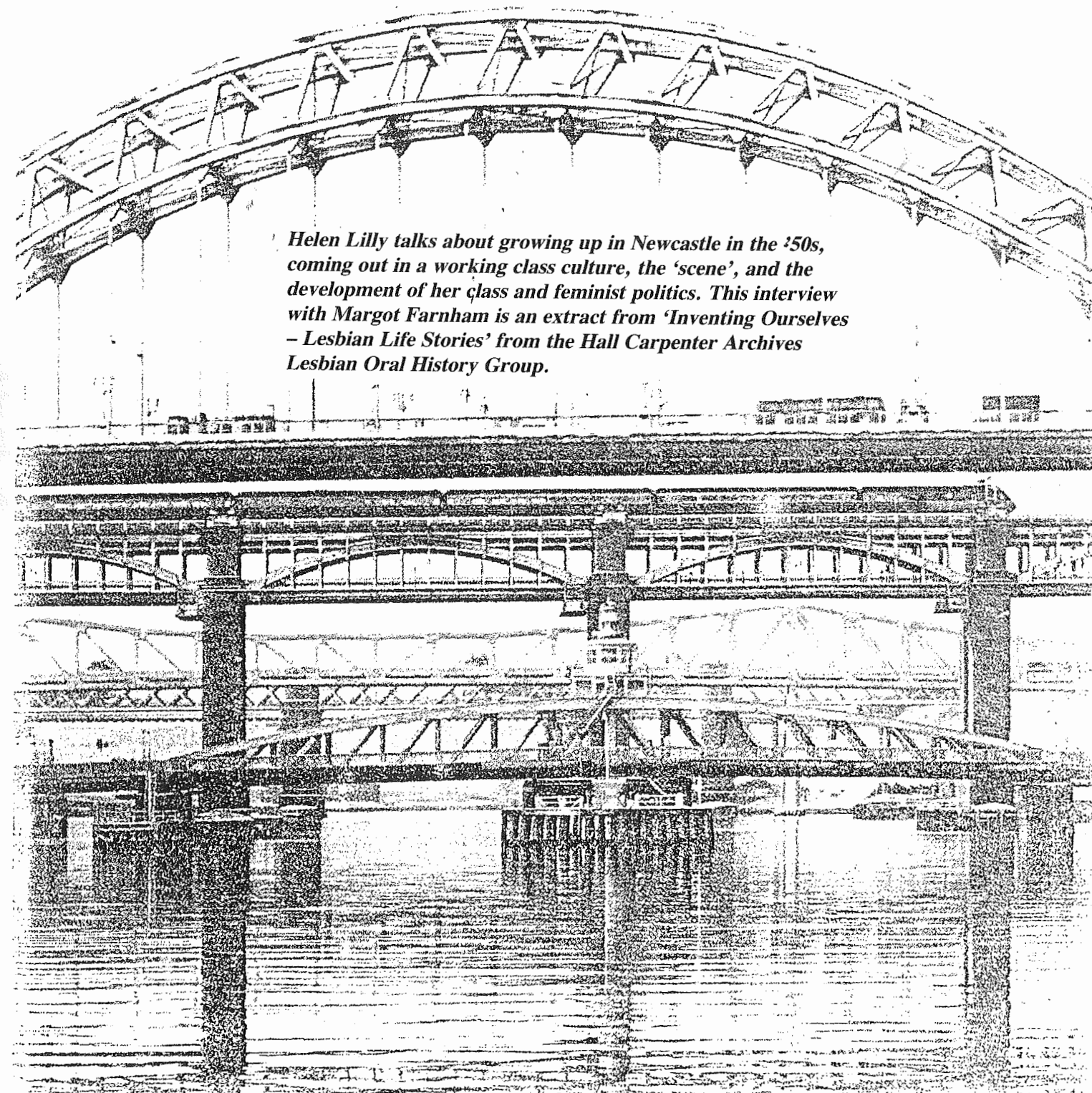


Footnotes

1. Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (Penguin, 1985) p.175.
2. Valerie Taylor, *Return to Lesbos* (Naiad Press, re-printed 1982) p.57.
3. Del Martin & Phyllis Lyon, *Lesbian Woman* (Bantam, 1983) p.257.
4. Kathie Sarachild, "The Power of History", in Redstockings, *Feminist Revolution* (1975) p.20.
5. bell hooks, *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Pluto Press 1982) p.149.
6. Martin Luther King Jnr, *Why We Can't Wait* (Mentor, 1963) p.24.

Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (Penguin, 1982)

TYNE AND TIDE



Helen Lilly talks about growing up in Newcastle in the '50s, coming out in a working class culture, the 'scene', and the development of her class and feminist politics. This interview with Margot Farnham is an extract from 'Inventing Ourselves - Lesbian Life Stories' from the Hall Carpenter Archives Lesbian Oral History Group.

My father's family are travelling showmen. They had a tenement house in Newcastle. I was born in June 1946. My early childhood was living in my grandmother's showman's wagon. We went on the Moor and travelled around the Durham Miners' and Bedlington Miners' Gala. One of the first ever things I remember was the miners' lodge banners; they made a great impression on me.

That was till I was five. And then my dad give it up. He used to do markets and shows just after the war, in seaside places just outside of Newcastle. He give it up and he went on the railway. He thought I should have some type of settled life and wanted to settle down himself because he'd had a bad time in the army. He'd come out with industrial dermatitis, and it really made him bad. They wouldn't give him any compensation, wouldn't pay him a pension, so he went on the railway and was a member of the NUR for a long time till he was made redundant. My dad's family were all active in Labour Party politics, and one of his uncles was on the Jarrow march which he was quite proud of. My dad was always active in politics, even though travelling showmen are quite conservative.

My mother was from down London. She was apprenticed to a Jewish tailoring firm in Islington. She left school when she was fourteen and only done it for four years. They said she should have been a seamstress, but she stuck it out and asked to become a tailor, so they took her on as an apprentice tailor, which was quite unusual at that time; quite a step forward for a woman. But me mother said when she was nineteen she didn't appreciate it. She wanted to go in the army. Her friends were going, all these women she knew all went into the ATS. She could have stayed in it because there was war work and she could have done uniforms, but she said she didn't want to do that; she went into the ATS.

My mother had a very good friend called Eileen and I think it was physical as well. They were both in the big army camps down in Kent. My mother worked on the docks, on the big cargo boats and troop carriers. She said it was quite hairy because it was when bombs were dropping round '41 and '42. Her family are all strong Labour. My grandmother was very strong chapel with Labour

connections through primitive Methodism. My mother was much more into having a good time.

My early childhood was very happy actually. Very free. Being a travelling show kid, I had more freedom than other kids, which was nice. When we lived in Newcastle the kids were right urchins, scruffy little crows we were. Nobody had anything; the doors were open. We had two rooms and we were quite well off because me dad was on the NUR. Most of them had very, very little just after the war. It was nice though. We went away for school trips and the neighbours were really nice. We had a community, one of the things I miss now. Everybody used to look after one another's kids. Say that somebody was going out for the day up the park, the mothers used to take all the kids whosever kids they were. And the old weren't neglected by any means. People were looked after. If people went into hospital their homes were cleaned.

We played hopscotch and two balls, top and whip and marbles; different seasons you had different games. It was just after the war, things seemed grey. I remember the ration books. One of the earliest recollections I ever had was of my grandmother when I was about two. She was a drinker all her life and her friend Mrs Bliss, she was a travelling show-woman. My granny was a tall, straight Victorian, and her and Mrs Bliss both used to drink gin like it was going out of fashion.

When I was very little, I found the two old girls sitting in the passage with their hats over their eyes. It was really funny because my granny put her hand in her pocket and she gave us half a crown, and said, 'Don't tell your aunt Polly your granny's pissed again.'

The first school I went to was Cambridge Street Infants and Juniors and Seniors. It was one of those all in one Council schools. Everything was in one Victorian building. You started off in the Infants and if you didn't pass your eleven plus you stayed there till you were fifteen. If you did pass, you went to a Grammar School. At eleven you knew you were going into a factory, and you were going to become married. Apart from that I was quite happy at school. From the time I was eleven I used to bunk off. It was just after the war, the fifties: they still had strong discipline and corporal punishment. You got the belt if

you were late, this leather strap. I left Cambridge School when our tenement was pulled down. We moved into a flat and I went to a Church of England secondary School, St Andrew's. But even that was grim. You've seen them: most cities in Britain have got them, this grim, big yard. You've got your play-yard and no beauty.

I became a lesbian when I was fourteen. That's one thing I really am proud of. It's twenty-five years ago last month. I met one of the girls I was at school with, Winnie. We bunked off one afternoon. We never heard the word lesbian, no way, didn't even have any concept of what it was. We had this physical attraction for one another and we went in the park one afternoon and we had an affair. That lasted for about three months. In the park, yes. There was nowhere else. Nobody taught what it was about. It was just one of those things that seemed to come naturally. It was first love, one of those things you never forget. And it happened to be my first love was with a woman. She came from a large working-class family. Her expectations were that she got married, which she did and she's regretted it ever since. She's been divorced twice. She just didn't have the strength enough to fight that through. That's one thing I'm always grateful for, that my family were possessive enough to not want me to get married. I didn't have that pressure. I had that freedom, which I was really proud of. There was my father's political leaning as well. One of the things he said was, 'You get married if you want to get married. It's a woman's right to choose.'

I remember the only sex education lesson we ever had was in needlework. We had this teacher called Mrs Salsby; I was about thirteen or fourteen. You talked about your periods and where babies come from and that was your sex education. Lesbianism and, God, anything else, well, you had to learn by your mistakes and errors. The rest you got from other girls and what you gleaned from books.

When I was fifteen/sixteen, I was really hooked on a woman and it was bad. I met her down at a pub in Newcastle. Actually from this time I started to think about my sexuality. I realised I was different. I'd had this fling with Winnie and I realised that's what I wanted. I didn't want to trip down the aisle with some fella and have numerous kids.

By this time I was seriously thinking about politics, thinking about joining the Young Socialists. I was fifteen. The Conservatives were in; it was '61, '62. My dad was talking about politics. I was thinking about Newcastle and what was going to happen, because it was pretty bad. Sixty-one was just before I left school; it was when the economic climate was pretty good down the south but was declining in the north. It was starting to bite again. The so-called affluence of the fifties had gone. This was when there was about 200,000 people unemployed in the whole of the country. These were the figures I remember. I think a couple of years later Quentin Hogg came up, wearing his hat and talking about making the north-east, reviving the industries so there would be no more unemployment.

I'd left school and started reading anything political I could get my hands on. A lot of women's books, trade union books, political pamphlets that came out of the Communist Party, *The Morning Star*, then I read Marx avidly. I read Engels's *Conditions of the Working Class*. Looking back now there wasn't anybody alive who actively had charisma and influenced me greatly in the early sixties. I'd seen the Stones just before they became popular in '63, '64, because they come to Newcastle. They were really raw. From then on the decline of the sixties began and I started branching out, thinking more for myself. We were all trying to change the world. By then the '64 election was coming up, so we were all knocking on doors, wanting to chuck the Conservatives out. George Brown came up. I went and listened to him and booed him and heckled him. Heckled Labour, heckled the Conservative who was Willy Elliot at the time, because it was Conservative where we lived in western Newcastle. Heath came up.

I think they probably talked more about sexuality in the Young Tories. We talked about women's politics and equal opportunities and how we'd all be equal and stand together on the barricades with guns. That was the whole rhetoric I got carried away with. But it was good and then I joined the CP when I was eighteen. I think it was just a natural progression from the YS into the Communist Party. I went in because I felt it was the answer. I've got a great affection for the Labour Party but I thought, Oh God,

it wasn't going anywhere, and Wilson wasn't making much of an impact. And I found there were a lot of working-class people in when I was in it.

Q: Can you talk a bit now about the double life you've described yourself as leading?

What the dives? There was nothing else. The Women's Movement hadn't got off the ground. There was no women-only things. It wasn't that you weren't out as a lesbian, it was just that the pubs were all you had and they were grotty, overcharged and mixed. The pub I frequented was called the Royal Court in Newcastle. It was a dive, where all sorts of people went, you had gays and petty criminals and prostitutes, so you mixed shoulders with everybody. This was the middle sixties. I was into the three-piece suits and the butch thing. I never wore a tie; I couldn't stand them. And no way could I ever see myself as a femme. God, no. It was the high heels (laughs). You felt you were either one or the other. Country and Western was very fashionable I remember, Patsy Cline, when I was into the Stones meself. Most of the people were in couples. It took you a long time to get in. Also, a lot of the women who were on the game were also lesbian. I lived with a couple of women who were on the game, but I just used to say, 'That's your life; that's separate.'

I slept with one man: it was just that I felt, 'Am I missing something?' After, I knew I wasn't missing anything at all and I knew then what I wanted. I do find my sexuality has always been lesbian. I acted as a butch, but I was never into heavy role-playing. I think when I first got into the bar scene I did it for a little while; then I met a woman who said she couldn't go with a purely butch woman. I felt quite relieved, I'll tell you. Looking back now I couldn't stand that power thing, although I wouldn't have said it in those words then. I became freer in myself, because at one time I felt I was giving out all the time and sometimes you wanted something back as well. Sometimes you wanted to feel close with a woman.

A friend of mine in her seventies, who lives in Newcastle, was telling me once, she'd never let a woman touch her in all her life. She'd been a lesbian for a long, long time and she was saying she'd never let a woman touch her. I thought that was quite sad.

I did say I led a double life, but in the CP I wasn't denying my sexuality at all. Later on, when I was in my twenties, I really found that I was starting to become the token working-class woman. I was in the CP for about five years, from '66 to '71. I left because they were trying to get on the bandwagon and taking up causes but without much thought behind them. I came out of the CP in my early twenties.

When Czechoslovakia came up, I was on my way there, there were six of us going to Prague. And then Paris came up in May, the students, the revolutionary events. I think we started seeing Prague as the ideal of what we wanted socialism to be, then the tanks came in. And Jan Palach - he was a student who burnt himself to death in Prague in '68 when the Russian troops came in, and that was quite an image in my mind. He was just a working-class man and they'd started saying in the Communist Party that Moscow was right, but if you were a thinking person you knew it was wrong. At the time I thought the Czechs and the Hungarians had a right to determine their own course of socialism. I think everybody has and that's when I started thinking it was wrong. I didn't flee exactly then. A lot of people did leave later on. It's still quite painful actually, because I think if we'd had an independent Communist Party in this country, I might still be in it.

When I was twenty I went in to Newcastle University as a cleaner and I went into NUPE. Before that I had dead-end jobs, I'd been up and down to London. My mother was working as a Senior Cleaner and she said, 'Do you want a permanent job?' I was still in the Communist Party but up and down, living a schizophrenic type of existence during me teens, so I got really involved in NUPE. Though it was a mixed branch, the vast majority of the members were the low-paid domestic cleaners. We had 1,000 members and 800 of them were women. The rest were either porters or boilermen. At one time NUPE got a female membership up to a half a million. It's fallen back now. I was Branch Chairman and Acting Secretary.

I really feel sad about NUPE because they've got potential for women. In my branch at one time the women were all really apathetic. We used to go round and ask women to join: 'I'll have to ask me dad, I'll have to ask me husband if I join the union.'

But once you got them into the union it was surprising how radical those women started to become. They started to think, started to listen. Before I became Chairman if you got ten to go out of 900 you were lucky. One of the things I did was get an agreement with the University to have meetings at the workplace, because a domestic couldn't come from campus down to the main area. We used to have meetings up in the campus and that's how we started. It was just really going in and not having any prejudice and taking the women with you.

We started our own women's group. We started our own paper, the Newcastle University Women's Broadsheet. Also we had our own pay agreement as well and we had very good pay and conditions. By this time I was defining myself as a lesbian and getting into women's politics, but I was finding it very difficult to talk about my own sexuality. I found their attitudes to their husbands and boyfriends quite revolutionary. Some of the women started talking about being battered and the brutality of marriage, and the way they were feeling about their bodies as they were getting older. When we were talking about sexuality we took in the whole economics of bad housing and economic dependence. We had a couple of widows who worked who weren't going to get their pensions and one of the resolutions I remember we had was that all women should have the same pension rights as men. At midday I used to go around and talk, because that's the only way I found out what was the trouble and what women wanted, which was better pay and conditions. They also wanted other things, like a nursery, and we did get maternity leave and the right to negotiate our own conditions. I took the six points of the Women's Liberation Movement and we did get them through the branch, even the demands about the rights of lesbians, and we managed to pull it through to NUPE conference.

At the '76/'77 conference, when they were starting to talk about placing five token women on the Committee, I was against that because the vast majority of the Executive Council were men; the Area Secretaries were men; the General Secretary was a man. There was no radical change to bring women in from the bottom. In NUPE, especially in Scotland and the north-east, we had really radical

women and women who had been in the trade union movement for a long time who wanted to become Area Secretaries. We were being fobbed off.

I left because of personal problems. But I am sorry because I left too soon. I think we could have done some really good work, because it was working-class women who were fighting for their own rights. Pay and conditions, people thought that was the only thing they would come out on strike for, but they also came out for the nurses; they were really involved with women's rights. I'd done a couple of TUC courses. NUPE wanted me to go to Ruskin College, but I was really frightened because I can't write very well. It's one of the hang-ups I had from secondary school and one of the things I've always hidden. I actually do feel I did let myself down; I let NUPE down; I let the women down. They all wanted me to take it, but they didn't know the reason why I didn't.

I was also in the women's group at Newcastle University, which was middle class and hard going. I stuck it for a few months. They were talking about heterosexuality and because I was out as a lesbian, and a working-class lesbian, I felt a token like I did in the CP. I think that's been the crux of the matter, this split between heterosexuals and lesbians. Lesbians felt they put their heart and soul in. They've supported heterosexual women in the past but whenever we've asked for help, suddenly they've scurried away and you never see no one. We've always been stood there on our own ultimately. That's why later on I became a separatist.

I lived in Radnor Terrace. I went squatting for a bit and lived in women-only houses. That's all to do with the fact that ultimately that's how I would like to live. When I became a separatist I thought of the women from my work at Newcastle and I wished I could have brought them with us, because when I lost contact I felt I lost something. I admired their life: how they'd brought up their kids, how they'd taken adversity and laughed at it. I'm not looking through rose-coloured glasses and I'm not looking back in hindsight: I find them really strong. I mean they're strong and they're weak but I feel the Women's Movement has never been able to get close enough to those women.

Q: You were saying that when you were thirty you got involved in a lesbian marriage?

I met this woman, Jackie, and we had an affair, but I think we wanted society to accept us, to know that two women could make it. At the time we both needed security. She was into the whole matriarchal magic bit. I've got to admit that I can't stand that, but anyway I loved the woman at the time, so when she suggested that we got married and have a Romany wedding, we did. We had a fire and jumped the brush, exchanged gold wedding rings, cut one of our wrists. Quite painful. I've still got the scar actually. We thought it was going to last. We were together nearly three years but after about two months of this we both felt trapped. Looking back it was this whole thing of being trapped into monogamy and houses and getting a job, working and looking after somebody for the next forty years. It was really screwing us up. God knows how heterosexual women stick it. It's taken me and Jackie till last year really to become friends again, and I did love the woman and still care for her very much.

I've lived with five women over all, a year and longer. I've lived with a woman for the past six years and it was very monogamous in the beginning. We had a really good relationship and when the physical side finished, instead of just parting, we both stayed friends and we worked our relationship into an emotional thing, and that was really nice. Though she's moved out now, we had a very strong relationship.

The person I am now to the person I was, say, six or seven years ago is totally different. I've calmed down a lot. I have to admit now that I left active politics because I was drinking, couldn't cope. The woman, Di, I was living with helped stop me drinking and I had therapy as well. Therapy can help you up to a point but ultimately you've got to help yourself. I was in the trade union movement where drinking was accepted, everybody drank. In my family, drinking is accepted. Me dad was a very heavy drinker. Whatever I did there was drink, the labour movement, the bar scene and that's a bad thing I think.

Q: How do you socialise now?

I go to the older lesbian group. I still go into bars and discos but I don't drink half as much as I did. I went to the Older Lesbian Network because I wasn't active in politics for a long

time. I wanted to discuss ageism and certain things like this. But they didn't talk about these things to the extent I wanted. Now it's just really social. I've met some really lovely women through it and women who years ago I would never have met. Women like myself who've been in politics, women who've gone through the bar scene, women who are quite closeted. I'd like to get into more active working-class politics, not just lesbian politics.

Q: How close are you to your family now?

I'm still very close to my mother. My dad died the year before last. I still see my family on numerous occasions and I still get invited to the weddings and funerals. They know that I'm a lesbian. They don't care. In fact they still call me by my old name, which is Lilian. I changed my name to Helen, because I couldn't stand Lilian, and at various stages I used to be known as Geordie as well in the bar scene. That has very heavy connotations and that's one reason I changed my name to Helen. When I changed my name, I gave up the butch image. I think names can make you feel different and Helen did make me feel a lot different. If you had met me say six years ago, I'd have been really aggressive. Now I do feel a lot freer, more relaxed, a better person, actually, than I was fifteen years ago. And it's nothing to do with age. □

Interviewed on 18 June 1985

Hall-Carpenter Lesbian Oral History Group *Inventing Ourselves, Lesbian Life Stories* (Routledge, 1989)

LESBIAN HISTORIES

I am looking for documents and other kinds of evidence about Lesbians and Lesbianism prior to 1970 for a history of Lesbianism. I want this history to be pancultural and global and to go back as far in recorded history as possible. I'm particularly eager to learn of records and evidence of Lesbians prior to the 20th century. I cannot pay for this help but will acknowledge it, by name for those willing to be named, anonymously for all others.

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