

The Relationship Between Feminism and Socialism in England 1883-1914

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The aim of this thesis is to uncover those moments when feminism and socialism were closely allied and to explore the reasons why the relationship between the two has also been fraught with tensions and difficulties.

The year 1883 has been chosen to open this thesis because it appeared to mark a high point in nineteenth-century feminist activity. The year 1883 has significance for socialism too. In that year Karl Marx died in London.

I have chosen to end this thesis with the outbreak of war in 1914. Therefore 1914 may be regarded as something of a watershed for both movements. By challenging the ideology of a timeless, fixed category of female nature, feminists have sought to illuminate the social, political and ideological context of "taken for granted" perceptions of the world.

This challenge has taken the specific form of questioning the actual categories of "woman" and "man" themselves. Woman is a social being, created within and by a specific society. That is, while the sexes are biologically grounded the meaning of what it is to be either a woman or a man has changed through time.

Recent feminist writing, emanating predominantly from Britain and the United States, has expressed alarm at certain developments within feminism in the 1970s and 1980s which both stress and celebrate gender difference.

It is argued by feminist authors that a shift in feminist debates constitutes a retrogressive step in the struggle for liberation which denies the important theoretical breakthrough within feminism which perceived gender as a social category, a construct, and sex as a biological fact.

One of the tasks of this thesis will be to elucidate whether such a shift in feminist thought, from an understanding of the social construction of gender to a celebration of gender difference, did occur in the period under examination.

From 1966 women have steadily increased their participation in the paid workforce in Britain but they have primarily done so as part-time workers, thereby enjoying few of the benefits that accrue to full-time workers.

The disillusionment with reform to produce equality for women has led to the articulation of a number of quite distinct theoretical positions within feminism, united nonetheless by their concern with the subject of "woman" and the notion of "difference".

On the one hand, some feminists have focused upon sexuality and pornography to show that women's oppression is the result of male violence - both psychic and physical. In their view, the only way for women to gain strength is to disengage from this violence and actively create an alternative culture based on "women's" values.

On the other hand, feminist theorists have denied that such a simplistic solution is possible by looking at the processes whereby women acquire notions of womanhood and femininity. The meaning of what it is to be a woman is hotly debated within modern feminism.

The link between feminist history and politics has always been strong. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese has argued: "The primary theoretical implication of the confrontation between women's history and official history is this recognition of gender system as a primary category of historical analysis - as deeply

ingrained in social and economic formations and the political institutions to which they give rise as class relations.”

Women’s actions are not always necessarily progressive. For example, the nineteenth century American women’s movement was conservative with regard to sexuality because the nineteenth century feminist mainstream accepted women’s sexual powerlessness with men as inevitable, even as they sought to protect women from its worst consequences.

We cannot understand women without also understanding men. In particular, we cannot understand women as historical agents without also analysing how that agency related to the wider social and political context through which it was expressed.

To focus upon resistance in women’s culture ignores that culture’s own limitations in the way it also confined women and in its frequent hostility to feminist politics. Only by studying women’s interaction with each other can we begin to untangle the intricate relation between the female world and the economic and institutional power structure of the “external world”.

On the one hand, an emphasis upon politics will show the ways in which women have sought equality by actively challenging male oppression through feminist movements and, on the other hand, an investigation of women’s culture will illuminate the ways in which women have created their own world different from, and in resistance to, that of men.

Either women existed “in public”, challenging male oppression through organized feminist movements, or they developed an autonomous culture as an act of resistance to the dominant male ideology. Feminist ideology is moving beyond the split vision of social reality it inherited from the recent past.

It is impossible to speak of women’s culture without understanding its variation by class and ethnic group. Women’s culture, like popular or working-class culture, must appear in the context of dominant cultures.

An analysis of class will illuminate female lives in ways that focusing solely upon women’s culture or feminism does not. The political language and objectives of both women and men were structured partly by their class and partly by their gender.

It is in this complex interweaving of class and gender that British historians have identified a tension between arguments for equality and arguments for difference. Despite the fact that women’s demands have always in themselves been eminently reasonable, such demands have been perceived as deeply disturbing because ultimately they threaten social organization as a whole.

Neither Marxism, with its priority given to analyses of class struggle, nor radical feminism, with its insistence upon a timeless male oppressor, can resolve this tension. For feminist historians the problem remains: how are we to understand and interpret women’s claims for equality and their assertion of difference in a past which was structured by gender and class.

The formation of the English middle class between 1780 and 1850 was the result of an active struggle to specifically shape and order gender and class relations in the context of developing industrialization. Analyses of gender and class clearly have a special relevance to studies of feminism and socialism.

The insistence that women were more naturally socialist than men could easily slide into an acceptance of innate “masculine” and “feminine” qualities. Towards the end of the nineteenth century there existed another forgotten period in the history of socialism when feminism, sexual radicalism and socialism were intertwined.

Gender antagonism is frequently described between women and men in the socialist movement but it is not analysed. Perhaps feminists have been looking for a too simplistic solution to the “problems” of feminism; an all-embracing theory which is ultimately teleological.

In the period from 1883 to 1914 no one organization or individual held a monopoly on all or even one of the various strands of both feminism and socialism. The late eighteenth century coincided with the rise of liberalism. The picture presented of feminists and socialists cannot be homogenous.

The feminist and socialist problems of difference and equality, and independence and alliance represent the diversity of debates conducted within and between the two modes of thought. Marx saw the stresses of history as a dialectical process. Not a progressive march towards a higher, more enlightened state of being, but a struggle for human liberation conducted within consciousness itself.

Hegemony is not something that is imposed, from above, upon the working class, it has to accord with the common sense of that class. A cross-class element in the suffrage movement, the democratic suffragists, were a significant factor in the rise of the Labour Party.

In the case of women’s trade unionism claims of “sisterhood” were articulated by the middle-class women who possessed only a limited understanding of the actual conditions of life for working-class women. Gender was intersected by class and class was intersected by gender.

By their very actions both feminists and socialists were demanding that their concerns be placed upon the political agenda. They had already, therefore, crossed the ideological divide between public and private spheres.

We need to understand what it is about feminist and socialist ideologies which makes them so hard to reconcile, except in some historical contexts.

Chapter One: The Intellectual Origins of Feminism and Socialism

Some recent commentators have referred to the years from 1880 to 1930 when socialism re-emerged in England as a period of crisis during which the modern state was in the making - not in the sense of a gentle evolutionary transition from one form of social organization to another but a rupture with pre-existing modes of organization and thought.

Whether it is possible to argue that Britain was in a state of continuous crisis for fifty years is debatable. Rather, it would be more appropriate to argue that Britain was experiencing a series of important political, social and economic changes some of which represented specific points of crisis.

Nevertheless, the revival of socialism did occur in a climate of discontent and economic distress. Notwithstanding this apparent paradox of distress and material betterment, a number of contemporary observers did perceive the last quarter of the nineteenth century as a time of crisis.

The industrial organization, which had yielded rent, interest and profits on a stupendous scale, had failed to provide a decent livelihood and tolerable conditions for a majority of the inhabitants of Great Britain.

If the late nineteenth century was, in the eyes of contemporary intellectuals, a period of crisis, it must also be viewed as a time of intense struggle which penetrated far beneath the surface of institutional reforms to engage with both language and consciousness.

Situated at the very centre of this struggle were the socialists and feminists for they were involved in a critical contest for the hearts and minds of the population. In her work, *Faces of Feminism*, Olive Banks has identified three distinct feminist traditions with distinct origins: the enlightenment; evangelical christianity; and socialist feminism.

Because women of the middle and upper classes exhibited puerile and subservient characteristics in relation to men, it was argued that women by nature must therefore be puerile and subservient. Far from demonstrating the innate inferiority of women, contemporary debates merely constituted a description of the influence of environmental factors upon human behaviour, the most important of which was that of education, which in this context meant socialization as well as formal education.

Until women and men received an identical education no conclusion could be drawn concerning the relative inferiority or superiority of either of the sexes. Till society is constituted differently, much cannot be expected from education.

For women to fulfil the feminine ideal they were by definition unfitted for the demands of public life. It was only by exclusion from this world that women could exercise control over their passions. A moral and ethical basis for the formal exclusion of women from participation in civil society was an attempt to prevent revolution.

This led to the contradictory conclusion that women were morally superior to men but naturally inferior. Only through a rigorous moral education and the adoption of separate spheres could women maintain their purity and innocence.

By the middle years of the century, the religious language of sexual difference used by the Evangelicals had passed into secular usage and thereby entered the "common sense" of the middle class. With the threat of a democratic revolution coming both from abroad and at home the Evangelicals made the prevention of such a revolution contingent upon the reform of the family.

In this manner, the family became an active moral force within society, with the role of women pivotal within it. The Evangelicals sought to rationalize the rapid social, political and economic changes which were occurring in England at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries.

Like the feminists and socialists of the late nineteenth century, they were trying to re-model a society in a state of change. The industrial revolution resulted in the intensification of an already existing labour process which became increasingly directly subject to the vagaries of market relations.

Where machinery was adopted it was frequently accompanied by innumerable manual tasks which formed an essential part of the production process. Labour was cheap and abundant, which encouraged capitalists to engage in capital-saving rather than labour-saving investment.

Increased productivity could be achieved either by introducing better tools, by more intensive exploitation of the labour force, or through the introduction of cheaper, labour-saving materials. An increased division of labour could achieve a rise in productivity without the need for machinery.

One effect of this continuation of old methods accompanied by greater exploitation of the workforce was a disruption in the social relations of production. It is within this context of the necessity for work discipline that the Evangelicals sought to re-define society in terms of an essential division of labour between women and men.

The home came to be seen as a haven from the public world where harsh competition and numberless vices proliferated. Such a gendered ideology was highly contradictory thereby enabling later feminists the opportunity to seek a voice in the public world.

If women were the possessors of moral virtue and if, too, the public world was immoral, then their participation was not only justified but vital for the future of the nation. Later on, in the early years of the twentieth century, feminists were to take this argument even further by declaring that the encroachment of the state into those areas where women were intimately concerned, such as the welfare and education of children, made their involvement a moral imperative.

Minimizing distinctions between the sexes gave coherence to demands for egalitarian treatment, but at the expense of ignoring those aspects of women's existence which simply could not be lived in the male mode. But to admit the particularity of women's lives and needs appeared to undercut the egalitarian argument.

The word "women" was dropped from the original demand for universal suffrage for fear that its inclusion would retard the progress of the Chartist movement. At the same time, Chartist leaders sought to mobilize the support of women for the movement solely on the basis of their position as mothers, wives, sisters and daughters of working men.

The central belief of radicalism in the corrupt nature of political power and the authority of the state was undermined by the introduction of political measures designed to ameliorate economic hardship, such as the Ten Hours Act of 1847.

The political discourse of Chartism itself precluded women from active participation, particularly at an organizational and decision-making level, because its fundamental subject was male and its fundamental object was male representation.

The tensions between arguments for equality and assertions of difference were not restricted to radical feminist and socialist movements. What was then called the nature of women was an eminently artificial thing - the result of forced repression in some directions, and unnatural stimulation in others.

From the middle years of the century, until the re-emergence of socialism in England in the 1880s, feminist thought continued to be influenced by both Evangelical gendered ideology and liberal ideology.

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The Evangelicals perceived their attempts to reform society in terms of a personal struggle with God for both women and men. Their struggle was an active engagement with social evils, as evidenced by their role in the anti-slavery movement which was interpreted by women as a moral duty.

The universalization of the category “woman” disregarded class distinctions and portrayed the bourgeois vision of womanhood as the ideal for all women; the idealizing of the home as a haven from the outside world; and the denial of autonomy for women.

Ironically, the universalization of the concept of “woman” led to a feminism which argued that all women constituted an oppressed sex-class. The idealizing of the home as a haven and the denial of female autonomy in turn led to a feminism which exposed the separate sphere ideology of Victorian society as a hypocritical mechanism for the oppression of all women.

Sex became the key element which differentiated all women from men. This analysis of women as a sex-class tended to dominate feminist discourses up to and beyond the re-emergence of socialist feminism in the 1880s. It also tended to deny the economic class differences between women.

Like most liberal statements, the viewpoint of the middle-class was elevated to one which purported to speak for all classes. Feminists in this period both worked within the values promoted in their own society and distanced themselves from the mainstream.

Women’s campaigns for access to education, both secondary and tertiary, for the right to employment and for the right to vote need to be seen as part of a multi-pronged attack upon a social, political, and economic system which denied them those rights.

Women’s assertion of difference and autonomy from men was not so much an acceptance of male definitions of womanhood as an attempt to positively assert a strong female and feminist subjectivity and consciousness.

By the time socialism re-emerged in England in the early 1800s, then, feminist campaigning had been conducted over a number of issues for many years. The dominant theme of feminism was the emphasis upon the community of interest between all women regardless of class.

In this analysis difference and autonomy were stressed above equality; gender above class; and female moral superiority above a universal conception of human nature. The adherence to these views was shared by women from across the political spectrum.

Liberal feminists remained the dominant force within feminist organizations, reaching the height of their influence with the campaigns for the extension of franchise to women in 1884. Liberal feminists were prominent both in calling for a more interventionist role of the state and in responding to that change.

By appropriating definitions of womanhood for their own purpose, liberal women were both accepting that women and men were different but challenging the view that difference entailed inferiority. If the “woman question” was an issue of public concern and debate throughout much of the nineteenth century, the same cannot be said for socialism.

Socialism in England was espoused by a tiny minority among both the working class and intellectuals, despite the formation of the International Working Men’s Association in London in 1864. The third quarter of the nineteenth century represented a period of general prosperity and advance in the form of factory legislation, trade unionism, public health measures and, particularly, the passing of the Second Reform Act in 1867.

The economic climate and industrial changes which occurred towards the end of the century fostered a sense of class solidarity, yet politically the majority of workers still sought allegiance with the Liberal Party.

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The notion of a “fractured” or ambivalent consciousness on the part of skilled workers, it may be argued, is also important for an understanding of working class attitudes towards masculinity and femininity.

From as early as the 1840s a division between class and gender priorities was evidenced in some key sections of the working class. More precisely, this attitude was bound up with “natural” notions of what constituted masculinity and “manliness”.

In Bourgeois ideology femininity was represented as emotional and economic dependence within the separate sphere of the family, while masculinity represented the converse: independence and strength through work.

Skilled workers’ espousal of an assertive masculinity and their apparent acceptance of bourgeois gendered ideology needs to be set in its historical context. It is possible to argue that masculinity here represented a working-class male defence against the exploitative tendencies in relations of production under industrial capitalism.

It is, however, also illustrative of the extent to which notions of class and class consciousness were themselves gendered. The socialists and feminists had to connect the oppression of women within the family and within society, and the oppression of the working class, with the complex social relations which often served to mask the reality, or totality, of that oppression.

Yet, despite these obstacles to the attainment of a socialist feminist consciousness, the socialists and feminists could also look back to a tradition which had not completely died out. The ideal citizenship aimed at the realization of the full and perfect life for all, which could only be attained by the cooperative and sympathetic labour of men and women side by side.

Implicit in this critique was the recognition of the balance between seeing women and men as agents for change and simultaneously defined by their social circumstances. This was not an argument for revolution, in the sense of an abrupt break with the past, rather although the framework for social change needed to be located within existing society it could only be initiated by an altered consciousness of how a new society could be created.

The campaigns on the part of middle-class women, firstly for employment opportunities and then for the right to vote, were symptomatic of the period when individualism was the dominant philosophy. One of the most persistent problems for all feminists, regardless of their political affiliations was how to reconcile the need for the special treatment of women, for example, in areas such as child custody and employment, with assertions for absolute equality between the sexes.

The attainment for a socialist feminist society required not just special reforms for women but at the same time a change in consciousness. Socialist revolution had to be more than economic or political or social, it had to strike at the heart of cultural life itself.

The class struggle was the means for achieving the new society; from this would stem a change of consciousness which would bring about a state of equality and harmony. The political differences between various socialist groups were apparently extreme, ranging from advocacy of revolution to reformism and all the shades in between.

If the new world has proved difficult to attain it has, at the same time, proved to be one of the most enduring visions of English socialism. Whilst in the earlier period socialist feminism represented an alternative to capitalism, in the 1880s it represented a sustained critique and struggle within capitalism itself.

Socialists sought to change the consciousness of the working class by revealing the necessary relationship between theory and practice. They did so by emphasizing the need for a new way of life, not merely politically or economically, but culturally.

It was the breadth of this new vision of socialism, concerning as it did the totality of lived experience, which led many to proclaim it as the new religion. From the late eighteenth century onwards the problem of equality and difference provided both the links and the tensions between socialism and feminism.

But by the end of the nineteenth century gendered ideology had become deeply embedded in the feminist and labour movements alike. It was in these circumstances that the religion of socialism led to a questioning of all facets of social life, both personal and political: indeed, it made the personal political.

Making Socialists: Personal and Political Life 1883 – 1893

One of the features of the socialist revival in the 1880s and 1890s much commented upon by historians was the widespread use of religious language. It was the expression of a deeply felt hope for the future of a new society and a new way of life amidst the present misery.

Partly, too, it was the continuing expression of a long tradition within the labour movement generally and English socialism in particular which stretched at least as far back as the revolutionaries of the seventeenth century.

But it was also the language of those who came from the tradition of the chapel and the church. The working class will always, naturally, tend towards socialism. The language used by socialists did not merely strike a responsive chord within those members of the working class who had been reared within the utopian socialist tradition, it also promised for some women the dawning of a new era of hope precisely at the point when those hopes had been dashed by the failure to obtain some measure of enfranchisement under the 1884 Reform Act.

It was this vision of an altered way of life, both on a personal level in the ordinary relations between men and women and on a socio-economic level in the relations between capitalist and worker, that nourished members of the socialist movement and has continued to do so long after the “utopian” aspirations have largely vanished from the socialist agenda of the Labour Party.

The feminist problem of equality and difference, reformulated in socialist terms as independence and alliance, was to the fore in this period when the thrust was towards making socialists by changing consciousness.

For the Socialist League, in particular, a change of consciousness was seen as a prerequisite for the attainment of a socialist society based upon freedom and equality. They eschewed all forms of “collaboration” with existing institutions which either hindered or did not recognize the need for this change of consciousness.

The stress upon the moment of conversion, the process of making socialists, represented both the strengths and the weaknesses of the language of religion. Its strength lay in the powerful effect such a conversion had upon individuals.

It was literally a moment of revelation and, as such, produced a level of commitment which far exceeded that usually required of members of a political group. Its weaknesses were three-fold. Firstly, the use of religious metaphors could obscure political differences by proclaiming a spiritual unity between disparate groups, which did not necessarily correspond with lived experience.

Secondly, religious language could lead to an emphasis upon the moment of conversion at the expense of a strategy to achieve socialism. Finally, such language could produce a tendency towards moral conservatism.

Put simply socialism means not only the socialization of wealth, but of our lives, our hearts, ourselves. Not only did it affirm a basic belief in equality between the sexes, it also denied the division between reason and passion - both hearts and minds were to be mobilized in the struggle for socialism.

The impoverished portrayal of female subjectivity, a problematic element within feminism, and a similarly impoverished portrayal of male subjectivity inherent within gendered ideology, promised to be banished by this discourse.

The emotional desire for freedom was linked with the economic urge for equality. The growth of commercialism, the introduction of new machinery and the increasing division of labour all involved the destruction of the relationship of the worker to the end product.

There was a connection between the loss of creative ability in the worker and the proletarianization of the working class. With the growth of mass-produced artefacts beauty itself became degraded. The loss of beauty had created a class who were so exploited that they were incapable of realizing beauty in their own lives.

The development of a capitalist industrial society and the destruction of art were therefore part of the same commercial process whereby human lives and values were devalued. Thus, the reinstatement of art in people's lives necessitated the destruction of capitalism.

This relationship between class struggle and the re-birth of art and beauty in people's lives formed the basis of the new society. Three qualities or conditions had to be acquired before the socialist society could be attained: "intelligence enough to conceive, courage enough to will, and power enough to compel".

Without these qualities, without the conscious desire for a new life, the class struggle became simply a means without an end and would necessarily fall victim to a kind of utilitarian sham socialism. The task for the socialist league, was to go out to the working class and arouse in ordinary men and women the desire for a different society based upon equality.

Propaganda, not reformist measures, was seen as the key to converting the working class to socialism. In the first decade of the twentieth century during the intensive suffrage campaigns, the claims of feminists were perceived as secondary to the class struggle.

Whilst the family served to reinforce capitalist ideology with an emphasis on individualism, freedom and equality, at the same time its very structure militated against the highly socialized workforce needed for capitalist production.

The socialists' stress upon freedom within relationships could mean libertinism for men but greater sexual oppression for women. The recognition of women's oppression through their unpaid domestic labour, and the acknowledgement that such work should be performed equally by both sexes, made reference to practical activity only. It did not counter the belief that maternity was women's natural role.

All women, regardless of their class status, were victims of the same male contempt for womanhood and that the notion of a world divided into two separate spheres was a fiction. The capitalist state had not only produced a corrupt economic system but had also produced a profoundly corrupt moral system.

The late-Victorian expectations of social behaviour forced men, and in particular those of the middle class, to hide their true feelings. The effect of capitalism upon men had been to draw him away namely, Leveratt, Mandy (1991) *The Relationship Between Feminism and Socialism in England 1883-1914*.

1) from nature, 2) from his true self, and 3) from his fellows, whilst the self-same system had resulted in the enslavement of women.

There existed within everyone a longing for the ideal of human unity which had been suppressed by Victorian bourgeois ideology and by established religion. It was this hidden, truer human nature which needed to be uncovered and consciously striven for in order for people to achieve the spiritual growth necessary for the new life. A change of consciousness was pivotal in this process.

There was a tyranny in the fixed gender roles whereby women were trained for economic, social and emotional dependence, whilst men were trained for an independent competitive life which involved denying their emotions and disguising their true feelings.

Evidence of this denial could be seen in the way men treated women, other races, and the working class. Gender ideology penetrated all aspects of social existence and was, moreover, intrinsic to the functioning of civil society.

Relations between the sexes had been perverted by the growth of capitalism. The new society would be based on co-operation; men and women would be free from sexual stereotyping and hence enabled to combine the best characteristics of each sex.

The androgynous society was seen as the solution to sexual and economic oppression because the socialization of women and men into fixed gender roles trained men to dominate and women to be submissive.

A combination of the characteristics of each sex would make men less competitive and women more independent and thereby both class and gender oppression would be abolished. Women who break out of the bourgeois mould are seen as behaving in a "mannish" way. But the men who break out of the mould are not subject to the same criticism.

The extent to which a challenge could be presented to domestic relationships was reduced because its intensity was limited to one sex. The triumph of the spirit would occur when masculine intellectualism was allied with feminine moralism, thus creating a new race of women and men.

The ability of the individual to uncover hidden feelings and live out a new spiritual relationship with the world could only be achieved by those with independent financial resources. At this time, ideas about the social construction of gender were unknown.

Women, especially well-educated women, were brought into contact with a philosophy which declared that there was nothing "natural" about the sexual division of labour and thus offered at least the possibility of a life with new dimensions.

The enslavement of women and the degradation of the working class were a result of the accumulation of private property. But an economic change of itself would not necessarily free women. There had to be a moral revolution as well which would allow women complete freedom both economically and sexually. Freedom and equality were the twin foundations of the ideal society.

The perception of socialism as a new religion, as a new cultural practice, exhibited itself in two quite different, yet inter-related ways. It could and did, lead to sexual radicalism, for the connections made between personal and political life led some to an analysis of sexual relationships and sexuality itself.

The identification of socialism as a new religion led to another, more morally conservative, development. There was a crucial difference between the two versions of the religious discourse of socialism.

The first sought to change people's consciousness to achieve the new society. The second sought not the creation of a new society but the redemption of the old. This redemptive perspective sought to bolster and not abolish certain key institutions such as the family.

This particular socialist discourse had a humanistic impulse that was directed towards the realization of "true" Christianity on earth. One consequence of this was the belief that socialism would strengthen the existing institutions of marriage and the family rather than alter them.

Moral conservatism entered the socialist movement through two routes; those who had replaced established religion with the religion of socialism and those who privileged economic change above all else. The two were related.

The two aspects of the religious discourse of socialism, the struggle to change consciousness and moral conservatism, illustrate the problem of consciousness. They demonstrate how the complex inheritance of socialist ideas at one and the same time, with a vision of liberation and a history of conservatism with regard to the family.

The two aspects of the religious discourse co-existed in the early years of the development of socialism when it was in a state of flux and ideas flowed freely. By looking at the impact of socialism at a local level we are able to see how socialism and feminism functioned at the grass roots.

In addition to being a centre of dissent, Bristol was also an important trading and manufacturing centre for the west of England. During the nineteenth century the size of the city grew five-fold. It outstripped that of Norwich, which along with Bristol, had been the two largest cities outside London in 1700.

The Bristol Socialist Society came into existence as an independent group in December 1885. In April 1884 the society issued a Manifesto addressed to "Fellow Workers" which clearly set out its socialist principles:

"We earnestly appeal to you to join us in endeavouring to establish equitable conditions to live and labour under. Our labour provides the means of existence for all, and life to us should be beautiful, comfortable and happy.

"Why, amidst the abundance of wealth which our labour has produced, should want and misery exist? Remember it is not from lack of wealth that this continues, but because there is no justice, or social order in its distribution.

"The present must be superseded by a more righteous system of production and distribution of wealth; there should be collective ownership of the land, machinery and all means of production and distribution, and all departments organized on co-operative principles, and worked for the people's benefit, and hours of labour reduced, and for ever end this slavery, competing for bare subsistence".

The publication of this manifesto meant that Bristol "openly advocated socialism six months prior to the Democratic Federation nationally declaring for it."

Bourgeois ideology was not imposed from above upon the working class but instead was subject to mediation and manipulation. What the middle class understood to mean by "improvement" was clearly not the same as that of the working class.

Socialists seemed to meet each other in the early years of the socialist revival by a chance meeting or through a network of radical groups up and down the country, not yet socialist in the 1870s but looking towards a new way of life.

The Bristol group is an illustration of how close-knit were the local societies of socialists. In general, people joined the Bristol society either because there was a family tradition of radicalism or because they lived in close proximity to those who had just such a tradition.

Becoming a socialist in the 1880s and 1890s meant far more than paying a membership fee; it also involved a dramatic change in life-style. For some it meant ostracism from previous friends and relations, whilst for others it could mean losing their jobs.

As one member of the Bristol Society said: "We were despised, ostracised, spurned, and, as far as possible, persecuted. We stood alone as a very small but defiant body of rebels, with the finger of scorn pointed at us; but, and perhaps largely because of this, we lived intensely and cared not for anything but our ideal and the genuine comradeship which had sprung up between us".

Women and children were actively welcomed into the group in order to preserve and foster family unity. The cultural activities undertaken by the Bristol Society ranged from musical evenings, to lectures on a wide range of topics and the establishment of a Sunday School for the children.

In the 1890s, the Clarion movement was to extend these activities with its rambles in the countryside and cycling clubs which brought new-found freedom especially for women. All these activities were important in establishing the group's identity and a sense of unity among the members against the hostility of the world outside.

In the case of women who joined the society this need for unity was particularly important as it took a considerable amount of courage for them to become involved in political activism, with the certain knowledge that they would be ostracised by society.

During the late 1880s and early 1890s, Bristol, along with other industrial centres in Britain, experienced a series of strikes involving previously non-unionized unskilled workers. The Bristol society, and in particular the women of that society, played an important role in the organization of the workers.

It was in 1889 that, to aid the striking cotton workers who were not unionized and did not possess a strike fund, the society formed a strike fund committee of which Miriam Daniell became treasurer and Helena Born secretary.

A national appeal for money was launched through the pages of the Women's Union Journal in November 1889. As part of their protest, the women paraded every Sunday through the streets of Bristol, entering various churches along their way.

The tactics of taking strikers into the very heartland of bourgeois Victorian life, the High Church, seems to have been both a popular and effective one. The gulf that existed between the professed religious beliefs of the Victorian bourgeoisie and their actual practice could be exposed.

The actions of the Bristol socialists and the conjunction between religious beliefs and conversion to socialism, illustrated just how close were the connections between religion and socialism in the early years of the socialist movement.

For many of the socialist feminists of the time, the primary struggle was that of the workers against capitalism; the specific needs of women were to be remedied once capitalism had been abolished. It was only by creating a new society with a different moral code that women and workers would be emancipated.

The desire of some women for freedom and equality in all human relationships involved a change of consciousness which was too advanced for some sections of the socialist movement. Later on, as the movement had grown and became less open to experimentation with new ideas, socialist ideology became both more rigid and narrower in its outlook.

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This narrowing of outlook was to lead to the exclusion of both feminism and the search for a new society from its agenda. Changes in life-styles, friends and occupation, were an integral part of becoming a member of a socialist group.

Many socialist feminists believed that genuine comradeship was possible only when the man becomes effeminate or when the women to some extent rationalizes her costume. The involvement of women in the day to day activities of the Bristol Socialist Society had already implied a changed attitude between the sexes.

By their dress, their life-styles, and their appearances on the lecture platform, such women were kicking over the traces of conventional behaviour. Living by one's own principles also meant the freedom to love and be loved. Unconventional love relationships were a feature of the early socialist movement.

Socialist women were caught up in the desire for the ideal relationship. For many women, the pressure of maintaining an alternative life-style was too much for them. A complete revolution in life, in the relationship between women and men, and the economic relationship between capitalist and worker, necessitated more than a change in the mode of production.

It involved rather, a complete reconstruction of the moral, ethical and religious base of society. This could only come about through a change of consciousness. But trying to change people's consciousness simply was not enough, for without a corresponding strategy it did not and could not become the actual mechanism for change.

During the period of growth, when the socialist movement was in a state of flux and many different schemes were disseminated it was possible for socialists to combine the desire for a more equitable economic system with a desire for a qualitatively different way of life.

But in the 1890s the labour movement turned increasingly towards the attainment of more immediate goals such as the eight-hour day and independent labour representation.

Independence or Alliance: The Making of a Political Party

The formation of a political party was seen as the beginning of a new era of cooperation between socialists and trade unionists in which political and industrial aims would be united. A number of representatives of local socialist societies came together in Bradford to form the Independent Labour Party with the intention of securing, amongst other reforms, "the collective and communal ownership of all the means of production, distribution and exchange."

From this movement the socialist movement in England entered a new phase of its development. The birth of the first political party in England to expressly represent the interests of the working class arose not solely from a spirit of unity but also from discord and dissension.

The Independent Labour Party represented a confluence of socialist and labour element, each of which emerged from quite distinct traditions. The period during which the arguments for socialist unity were being aired corresponded with a time of political, social and industrial change.

All the various socialist groups were engaged in a struggle over definitions of change. The issues of independence and alliance, therefore, took place on several different levels at the same time. In order to effect change from capitalism to co-operation, from unconscious revolt to conscious reorganization, it was necessary that Socialists should constitute themselves into a distinct political party with definite aims, marching steadily along their own highway without reference to the convenience of political factions.

From the outset the independent Labour Party was faced with the problem of not only trying to co-ordinate local socialist societies, it also had to cope with the explicit rejection by the national bodies of the Fabian Society and the Social Democratic Federation.

A problem inherent within the new party concerned the priority given to political representation, for this could lead to parliamentary opportunism and to the containment of socialist aims within a bourgeois institution and mode of operation.

At the Annual Conference of the social Democratic Federation it was resolved that: "there can be no need for the separate existence of the I L P, on the ground that the proper place for conscious socialists is inside a revolutionary Socialist organization such as the Social Democratic Federation."

Despite this clear stand, the Social Democratic Federation was soon forced once again to consider fusion with the I L P due to the increasing popularity of the latter organization. In July 1897 an informal conference between the two groups was held and a resolution passed which stated that: "It is desirable in the interests of the socialist movement that the S D F and the I L P be united in one organization, provided it is found that there is no question of principle to keep them apart."

If the Social Democratic Federation felt unable to work with the Independent Labour Party on the grounds that the latter organization was not socialist, the independent labour party, in its turn, perceived the Social Democratic Federation as an isolated propaganda organization which did not understand the traditions of the labour movement in England.

Further complicating these political differences were personality conflicts. It was precisely the desire to abolish, not to ameliorate, the "evils of the system" that the independence of Labour lay. The Independent Labour Party had to distinguish itself from both Liberal and Conservative radicalism.

Also, the working class was divided in its support between the liberals and the conservatives; any anti-constitutional measure, whilst appealing to those who supported the Liberals, was bound to alienate those workers who supported the Tories.

The only way to unite these two, disparate groups was to promote those issues in which all workers had a vested interest, such as the hours and conditions of labour. Gone were all references to the making of a new world and a new society.

Instead, socialism is presented as an improvement upon the old, a more efficient system. This efficiency was to be achieved through greater state control - the nature of the state itself was not in question. To understand how this crucial shift occurred it is necessary to look at the development of the trade union movement.

While trade unionism made progress during the third quarter of the century it was not linear; measures gained through one Act could be abolished by another. It is this particular group of workers - the craft workers who were members of the new unions, participated in insurance schemes and belonged to such organizations as the Mechanics' institute - who have been identified as comprising a "labour aristocracy".

The Labour aristocracy formed a distinctive upper strata of the working class, better paid, better treated and generally regarded as more "respectable" and politically moderate than the mass of the proletariat. It has been established empirically by a number of studies that a labour aristocracy did exist.

Uneven development of industrialization disrupted social relations, offering independence for some workers, subordination for others. Many of those responsive to the socialist revival were skilled workers. Workers were recomposed into the now familiar three grades of skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled.

The growth of women's trade unionism in the textile trades was a major factor in the disintegration of paternalism. "Independence" represented a statement of classical political economy; freedom from state interference, and an aggressive individualism.

Yet it also suggested collectivity - the ability of strong workers to bargain directly with employers for wages and conditions of work. Independence was thus at one and the same the expression of a strong individualist masculine identity and a collective class consciousness, however limited that may have been.

But if independence was associated with masculinity its obverse, dependence, was associated with femininity. The factory women of Lancashire had long been attacked by moralists for their "independence", although the terms of this attack were always bound up with the notion of their being sexually threatening in a way in which independent men were not.

On the contrary, the independent and respectable man was usually assumed to be a paragon of sexual virtue. There was nothing inevitable about the process whereby sectors of the working class took on board some of the values and politics of middle-class society.

The formation of a class consciousness which was specifically informed by socialist and feminist ideas was dependent in great part upon the effectiveness of both socialists and feminists in bringing their ideas to bear upon the working class.

The recognition that palliative measures could provide a transitional period before the advent of socialism led the Socialist Democratic Federation to agitate for parliamentary representation for the working class.

The federation was extremely active amongst the demonstrations of the unemployed in London in the 1880s, and sought political representation on local councils. Having formed itself on the basis that capitalism would inevitably crumble under the weight of its own contradiction and that with each successive industrial crisis the year of proletarian emancipation was creeping ever close, the S D F necessarily viewed strikes as a dissipation of the energy and funds needed to prepare the workers for the coming revolution.

It was the crude economic determinism of the Federation, which was seen as the iron law of history leading the working class inexorably towards revolution, that constituted their "marxism". With the economic destruction of capitalism as a self-evident truth, at least according to the S D F, they could justifiably argue that the way forward lay in the political education of the working class.

"The present system is rapidly breaking up. Capitalism is falling of its own inherent rottenness, and the future, dark to our enemies, is full of hope and encouragement to us. The storm cloud of industrial revolution is hanging overhead", they proclaimed.

Unemployed riots shook London between 1886 and 1887. Although the Socialist Democratic Federation played an important role in the riots, their attitude towards trade unionism meant that when the new unionism emerged barely six months later in 1888, the Federation was incapable of perceiving this as a significant force in the struggle for socialism.

The leaders of the new unions were forced to break away from the main body of the Federation, thereby producing a significant rupture between the main group and the trade union activists. The universal eight-hour day would not only create greater employment opportunities but would also give workers the leisure time necessary to educate themselves in the principles of socialism.

The real business of the socialists was to instil this aim of the workers becoming the masters of their own destinies, their own lives, and this can be effected when sufficient number of them are convinced of the fact by the establishment of a vast labour organization.

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The problem for the Socialist League lay in being clearly able to identify the enemy. How could the working-class oppose the liberal party when it appeared to be offering them the very reforms they sought?

The enemy was re-casting itself in a different mould and even appeared to be adopting some of the root principles of socialism, namely collectivism. The enemy was no longer without but nestling within. If the social Democratic Federation proclaimed the inevitability of revolution the same cannot be said for the socialist league.

The league acknowledged that the pressures upon the state demanded new solutions to urgent problems but, they argued, unless socialists stood above and outside the system and maintained their criticism they would be unable to recognize the difference between palliative reforms and revolution or, in the words of the socialist league, between radicalism and socialism.

The strength of the League's socialism lay in its emphasis upon the qualitative and conscious change it would bring to people's lives. Radicalism is made for and by the middle classes, and would always be under the control of rich capitalists.

From 1884 onwards when significant numbers of the working class men were enfranchised for the first time, and when the effects of the economic downturn and unemployment were beginning to bite deeply, the pressure for reform came from below.

Whilst collectivism from above could mean greater state control over the population in order to maximize industrial and imperial efficiency, collectivism from below concerned the demand for working-class recognition in the name of social rights and well-being.

It was all very well to argue that a conversion to socialism had to precede any revolutionary change in the social system but the social and economic context demanded that immediate solutions be found. It was the lack of a coherent strategy which had implications for the feminism of the socialist league.

At the very moment when the miners in Scotland were receptive to socialist ideas, the league drew back from the conflict, unable to see that, with their assistance, it may have been possible for a "sectional" strike to develop into a broader socialist action.

The Socialist league had told the miners it was a hopeless fight and so it proved to be. But a resolution passed at a meeting indicated that, among the miners at least, a conversion to socialism had been effected.

At the moment when the Socialist League was at last achieving some success, it was unable to do anything about it because of internal fighting. The socialists in Scotland, left bereft by the Socialist League, formed themselves into the Scottish Labour Party in 1888 and affiliated later to the Independent Labour Party.

At the very moment when the workers were affiliating in large numbers with the socialist cause, the Socialist League was incapable of taking the initiative because of its internal struggles over the issue of parliamentary action.

For the first time it was becoming clear that the future for socialism lay not in London but in the North of England. With the formation of the Independent Labour Party in Bradford, the majority of the provincial societies immediately sought affiliation thereby diminishing whatever support the Socialist League had in the North of England.

Between 1888 and 1892, which are seen as representing the peak years for growth of the new unionism, trade union membership doubled, reaching about one and a half million. Some unions were directly

influenced by socialists, others remained much more attached to both the Liberals and the Conservatives.

The new unions were general labour unions. Unlike the older-style craft unions they were not organized around one particular skill or trade but, rather, included unskilled workers who were engaged in a number of quite diverse occupations in a number of different geographical locations.

What was particularly of note about these unions was the involvement of women both at the organizational level and in their general membership. From the start women were admitted as members on an equal footing with the men.

The new unionism thus appeared to mark a high point in the relationship between female and male workers. In Bristol, for example, the strike of the women confectionary workers at the Sanders' factory in 1892 was supported by the dock workers.

The new unions were extremely vulnerable financially as their funds were quickly depleted during strikes. This, in turn, made the new unionism particularly vulnerable to counter-attacks by federations of employers formed to break strikes and implement lock-outs.

Although it was a strike of women match workers which initiated the explosive growth of trade unionism between 1888 and 1892, in reality they succeeded in unionising only a small number of women in comparison with male unskilled workers.

The support exhibited by the dock workers towards the confectionary workers in Bristol is an illustration of how the prominence accorded to women in the local socialist society could, in turn, effect a change of consciousness and a new solidarity between women and men workers.

Whilst the new union leaders regarded the unionization of women as important and attempted to include women in their organizations as members of the working class, this class action was developed on the basis of a deep-seated belief in different gender roles, within a labour force structure which was itself increasingly divided by gender.

The new hope of mass socialist organization among the working class, the building up of alliances across trades, was thereby constrained by the perpetuation of a consciousness which was at best ambivalent to the needs of women workers and, at worst, actively hostile.

One explanation was the need for the new unions to establish their respectability in the face of growing middle-class hostility to their militancy and a counter-attack by the employers, which saw a number of employer federations established with the aim of breaking long strikes.

In addition to this, a number of commentators have remarked that as the new unionist leaders got older they tended also to become more conservative in their attitudes. Nevertheless, the new unions did represent the industrial expression of mass working-class activity which also sought political representation.

At its simplest, independence entailed political independence from the Liberal Party, whilst alliance can be understood as both a desire for socialist unity and an industrial alliance with the trade union movement.

The fact of early industrialization, however uneven, along with the mid-Victorian years of compromise and slow consolidation meant that revolution was not a plausible option within the labour movement. What cannot be denied is that the failure of socialist fusion and the formation of the Labour Representation Committee led to an emphasis upon working within the parliamentary system and a closing off of theoretical alternatives.

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The relationship between theory and practice, which was never strong in the English context, was weakened as the parliamentary road to socialism became the creed of the Independent Labour Party. The unity between theory and practice was reduced to a vague wooliness with socialists reduced to the status of reeds shaken in the wind.

The weakening of the links between theory and practice did not necessarily mean that the language of making socialists disappeared within the Independent Labour Party as a whole. Socialists were not necessarily feminists in spite of the item in their programme affirming their belief in “the complete social and economic equality of men with women”.

Women and men should work together within the socialist movement to overcome the disadvantages women suffered as a result of their inferior education and socialization. For the feminists involved in the socialist movement the lack of attention to consciousness was critical as it exposed the gap between theory and practice which had become greater.

Women and Trade Unionism To 1914

Trade union organization for women had, by the 1890s, reached a higher stage of development. Those women opposed to state intervention did so in the spirit of individualism which was in contrast to the collectivism which state protection would foster among women trade unionists.

Was woman the helpless creature as claimed by male trade unionists and the state in their combined endeavors to limit the scope of her employment or was she capable of taking control of her life alongside the great and strong men of the world?

Those who opposed protection were middle class, and those who supported it were the workers, the socialists and the labour movement generally. That was the dominant view down to the 1970s, expressed as an irreconcilable division between middle-class feminists on the one hand and Marxists on the other.

Women and men rarely performed the same jobs and women always received less pay than men working in the same industry. Particular attention is paid to the reasons why a policy of opposition to state protection for women-only emerged in the early years of the Women's protective and provident league.

In early feminist literature of the 1960s and the 1970s much analysis centered around the separation of the home from the workplace with the development of industrialization. The home became the site of reproduction and consumption whilst the workplace became the site of production.

In this development of separate spheres and an accompanying sexual division of labour the roots of modern day women's oppression were to be found. Women were degraded workers as early as the first half of the eighteenth century. In both the textile and metal industries a gendered division of labour was apparent long before industrialization.

A gender division of labour existed prior to mechanization primarily because of women's extra responsibilities for child care and domestic work. Women's domestic work was unwaged and thereby separated from the meaning of production.

Women workers, seemingly the most “independent” or autonomous of workers when working in their own homes or in small workshops, were, in fact, the most degraded and dependent. Their control over the labour process was minimal and their secondary status within the labour market confirmed this subordination.

Within the family unit of production men gained authority and status through their role as head of the production unit whilst women were subordinate because of their childcare and domestic duties. Instead of organizing low-paid women workers, men sought to exclude them from their trades.

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The family, through the struggle for a family wage, represented an attempt by the working class to control the labour supply and thus improve their standard of living. Women gained indirectly through this control as a result of increased family wages.

Men may well have been the heads of the family unit of production and the most productive members in terms of actual output but it simply is not possible to argue that this necessarily resulted in men perceiving women's labour as secondary and inferior.

The family wage is as much myth as reality and, moreover, ignores the existence of male workers without dependents and women workers who are sole breadwinners. Women were perceived as cheaper and less skilled workers before industrialization.

The custom, bolstered by middle-class gendered ideology, both perpetuated low wages for women and ensured that gender antagonism would play a central role in the struggle between capitalists and workers over wages and control over the labour process.

In addition, changing concepts of masculinity, which revolved around the possession of a skill and independence, also had an impact upon the way women workers, particularly married women workers, were perceived to undermine male status.

The result was a working class fractured along gender lines and also divided hierarchically by status. Within the working class, it was the strata of skilled workers who had retained the greatest control over the labour process, and who could also afford to keep their wives at home, who were in the vanguard of the movement to exclude women.

The individual wage payment threatened to destroy their patriarchal control within the family whilst at the same time the intensification of the labour process threatened to destroy their status as skilled workers. Thus they simultaneously called for the exclusion of women and the payment of a living wage.

The drive of craft unions to exclude women from membership, and enforce their secondary status in industry under the banner of a living wage, was doubly divisive. It split the interests of working women from men, and it separated the unorganized labouring poor from the organized and higher paid ranks of the skilled trades.

Whilst concentration and intensification of production and the payment of an individual wage are integral to capitalism, the pursuit of exclusionary tactics by some male workers is not. The solution for women then, was to form themselves into trade unions and fight collectively for higher wages as male workers had done.

Firstly, women needed to protect themselves against under-payment from employers. Secondly, they needed to protect themselves against male trade unionists, some of whom had passed rules forbidding their members to work with women.

Finally, they needed to protect themselves against the combined efforts of male unionists, through the parliamentary committee of the Trades Union Congress, and the government, who together were proposing to limit the hours of women's work under the Factories and Workshops Bill.

The attitudes of these three groups - the employers, the male unionists and the state - towards women workers, revolved around a common definition of womanhood. Women were weak and helpless and so the more readily exploited by employers, the more likely to displace male workers in the workplace with their cheaper labour and thus the more needy of state protective legislation.

It was to counter this belief in the helplessness of women, by proving that through their own efforts they could, like the men, regulate their own wages and hours, that it was advocated to form women-only trade unions.

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The dependence of the league upon the financial support of middle and upper-class subscribers meant that when it was formed the more radical ideas had to be abandoned. Hence, the original title, the National Protective and Benefit Union of Working Women, was dropped for fear that the word "union" would alienate middle class sympathizers.

The word "union" had an evil sound in the ears of those to whom it seemed obviously associated with acts of wicked violence and intimidation. The subsequent adoption of the word "provident" was clearly intended to both appeal to, and reflect, the philanthropic instincts of middle-class liberals.

The league emerged instead as a central agency for the purpose of co-ordinating and encouraging trade unionism among women and not as an actual trade union itself. As a result of this dependence on middle-class support the aims of the League were thereby considerably modified to reflect the nature of that support.

The object of the League, it was stated, was to promote a cordial relationship between the labourer, the employer and the consumer. In terms of philosophy and organization, the women's unions promoted by the League came to resemble closely the craft unions from which they had been excluded.

The League was opposed to the imposition of legislation by and on behalf of men which had been framed without women's consent or co-operation. What the league was arguing, therefore, was not that women did not require protection but rather that they would achieve greater gains if, like the men, they were strong enough to negotiate their own conditions of employment.

The debate over protective legislation was not primarily a class issue, it illustrated rather the degree to which all facets of social existence, including both the "public" and "private" spheres, were gendered. The major difficulty with the League's opposition to protective legislation was that its spokespeople were middle class.

Middle-class women sympathizers had little or no knowledge of their work or lives and tended to present a romanticized image of the rosy-cheeked out-door worker. Working women learned to have a spirit of independence, to take a pride in work, and to refuse, not for their own sakes only but for the sake of the community at large, to take such remuneration as would not support them in decent comfort.

The League could not begin to counter the sexual division of labour within the hope from which the secondary status of women's work outside the home developed. The reality for these working married women was not of two separate discrete spheres, the workplace and the home.

Rather, work for them was a continuous process which transcended this ideological divide. Whilst the work women did in their own homes remained unacknowledged and essentially invisible gender-specific state legislation for the public sector of employment could not remedy the double workload for the working woman.

By attempting to banish the notion that women were weak and helpless, the League swung to the other extreme, using the male bourgeois notion of equality and independence embodied in nineteenth century liberalism to urge women to demonstrate their strength by forming unions.

In relation to working-class women the league tended to overlook or idealize the conditions of their labour, thereby promoting the right to labour at the expense of a thorough-going critique of the conditions of labour and, therefore, also of capitalism itself.

The idea of the right to labour had little or no relevance for most working-class women and when they supported the League against the implementation of protective legislation they did so because they had to work for their families to survive.

The League was influenced by feminist ideas. Whilst bearing in mind that the right to labour had more resonance for middle-class women who were seeking to enter the professions than for working-class women, the middle-class women of the League did bring feminist ideas to their work.

The issue of women's rights regarding employment, like that of suffrage, was one which seemingly applied to women across the classes. The League was formed at a point in history of feminism when assertions of women's equality were evolving into the concept of women as a sex-class.

Thus, it could be argued, that all women were an oppressed class within society. Feminists then proceeded to turn this negative view of difference into a positive one. If women were different from men then they needed special legislation to positively reflect that difference.

The League's call for women factory inspectors represented just such a turning point in feminist arguments, for it was simultaneously a call for equality and a recognition that women workers had particular needs and problems at work which could only be discussed with another woman.

From this point onwards assertions of difference coincided with male unionists' arguments about separate spheres. The very act of trying to organize working-class women was also instrumental in effecting this change of consciousness within the League.

Either woman was weak and helpless or she was as strong as the male worker. Neither position could ultimately accommodate the full complexity of working women's experiences, or reconcile the tension between difference and equality, because they were both based upon a divided view of society.

A reliance upon philanthropy both alienated the support of the men's unions and, moreover, had resulted in an over emphasis upon the provident aspect of the League. It was suggested that the League should ally itself with socialist groups whose aims were to bring about a redistribution of wealth.

Such statements occurred at a time when London was being swept by a series of riots of unemployed workers in which the various socialist societies played a leading role. Considerable public sympathy was aroused by the plight of the unemployed.

Socialist women led the way in organizing unskilled women workers. The influence of the evangelists on trade unionism was evident in the manner in which the unionists perceived trade unionism as a form of personal struggle through which the individual achieved communion with God and realized christianity on earth.

The problems the League faced were two-fold. Firstly, it had concentrated its attention upon London when the majority of women workers lived outside the capital. Secondly, it had organized those unions along the lines of craft unions, once again, the majority of women workers did not fall into that category.

To argue that the industrial interests of women and men were identical, actually served to cement the process whereby women workers were seen as different and marginal, whilst in fact ignoring the specific disabilities that women suffered as workers.

The attempt to expunge all accusations of class bias within the League ultimately resulted in the denial of gender antagonism within the working class. The great value of Trades Unions is that they became schools of social and economic education.

The issue of trade unionism for women involved not merely an improvement in their industrial conditions but a complete revolution in consciousness. Real Trade Unionism for women meant a moral and industrial revolution, and many people dread a revolution. They prefer stagnation, particularly for women.

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Effecting a change of consciousness was a difficult task. It was also one which could not be accomplished whilst middle-class women purported to speak for all women. The structure of gender relations within the family was seen to have an impact upon the structure of gender relations within the workforce and, specifically, upon women's participation rates in trade unionism.

Whilst the existence of gendered ideology remained unacknowledged and the "common sense" of the working class remained unchallenged the voices of working-class women could not be heard and the essential prerequisite for an altered society - a change of consciousness - could not be affected.

Middle class women were also instrumental in making the connections between socialism and feminism. The period from the turn of the century to the outbreak of the First World War was characterized by a proliferation of welfare reforms, particularly during the years of the Liberal administration from 1906 to 1911.

It was argued that under socialism married women with children would not work in a factory, at least until the children were out of their hands. Working-class women activists were particularly alarmed by the development towards prohibition of married women's labour.

There was a class dimension to the debate on women's labour. But class was not always the determining factor. Rather, it was intersected at all points by differing conceptions of feminism and socialism. Therefore it is not possible to speak of a united working class women's position.

If working-class women activists disagreed over specific proposals they were nonetheless united in their view of women as active agents in the struggle for economic rights. The labour movement affirmed its belief in maintaining the sexual division of labour both within the workforce and within the home.

All women workers were perceived as difficult to organize by virtue of their gender, although the same argument was not used for unskilled male workers. As a result, women's unions tended to be led from above, leaving working women with little opportunity to obtain the necessary experience to take over the running of their own unions.

The suggestion that working women were being led from above is present in the annual reports of the League where they are constantly referred to as girls. Just as working-class women twenty years earlier had raised their voices in protest against the imposition of protective legislation on the grounds that it did not take into account the double workload suffered by women, so too did the women of the 1900s argue that without the vote, and without active control of their own organizations, the interests of working-class women would not be served.

The issues which were most concerning to working women - the right to economic independence and the right to vote - were fundamental tenets of a socialist feminism which viewed the family and the workplace as the sites where oppressive relations were constructed and enacted.

They therefore acknowledged no fundamental division between the fight for women's rights and the struggle for a new society, and criticized the labour party on the basis that it regarded these issues as distinct.

The League sought an alliance with the male unions which resulted in a re-definition of women workers as weak and in need of protection. The lives of working-class women, as both women and as members of the working class, transcended the ideological division within the feminist and socialist problematics.

More than any other issue, the struggle for the vote among working-class women exemplified the simultaneous struggle.

Women and the Suffrage Campaign to 1914

The campaign for women's suffrage in England has entered popular imagination, stirred by the images of women chained to railings, throwing stones through windows and engaging in battles with the police. Academic and popular texts tended to fuel this image by concentrating upon the "militant" activities of the Women's Social and Political Union.

The struggle for women's enfranchisement needs to be seen in a wider context than simply the desire to obtain the vote. Suffragists set out to redefine and recreate, by political means, the sexual culture of Britain.

The campaign for women's suffrage was interpreted by supporters and opponents alike as meaning far more in both spiritual and material terms than formal political equality with men because of the impact it was believed it would have on women and their role within society.

Although the movement was an important stepping stone to women's liberation, the campaign for the vote may have diverted feminists from a wider vision of emancipation. The issue of class represented a dividing factor among suffragists.

When women articulated the language of difference to justify entry into the political world they may have done so for the express purpose of exposing the biological determinism which lay at the heart of women's exclusion from political participation.

Thus, the use of the language of difference by suffragists did not necessarily mean that they therefore also accepted the biologicistic implications of that language. Suffragism was one part of a multi-pronged feminist attack upon women's oppression in Victorian England, rather than an isolated campaign conducted by and on behalf of middle-class Liberal women alone.

Suffragists were campaigning at a time when the two most crucial divisions within society were those of gender and class. As well as being important for the elucidation of notions of womanhood, the women's suffrage campaign is also critical for an understanding of the general relationship between feminism and socialism, particularly following the emergence of the Labour Party as a political force after 1906.

During the period up to 1914, the campaign for women's suffrage was conducted without cessation; a period which also coincided with the rapid growth of socialism in England. Thus there existed at one and the same time two powerful movements which were both concerned with political, social and economic change.

However, the relationship between the women's suffrage campaigners and socialism was fraught with difficulties not least because the existing franchise was determined both by gender and by property. Unlike the issue of protective legislation discussed previously, the suffrage campaign was one which affected all women because until 1918 no woman, regardless of her class, could vote in a general election.

There was then, in theory at least, the possibility of uniting all women on their common gender basis. In effect, the suffrage movement, on the basis of the demand for the vote, could potentially cut right across the socialist movement with its emphasis upon class solidarity.

But the major stumbling block affecting the relationship between feminism and socialism, and which created divisions within both feminism and socialism, was tactical: should the demand be for full adult, or universal, suffrage, which would mean campaigning for men as well as women, or for the vote on the same grounds as it had been granted to men.

This tactical dilemma was most frequently articulated in both class and party political terms, on the grounds that a limited suffrage for women would enfranchise only those who possessed wealth and property;

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a move which was interpreted as tantamount to delivering extra votes into the hands of the Conservative Party.

In addition, the demand for the vote on the same terms as it was or may be granted to men did not thereby necessarily restrict women campaigners to acceptance of a property based franchise. To date, no satisfactory study has been conducted which explains why a group of socialist women should have become increasingly hostile to the Labour Party.

Women's moral power over men was expressed not in terms of active choice but in terms of an unconscious, innate component of the feminine spirit. This moral purity, however, could be maintained only by the recognition of and compliance with the ideology of separate spheres for women and men.

If women were the moral guardians of the nation, what could be more vital than the effect of their influence being brought directly to bear upon the "Mother of Parliaments"? The key element on both sides of the suffrage debate was that of difference.

The moral superiority of women formed the bedrock of gender difference and was not, therefore, the subject of dispute. It was over the interpretation of that moral influence that debate arose. By the last third of the nineteenth century, the language of moralism had become entrenched within those debates.

The nature of woman was grounded in an essential division between reason and passion. Was woman's moral superiority to be reserved purely for the home or did it have a wider social and political applicability?

The fragile character of gendered ideology provided the chains that bound women and the potential for liberation. Neither side of the suffrage debate, at this point in the 1880s, sought to challenge the status quo in terms of an alteration in the institutions which constituted the framework of society.

But the demand for women's suffrage itself necessarily represented a challenge to the status quo. The demand for the vote was therefore also the demand that women be treated as both fully human and as individuals.

Some suffragists argued against the granting of votes to married women on the grounds that, given the structure of the family, it would be equivalent to granting husbands two votes. This was entirely consistent with the view that the family, and the man as the head of the family, constituted the primary social unit in society and that women's position of moral superiority within the family rested upon a position of actual inferiority with regard to men.

The argument over what constituted womanhood; her morality and her sphere of influence, was a dominant theme throughout the whole of the suffrage agitation, and if at times it appeared to be submerged by other themes, it was nonetheless all-pervasive.

Towards the end of the century, however, the voices raised in favour of women's enfranchisement were joined by a completely new element in the debate; working and middle-class women socialists. By the mid-1890s the two most important socialist groups were the Social Democratic Federation and the independent Labour Party each of which included adult suffrage as part of their programmes.

The mobilization of these arguments against women's suffrage by socialists represented elements of the half-defined and half-conscious antipathy expressed towards feminism generally with the socialist movement.

Middle-class suffragists took an important step forward in recognizing the claims of working-class women to enfranchisement. Within a year over a quarter of a million signatures in favour of women's suffrage had been collected.

A vital link was being recognized between the exploitation of women as workers and their oppression as women. As workers and as trade unionists the women were expected to contribute to the upkeep of an M.P, yet as women they could not vote for him.

The only conclusion that could be drawn from such a situation was that the women were discriminated against solely on the basis of their gender. The combination of all these factors must have made the women feel that they would only gain the suffrage through their own efforts.

The women's experience of uninterest, and at times, antagonism by men within the socialist and labour movements to the question of women's suffrage. Three particular lines of argument against women's suffrage can be discerned within socialism.

The first stated that the interests of women and men within the working-class were identical and that as long as working-class men were able to achieve political representation women's suffrage was irrelevant. The second argument went further than this and declared that the campaign for women's suffrage was an attempt to divide the working class along gender lines.

The third argument was more complex. It did not deny the existence of gender oppression but saw it as the result of economic inequality. The assumption that women's interests would be served by those already enfranchised, that is, men, appeared to be an argument for the equality of interest between the sexes.

However, it was based upon the belief in a fundamental difference between the sexes because of the statement that it was men, and only men, who were assumed to represent the interests of women as well as themselves.

The struggle for women's suffrage, whether in terms of partial or complete enfranchisement, was necessarily reformist because it did not challenge the structure of capitalist society. This form of marxist analysis was, however, comparatively rare in Britain.

It had more in common with the European socialist movements than those at home. The mid-Victorian reinvigoration of paternalism in industrial relations contributed to the development of a masculinity which was intimately connected with notions of independence and strength through work.

As a consequence, what it meant to be worker - a member of the working class - was itself gendered. By not challenging the sexual division of labour, analyses which focused on the economic position of the working class alone also failed to fundamentally challenge the structure of society on all fronts.

Socialist feminists became susceptible to the charge of being class traitors by pursuing the "middle class" objective of limited suffrage for women. This, in turn had the effect of fracturing the feminist movement, dividing socialist women from each other along the lines of adult suffragists against those in favour of a limited measure.

By the 1900s with the introduction of working-class women into the suffrage movement, a significant shift had occurred in suffrage debates from the moral arguments of the 1880s to the debate over class and gender priorities within socialism in the 1900s.

Those who linked gender and class oppression argued that a socialism framed by and for men could not produce equality between the sexes. This concept of equality rested upon the knowledge that gendered ideology had material effects upon the relationship between the sexes and that, as a result, immediate remedial legislation specifically for women was required.

The feminist critique of socialism saw the vote not simply as representative of women's oppression in general but also as critical in the debate over the type of socialism which should prevail. Feminists

argued that male socialists, despite their ardent desire for a new society, would concentrate only upon their own particular grievances and leave untouched those which were specific to women.

The combination of a distrust of socialism made by men alone with a feminist perspective which saw the vote as paradigmatic of women's oppression, enabled some socialist women to view the campaign for women's suffrage in metaphysical terms which attempted to transcend the tension between difference and equality.

The vote became both the means whereby this tension could be resolved and the symbol of freedom and equality. The feminist and socialist desire for a new society became encapsulated in the women's suffrage campaign, thereby indicating how radical the demand for the vote could be when linked to a fundamental transformation of political and social life.

It was women's suffrage, as a campaign run by women for women, which gave to feminism a heightened consciousness of gender oppression and solidarity. As long as the vote was perceived as having a meaning far beyond formal political equality the tension between the desire for a new society whereby both women and men were transformed and the emphasis upon women alone as an oppressed class could be minimized.

The dangers of emphasizing the vote alone were three fold. Firstly, by attaching to the vote the symbolic expression of all facets of women's oppression, the campaign for the vote could become an end in itself and not merely one means to that end.

Secondly, because the vote was an issue which involved all women, it brought about the possibility that men alone would be seen as the enemy and could potentially blur all those other factors that divided women.

Militancy represented the point at which the tension between difference and equality was broken and where women were seen as morally superior to men. It may have breached conventional views of womanhood and "feminine" behaviour but at the same time it served to confirm that men alone constituted the enemy.

Militancy has been the subject of considerable discussion by historians. Militancy certainly revealed male sexual contempt for women, as the survivors of street battles testified. Hunger striking, the ultimate act of militancy, contained the paradox that although the suffragettes had insisted upon overthrowing the shackles of the past, they now embraced their victimization, attempting to turn it into a new, yet familiar, martyrdom.

Bodily purity came to mean rejecting men and embracing death for the sake of the vote. A militant campaign had important feminist implications - the destruction of the stereotype image of woman as frail and weak, incapable of physical force.

However, militancy was far less effective than it could have been because of the women's movement's increasing isolation from other wider social movements of the time. Even if the vote were to be given only to women with black hair or to women of a certain height, it would mean that the barrier against women as women had been broken.

Suffragette campaigners were to testify to the enormous impact the movement had upon their consciousness of themselves as members of a subject class drawn together by the common bonds of womanhood.

Gendered ideology formed a critical component of the common sense of both women and men in Victorian and Edwardian England. The ideological division between the sexes was reinforced at every level - political, cultural, social and industrial.

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It also provided the framework for both feminism and socialism, because although they each looked towards a future whereby gender and/or class inequalities had been abolished, they were at the same time framed within the context of the profoundly divided society in which they arose.

The campaign for women's suffrage epitomized this tension between liberation and acceptance of the status quo. Their acts of militancy and their assertion of difference and separateness from men embodied the two potentials of feminism; for if militancy signified a direct challenge to received notions of female behaviour, the emphasis on the moral superiority of women entailed acceptance of the dualistic vision of culture and society.

The tension between those who were either convinced socialists or had become converted to socialism and those who retained support for the Liberal Party, however, did not erupt until after the First World War. In 1915, the National Union split, with most of the leading members leaving it to form what eventually became the Women's international League for Peace and Freedom.

For some of its women, the vote was a means for women, especially middle-class women, to introduce a "feminine morality" into the male sphere of politics. Criticisms of the "masculine" nature of existing political parties, and by extension, Parliament itself, were matched by a determination to enter and change that "masculine" world.

If women's awareness of gendered ideology provided the spark which initiated the process of detachment between feminism and socialism, from alliance to autonomy, it also contained the potential for a more complex critique of society whereby both female and male subjectivity needed to be profoundly altered.

It was here that the work of working class socialist women and the democratic suffragists became critical. Thwarted in their early attempts to create a socialism which transcended gendered ideology, they later sought to create a feminism which also contained a class perspective.

They were able to argue, therefore, for a socialist feminism which acknowledged difference and equality and for an organizational status which was both autonomous and allied.

Women's Political Groups To 1914

The development of socialist women's political groups occurred mainly in the years from 1906 onwards. The formation of the Labour Party appeared to mark a high point of unity within the Labour movement. This unity was, however, largely illusory. The twenty-nine members elected covered a wide spectrum of political opinion, ranging from self-professed socialists to ex-Liberal trade unionists.

Twenty years earlier, when socialism re-emerged in England, the major debate between socialists concerned the question of whether they should engage in parliamentary activity. By the 1900s, however, the debate was not over reformism versus revolution but over the form and content of reform.

One result of this was the hardening of the divisions between the Parliamentary Labour Party and the extra-parliamentary socialist movement - between social democracy and socialism. Whilst these divisions also had an effect upon socialist women's political groups, they manifested themselves specifically over those issues which were of most concern to socialist feminists - the right to work and the right to vote.

The path to social democracy, as the extent of this discontent suggests, was not smooth nor were the form and content of welfare reforms accepted uncritically by working-class women and men. Fundamental questions were raised concerning the role of women in politics, particularly in relation to the Labour Party, how women were to be organized, and how the voices of working-class women could be heard as against those of the zealous reformers.

Welfare reforms represented the point of intersection between the needs of women, the needs of the working class as a whole, and those who initiated and implemented the reforms. Women did not possess the vote and could not, therefore, as voiceless citizens, participate in the process of government.

An increasingly intolerable anomaly was developing whereby women, as mothers, were expressly acknowledged as citizen of the state yet were denied one of the fundamental rights which underpinned social democracy - the right to vote.

herein can be identified one of the contributory factors behind the demise of the Liberal Party as the party of progress. The women's suffrage campaign illuminated not merely the shortcomings of Liberal social democracy as far as women were concerned, it also exposed differences among and between feminists and socialists over the meaning of womanhood.

Those socialist feminists who were explicitly linked to the Labour Party faced an acute dilemma when they asserted their needs as women within the boundaries of a political party which gave analytical and practical priority to class.

The Women's Labour League was officially formed in March 1906. Gendered ideology, in the specific sense here of the sexual division of labour became a constituent element in the programme of the League. It urged women to pursue emancipation on the same lines as men.

The diverse nature of the concerns the women brought with them into the League promised to locate the Women's Labour League at the centre of socialist feminist struggles and to unite women involved in suffrage and industrial campaigns under the umbrella of the League, just as the Parliamentary Labour Party brought together men from across the labour and socialist spectrum.

More than any other issue, the question of votes for women highlighted the reasons why the Women's Labour League was not able to unite the feminist movement. The spirit of compromise which the League attempted to promote with regard to women's suffrage represented not so much a clear statement of policy as a desire to side-step the issue for fear that it would not only split the League but also endanger its relationship with the Labour Party.

There often existed a gulf between the London headquarters of feminist and socialist organizations and their provincial branches. The debate on women's suffrage was dominant in the Women's Labour League and threatened to tear the League apart even as it was being formed.

It had been a bitter debate, causing deep disillusionment among some socialist feminists with the Labour Party. The Women's Labour League itself had attempted to minimize the divisions caused by the suffrage debate by allowing its members the freedom to decide for themselves which particular suffrage proposition to support.

The women's suffrage campaign struck at the heart of these problematics and exposed the difficulties socialist feminists encountered when trying to define a political space for women within the confines of a larger organization which gave priority to class and which often ill-disguised a deeper gender antagonism.

The mother spirit, a happy medium in legislative proposals, and an opposition to sex antagonism were designed to reconcile the aims of the league with those of the Labour Party whilst, at the same time, promoting a feminism which was significantly different from that expounded by other feminists who were critical of the androcentric bias of the Labour Party.

It is possible to see independence and alliance in this expression of a desire to transcend the polarities inherent within notions of difference and equality. Like the right to vote, the right to work was a central issue for socialist feminists.

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The role of the Women's Labour League was to press for legislative enactments which could overcome the tensions between two polarized positions. By advocating public participation for women on the basis of motherhood as one means of overcoming charges of stirring up "sex antagonism" the League sought to steer a path between those who saw in every struggle for women's rights an attempt to divide the working class on gender lines, and the women of the Women's Social and Political Union whose increasing militancy was disturbing conventional views of "womanly" behaviour.

By stressing the role of women as wives and mothers the League had a two-fold purpose. It could reach an accommodation with their male counterparts within the Labour Party and at the same time argue for the urgent participation of women in public life without demanding the destruction of those roles.

Whilst such arguments did not challenge the dominant ideology of women as wives and mothers, nevertheless they represented a significant re-definition of the nature of the political. "Women's" issues thereby became the subject of political debate and, importantly, the question of what constituted women's issues was greatly expanded.

By the use of these arguments the League was involved in the creation of a new concept of the citizen that included the active participation of working-class women in shaping those laws and institutions which directly impinged on their lives.

But the ideology of motherhood developed by the Women's Labour League was itself the product of struggle. One of the areas where this struggle became visible was that of married women's labour and the accompanying question of endowment of motherhood.

The issue of married women's work outside the home became a matter of political concern following the Boer War when so many army recruits were found to be malnourished. Rather than looking at the underlying causes of malnutrition and ill-health, such as low wages, inadequate housing and sanitation, politicians and public health experts placed the blame upon mothers for poor child care and particularly upon mothers who worked outside the home.

Many socialists and members of the Labour movement generally saw state intervention as the only way to improve the circumstances of the working class and for some, in particular trade unionists, a ban on married women's labour could achieve a two-fold purpose.

Firstly, it could lead to the establishment of a family wage and a consequent improvement in home life. And, secondly, it could lead to the removal of female competition for jobs and the undercutting of wages by employers.

Whatever the political agenda of these diverse groups, the focus of their attention was upon women as mothers. The Women's Labour League therefore had to confront all these arguments when it attempted to formulate a socialist feminist definition of motherhood on the basis of social welfare reforms.

Some members of the League objected to both the prohibition of married women's labour and the idea of endowment of motherhood on the grounds that it assumed that all women were naturally fitted for marriage and motherhood.

In 1909 there were considerable divisions within the League over definitions of womanhood and its attempt to formulate a socialist feminist strategy on the basis of motherhood. Clearly not all members of the League shared the negative portrayal of women implicit in the assumption that they were in a state of dependence upon men.

Nevertheless, arguments both for and against endowment of motherhood were foregrounded in women's position within the family. Women had a right to economic independence and it was the duty of the state to see that this was achieved.

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The language of motherhood was couched in terms of nationalist and imperial efficiency. Moreover, whilst such “nationalist” language was gender and class neutral, it was the working-class woman who became the subject of investigation.

The language of empire and nationalism entered working-class popular culture during the late Victorian period. Such language also entered the “common sense” of the working class. As far as the Evangelicals were concerned, the individual’s obedience to the moral authority of God became the citizen’s duty to the collective good of the community and the state.

If language may be understood as a barometer of consciousness then the ideology of motherhood espoused by reformers of all hues must be seen as, above all, a struggle within consciousness. By concentrating upon the issue of women’s labour outside the home, and the concomitant issue of endowment and motherhood, the league forced “women’s” issues into the political agenda of the Labour Party.

But it did so in the context of an ideology and language of motherhood which was being deeply contested within its own ranks as well as by other socialist feminists. The role of the state should not be that of a policeman enforcing inequality by restricting the activities of one group of citizens but, on the contrary, its role should be to bring about greater equality by providing the structural means whereby this could be achieved.

The call for collectivisation of child care and housework represented one socialist feminist strategy for working-class women. It was however, a relatively rare demand and, moreover, was not necessarily one which accorded with the desires and lived reality of many working-class women.

Women established their own forms of collective help particularly during times of childbirth, illness and unemployment. In this context, “official” help in the form of charity workers, trained midwives and the like was often resented because it wrested control and a limited source of livelihood from the hands of local women.

By making the connections between gendered ideology, motherhood, economic dependency and the laws of the state, the Women’s Co-operative Guild transcended the ideological division between the public and the private spheres and gave priority to the lived experience of working-class women in its campaigns.

Where the leaders of the Women’s Labour League often spoke in lofty tones about bringing the “mother spirit” into politics and building “nobler homes”, the Guild instead published a book which chronicled the ill-health, poverty and male brutality which so frequently accompanied motherhood.

The Women’s Labour League, along with the Labour Party, did not oppose the introduction of maternity benefit, indeed it campaigned vigorously for its adoption and that of other proposals relating to women. Where the League differed from the Guild was over who should receive the payment, the man or the woman.

The League’s reaction to the granting of maternity benefit directly to women and the language it used in opposing such a measure reflected a tendency within the League to denigrate feminism whilst it pursued a close alliance with the Labour Party.

It demonstrated how attempts by the League to formulate a socialist feminist strategy, as opposed to a simply socialist strategy, were handicapped by their susceptibility to the charge of stirring up “sex antagonism”. Thus, whilst the Guild made women their priority, the League contrarily gave priority to the family.

The Guild was a democratic organization, composed of local branches, districts and sections as well as a national committee, all of which were governed in turn by elected committees. In addition, regular conferences were organized both at a sectional and national level.

This democratic structure had a two-fold advantage: the views of the general membership were carefully safeguarded and large numbers of members could be quickly mobilized behind a particular campaign. Unlike the executive committee of the League, the executive of the Guild did not have the power to override suggestions from the branches.

The issue that brought the two organizations together and yet, ironically, exposed the fundamental difference between them in terms of both consciousness and in their relationship to their male counterparts was that of divorce law reform.

The Guild argued that women lawyers should be appointed as they would be able to understand the women's point of view. Like their campaign on maternity benefit, the Guild stressed that it was women's experiences which were critical in determining its policy and it was prepared to articulate these experiences at the cost of severing relationships with the Co-operative Union.

Hampered by structural and ideological constraints, the League nonetheless regarded women as central agents in the struggle for a new society. The Guild acted very much as a pressure group in its campaigns for women's welfare rights.

Unlike the Women's Labour League, the Fabian Women's Group refused to condemn militant tactics, and moreover, was prepared to support any measure of enfranchisement which included women. This policy attracted other women from the League into the ranks of the Fabian society.

Where the league balked at reforms which would alter gender relations and the sexual division of Labour within the family, the Fabians dismissed this form of socialist feminism as androcentric, devised by men for men.

The Fabian Women's Group linked their campaigns for women's suffrage and for women's economic independence to the development of a collectivist state. Fabian socialism has been categorized as the most "reformist, bureaucratic, anti-democratic and illiberal variety of all the socialisms in existence.

The Fabian Women's Group reached the conclusion that women's oppression arose from the complex interaction of ideological and material factors. In the specific case of mothers with young children the same conclusion was reached but the Group concluded that what was also needed was, firstly, a maternity allowance from the state to endow women with some measure of economic independence and, secondly, the rational reorganization of housework using available technology to introduce labour-saving devices within the home which would free women to pursue whatever work they wished.

The crux of both these conclusions was that women had a right to an independent income and, furthermore, they had a right to earn that income outside the home even whilst their children were young.

In essence, middle-class women were gaining a greater understanding of economic oppression and working-class women were coming to understand gender oppression. If feminism brought to socialism an understanding of the ideological basis of women's oppression, socialism taught feminists that economic oppression could not be ignored.

It could be argued that the women's Labour League and the Fabian Women's Group were actively engaged in this process of trying to reconcile the aims of feminism and socialism. The language of national and imperial efficiency, which pervaded the ideology of motherhood as developed by both of these groups, reflected the political terrain with which this ideology had to contend.

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The Women's Labour League sought to protect and not destroy familial patterns. In this sense, they articulated the dominant opinion within the socialist movement and within the working class. But they did so at the cost of acknowledging that both socialists and the working-class in general were divided along gender lines.

For both the Women's Labour League and the Fabian Women's Group an ideology of motherhood was articulated in an attempt to place women at the heart of the socialist project. The Labour Party embraced a morally conservative strand of socialism which privileged the position of the male worker within the family and perceived feminism as explicitly hostile to this project.

The Women's Co-operative Guild, a body which was not structurally attached to any socialist organization, sought to transcend these constraints by formulating an ideology of motherhood which denied the privilege accorded the male worker and incorporated the lived experience of working-class women.

To this end, they supported the endowment of motherhood but, at the same time, engaged in an educational programme of their members which endeavoured to show them that their domestic concerns were inextricably linked to the wider concerns of the political world.

Those who saw married women's work as leading to a lessening of paternal responsibility and was destructive of the concept of a family wage were ignoring the basic fact that many men's wages were inadequate for the purpose of supporting a family.

All the women's political groups in the period to 1914 were engaged in a critical struggle to re-shape the face of politics in Britain from a socialist feminist standpoint. The reality of most working-class women's lives was either a constant struggle to survive on a man's wage, or long hours and poor pay in factories or a combination of the two.

Conclusion

Assertions of difference and arguments for equality were intertwined elements at the very moment of formation of modern feminism from the late eighteenth century. An analysis of the relationship between feminism and socialism cannot be reduced to this simple choice.

Lived experience is complex and contradictory. There was no easy or guaranteed transition from one assertions of equality to those of difference or vice versa. Rather, this process needs to be seen as one of negotiation within boundaries which were neither entirely fixed nor absolutely fluid.

The history of the Women's Social and Political Union can be read as a political development away from socialism towards conservatism as their leaders Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst severed their connections with the Independent Labour Party and embraced the Conservative Party.

Militancy represented the point at which this transition occurred because whilst it strained the boundaries of what constituted "womanly" behaviour it also provoked a strong re-assertion of "womanly" values.

The other large suffrage body, the National Union of women's suffrage societies, was drawn into a closer relationship with the Labour party following the failure of the Liberal Party to exhibit any commitment to women's suffrage.

Both feminists and socialists were possessed of a common dream - a vision of an alternate world devoid of oppressive relations. But whilst dreams can be shared, they are also intensely personal. Feminists and socialists had to contend with a dichotomous social view, at it influenced their own lives, even as they sought to transform and transcend it.

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The transcendence of these divisions lay at the heart of the socialist feminist project. Those with a vested interest in monopoly capitalism and imperialism were, like feminists and socialists, also engaged in a struggle to capture the hearts and minds of the population.