

The Feminist Challenge to Traditional Political Organizing

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Foreword

This *Working Paper* originated as a report by Penny Duggan to the first IIRE Women's School in 1991. It has evolved and matured since, having been given in whole or in part at all sessions without exception since then. It has become far broader in scope than at the beginning and thus, perhaps, schematic in parts. The report given to the first IIRE New Questions School in November 1995 was transcribed and used as the basis for the *Working Paper*. Although it has been reworked and edited for publication, it should still be considered as a work in progress. All criticisms and proposals for changes, additions and deletions are more than welcome, and will be taken into account when it is published in final form, most likely as an IIRE *Notebook for Study and Research*. Most welcome would be comments from women who, like the author, have wrestled for many years with the issues that Marxist feminists face in the women's movement, other social movements, and the revolutionary left. The fact that the text began as an oral report helps to explain its informal and anecdotal character, which has deliberately been preserved. The fact that Duggan speaks out of her own activist experience makes her perspective all the more valuable, both as a feminist critique from within the Marxist tradition and as an intransigent response to challenges to Marxism from outside the tradition. In this sense she makes an important contribution to the IIRE's project of the 1990s of a thoroughgoing, critical renewal of Marxism in dialogue with other paradigms.

Penny Duggan, historian and director of the IIRE Women's Studies Programme, has worked for many years to increase the feminist content of our educational and research activities. Together with Heather Dashner, she co-edited our *Notebook for Study and Research* no. 22, *Women's Lives in the New Global Economy*. She lectures on the historical development of the women's movement and women in broader political movements.

The Feminist Challenge to Traditional Political Organizing

The purpose of this report is to look at the challenges to and criticisms of traditional political organizational forms, primarily those made by the women's movement but also by other social movements, and consider whether they are well-founded or not.

1. Dissatisfaction with "politics"

The first thing to note is that there is a general dissatisfaction with what is considered as politics, that is bourgeois parliamentary representational politics. One of the main indicators of this is the growing abstentionism in parliamentary elections in Western Europe at least. The reasons are easy to see: the scandals over corruption, the confusion between politics and the media—"soundbite politics"—and the loss of control over elected representatives.

In the 1930s and 1940s there was a certain coherence to politics: parties represented different interests, they negotiated and made compromises in the interests of their "natural constituencies", in a division of labour with the trade unions. The great result of this type of politics was the establishment of the welfare state. Now in Western Europe at least this coherence is disappearing and there are rising levels of abstentionism in national elections. There can be exceptions, as in the presidential elections in Algeria in 1994. Islamic fundamentalism called for a boycott because it was obvious that all the elections would do would be to approve the president who had been put in place by the army generals two or three years ago. Nevertheless there was a very high level of turnout in the vote: something between 60 and 70 percent of the Algerian population went out to vote for the president. Bourgeois representational politics can thus still mean something in certain conditions. But this is an exceptional case.

Thus one of the problems that we face as political activists is that the very idea of politics and political parties of all types is something from which many people feel alienated. Our particular concern is in terms of left or revolutionary organizations, which are the subject of the harshest criticism from activists in the social movements because it's precisely to those parties that they look to find support and allies in their different struggles. We have all in our different countries and in our different ways experienced these forms of criticism:

- that the party form as such, the idea of a political party that organizes at a national level around a general programme, is outdated because there can be no overall project for society as a whole any more, so that all we need is a network of local activists;
- that left political parties are out of date and boring because they talk about the working class, and either classes no longer exist (in the opinion of some), or "the working class" is not a revolutionary class; a process led by the working class cannot defend the interests of all, or speak for all because such a notion doesn't take into account the variety of experience of the oppressed and exploited;
- that left parties are elitist because they think that they represent or can have an idea about what are the best interests of the class; this is also sometimes considered as being vanguardist, inasmuch as these revolutionary parties think that they in and of themselves represent the class;
- that they are hierarchical, bureaucratized, or to put it another way, Leninist;
- that they're old-fashioned in their ways of being active, because they talk about strikes and demonstrations and selling newspapers and giving out leaflets, and what we should all be doing is sitting in front of computers sending e-mail all around the world, which is the new, modern way of doing politics.

There is one more criticism to which I'm going to pay the most attention: that we should do away with this sort of organization because it's simply masculine and has nothing to do with half of the population.

2. Remember the context

The first thing that we have to do is put this back in political context, which is as we all know post-1989. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of Eastern Europe, the question is posed for many people: Is revolution still on the agenda? Is it possible still to have a project, a perspective of changing society? It's from this point of view that these questions about how you do it become important. Obviously the world has changed; there is a new world disorder; things are posed in a different way, and there is no revolution on the horizon just at the moment.

The example of Chiapas shows us that there can still be very important radical struggles, which are certainly different because they are in this new context. They're different because they come after a whole experience for example of the feminist movement and the gay and lesbian movement: think of some of the things that Marcos has been known to say. When we say there's no revolution on the horizon, it doesn't mean that there can't be very important struggles. But Chiapas is not something that can change the world relationship of forces at this point in time.

This new situation is forming new generations of political activists with a new outlook on the world. I'm a product of a generation for which it seemed that we could actually experience revolutions. On the European continent in the early 1970s, there was not only 1968 and what that represented, there was the beginning of the development of the revolution in Portugal; and there was the fight to

overthrow Franco, the dictator in the Spanish state, with the whole question of what would that society become. So I came into politics with the idea that I would actually see a revolution on my continent in five or ten years.

Obviously that's not the case in general for young people today. Unless we bring into our organizations people who come with these new political experiences and this way of looking at the world that is formed by the political context of today, we're going to miss things. But despite the new world disorder, the revolutionary left's goal does still remain a radical transformation of society. We still want a democratic, self-managed society that defends the interests of all of us. I think, unlike some, that there are general interests for the whole of the human race.

On this point I will refer to an article by Norman Geras, a well-known Marxist writer who has written a lot about Rosa Luxemburg but also about Marx's conception of human nature: *"It's not on account of any special forms of acculturation, historically particular social structures or types of learned behaviour, that people generally do not want to die of starvation or disease, or to lose their loved ones in these ways, or to be cruelly humiliated, or to die, or be permanently damaged physically or emotionally at the hands of a torturer, or to be persecuted for what they are or what they believe, be forcibly confined for it or be violently destroyed."* [1]

Those are the values that we would say we're fighting for, of a just and equal society. Geras goes on to say, to put this in continuity with Marx: *"Could anyone familiar with his writings really be in two minds as to whether his project of emancipation—whatever else it might be held to be about—included the aim of meeting the basic needs of human beings for survival and healthy activity and of eliminating from the world these more terrible cruelties and oppressions?... The principle he espoused of distribution according to need was to cover at least those fundamental material needs consequent upon the common make-up of human beings."*

It's an important point in these post-modernist days to stress that we do have common goals and common interests.

To apply this more particularly to the question of women, I would say that, despite the differences in the social, cultural and economic position of women throughout the world, there is a common demand for all women, which is the right to control one's own body. It may be posed in very different ways, in terms of what that means about having children: whether the fight is for the right to have children in good conditions, or for the right to have access to contraception or to abortion. But without that basic right—the right to decide what you do with your own body or who you're going to have sexual relations with, the right not to be violently attacked—how can you possibly live in any sort of decent way? This is not something applicable only to Western Europe. It is a universal value for all women, wherever they are. So we can have general goals, goals that we can share, though we have to define them in a particular way in our different continents, countries and contexts.

3. Development of collective consciousness, where and how?

But the problem is: how are we going to get there, and who is going to lead the struggle?

This brings us to a question that has been much discussed: Which is the revolutionary class? Is there a revolutionary class? Is the notion of a revolutionary class still applicable? The discussion is posed particularly in Latin America as the question of the "revolutionary subject", though not put in those terms in Europe. The Mexican revolutionary Sergio Rodriguez developed a useful distinction in the late 1980s, between the practical-political revolutionary subject and the theoretical-political

revolutionary subject. He distinguishes, in other words, the subject likely to make a social revolution—the subject which has the social massivity to impose a change in the social relationship of forces—and the subject which is more involved in developing the social project which it will be possible to build after the revolution. [2]

Classical Marxist thinking on this question did not make this distinction. It assumed that the social force capable of transforming society would itself develop the consciousness necessary to elaborate the social project. Our appreciation of the role of forces such as the independent women's movement leads us nearer to the position developed by Rodriguez. However, while the political contribution of these forces may be crucial, it cannot substitute for the consciousness developed by the mass of the population that the current order is something they want to change. Our first concern is thus to understand how this initial consciousness can develop.

For people to decide to fight, to struggle against the society that they're living in and for something better, means that they have to become aware of the fact that they are suffering, or to put it another way, that they are being exploited and/or oppressed, and that something can actually be done about it. It isn't just natural, they have to realize. God didn't actually make it that way, with the rich and the poor, and it doesn't have to stay that way forever.

This was the work that Marx did in *Capital* and elsewhere. He studied how the society he lived in was organized, in what way people were exploited and oppressed, and therefore how their consciousness of being so would develop. We have to look at that again because we know that society has changed. Let us study our society today in the way that Marx did to measure what has changed and what hasn't.

What is the "classical" Marxist appreciation of the formation of the working class as a subject with a "consciousness"? We can get a sense from some texts written by Ernest Mandel about twenty-five years ago. [3] In these texts, Mandel explains that the working class, the people who work, the people who are wage-labourers—who in the English translation are only ever "sons"—are first of all a category, and thus a social subject because they're a social group that exists. But if they begin to struggle and attain a certain level of organization, we can talk then about the development of a layer of "advanced workers", or a "broad vanguard"; and then as their understanding of how they are exploited and how they should be organized becomes more and more systematized, we can talk about the revolutionary vanguard and revolutionary organization.

Mandel explains that it's the workers in big factories, especially those with a big weight in the economy, who most easily become conscious that solutions can be found to social questions through collective activity, since this is less obvious to workers in smaller workplaces. Workers who live in big cities and those who are literate and educated also have greater possibilities of developing this consciousness. He emphasizes that developing consciousness is a product of actual activity and involvement in struggle, but also depends on an individual capacity to assimilate a systematic understanding of what's going on around you, and thus requires a certain level of education in order to become a revolutionary militant. This is the classic schema of the development of class consciousness. Mandel wrote this in 1971; in the following twenty-five years, his ideas presumably changed. In fact this is an inadequate way to explain how the collective consciousness that is the prerequisite to being a political or revolutionary subject can develop anywhere else than in a highly industrialized working class that works in big factories. If we take the Third World, where there's low industrialization and industrialization takes certain very specific forms—the maquiladoras of northern Mexico and the free-trade zones in parts of Asia, for example, where there may be quite large industrial plants but where workers may be living in barracks or in practically army-camp-type surroundings—this is not very conducive to the development of a real, political class consciousness.

Then there's the question of the development of class consciousness among those who are not wage workers, because the majority of the population in many of those countries aren't wage workers. This is not just the traditional peasantry, which is important, but also the poor urban population, the shantytown-dwellers, the street-sellers. So this classic schema is, if not totally inoperative, not a very useful guide as it stands from that point of view.

In Western Europe itself, fewer and fewer workers are actually working in big steel mills or car factories. There are more and more who are working in the service sector, who are working in part-time and so-called "flexible" jobs. There are more and more young workers who have never had a job but remain part of the working class. There are more and more immigrant workers; when there still were car factories there were many immigrant workers in the big car factories of Western Europe, but the way they were inserted into this work force was specific.

And there are many women workers, working in different sectors, again in a specific way. The sex segregation of the work force is a constant that has been noted time and time again. It remains relatively invariable even when other factors, such as social rights, the percentage of women working, or even their place in political life, change. Women are also more likely to work part-time and to take career breaks, in general to give more attention to their family responsibilities when combining the two requires prioritizing one or the other.

So the working class and the mass of the population are changing. Either they are not made up of wage workers, or if they are made up of wage workers they do not fit in the classic schema. The traditional structures of the working class, the trade unions, the political parties, and even the actual communities that existed are also being broken up.

For example, one of the reasons why miners have so often been able to wage extremely determined struggles is that miners tend to live in mining villages, in specific communities around their mines. Coal mines are not normally in the middle of big cities; they tend to be in isolated areas. So people who work in a mine live around it and so do all their families. The community can see very clearly its dependence on the jobs in the mines and created by servicing the miners. Obviously with the closing down of the mines you no longer have the communities. So there is a total break-up of many of these traditional forms of organization.

4. Development of women's collective consciousness

Let's focus more specifically now on the question of the development of consciousness. In his 1971 text Mandel talks about many different factors that affect the way that people become conscious of where they are and what role they play; how they came to see that their situation is not an individual one but a collective one shared with other people. But he never mentions that one of the things that would determine this is the fact of being a woman.

Women in the work force tend not to be in the big factories, they tend to be in sectors with less economic weight. Although there has been a structural change with the entry of women into the work force, many women are actually excluded or confined, or their preoccupations centre on the domestic sphere even if they do go out to work. When we come to the individual capacity and level of education, certainly in a historical sense, women had less access to education, even though things have changed: now at university-entry level it's about half-and-half women and men in most of the Western European countries. But women really do not fit very easily into this classical schema of how class consciousness develops.

Does this mean that women haven't participated, didn't participate historically in revolutionary and

radical struggles?

In general, women participated much more than we know about. One of the aspects of the the work done by the feminist movement is the re-discovery of women's history and precisely women's involvement in many of the social movements of historical periods, which you would never have known about by reading traditional history books. We have to deduce that women participate in forms of collective activity which do permit them to develop a collective consciousness and therefore to become part of the group that will be a motor force in the struggle for change.

This can take place in different ways. It can be through participation in general struggles, struggles of a community, struggles of a sector of workers; and it can be in struggles that are more directly related to women's situation as women. This doesn't necessarily mean immediate struggles on specific questions related to women's oppression. Experiences in Latin America have often shown that because women are responsible for the home and the family, in the division of labour which is seen as natural in our societies, they are the ones who become involved in struggles for drainage, electricity or mains water in their communities, or as women peasants to be allowed themselves to cultivate the land or to have loans in their own names. There's a whole host of examples that can be cited where women struggle because of a specific situation they're in because they're women, but it is not posed as a challenge to women's oppression in the explicit way that the feminist movement would do so.

That's one example of the way that class consciousness, consciousness of oneself as part of a group suffering from a particular form of exploitation or oppression, can develop in all sorts of different contexts and through all sorts of different experiences of struggle. That is extremely important, because if we were to confine ourselves to thinking that only workers in big factories in the economically powerful sectors could develop class consciousness, the outlook today would be a little bleak.

Women can struggle in different ways on different questions and develop a consciousness, though the development of consciousness is uneven. You may first go into struggle because of your situation as a waged worker, or because of your situation as responsible for the family, or it may be that the spark will be your oppression as a woman: as a victim of sexual violence, for example, or, as was the case with a certain number of the movements in Western Europe, directly around questions like the right to abortion.

What's important is that usually, as consciousness develops, it becomes less unequal. When you struggle, for example, as a local resident around a question regarding your neighbourhood, problems can arise if you as a woman have family responsibilities in terms of the division of labour, or if the men in your family—husband, son, brother or father—think that you should be at home looking after those responsibilities rather than being out on the street petitioning or seeing the local representative. You may find that when you go as part of a delegation of women to meet whatever local elected representative, he listens and says, "But what do the men think?"

All of those sorts of experiences accumulate into an understanding that there is something about the fact of being a woman that means that you're taken less seriously. This can lead therefore to developing a consciousness of the actual oppression of women, what we call a feminist consciousness. This is not an unimportant question: that the development of consciousness of women through struggle becomes a feminist consciousness.

5. Role of the women's movement

We consider that a women's movement that openly challenges women's oppression has a strategic role to play in the revolutionary struggle itself, in the fight to build a new and better society, because women as a sex are oppressed. This doesn't mean that all women are equally oppressed. Your class, your age, your race, and which country or continent you're from affect the way that this oppression is experienced. We must be extremely careful of generalizations about exactly what women's oppression is and how it is experienced.

Let's look at the question of the family. We generally locate the organization of the sexual division of labour, which we feminists consider oppressive, within the family. This holds good. But we have to pay a lot more attention to looking at the family forms in different societies. These factors affect the way that women's oppression is experienced, but this oppression can't be separated from other forms of oppression and exploitation and must be fought at the same time.

People are people, with all the facets of their identity. They're women, they're workers, they're from a Third-World country, or not, or they're an immigrant worker in an imperialist country, or not. There is no way that a movement can say, We're going to fight to liberate that bit of you, but that aspect is going to have to wait. That's just not a realistic proposal to make to anybody about how you're going to help them change the situation that they're in. The fight against women's oppression has to be a fight for today, in the same way that the fight against racism is a fight for today, the fight against imperialism is a fight for today, and the fight against class exploitation is a fight for today. On the other hand, neither can you say you are a combination of this and that specific identity, so you are different from the person next to you who is a different combination, and therefore you can't join together because you only share one facet of your identity.

6. The Marxist tradition and women

The Marxist movement has traditionally defended women's rights. But when we make a balance sheet of the Marxist movement, we see that women remained oppressed in the countries where Communist parties were in power. They may have had all sorts of equal rights. There may have been an enormous percentage of women doctors in the Soviet Union, which when you compare it with other countries seems wonderful. But when we look at what doctors were paid and what the social status was of being a doctor or an engineer or any of those other jobs that were held up as being so wonderful for women in the Soviet Union, we see that there's a problem.

In general, we have had a rather mechanistic understanding of what we meant when we said that there is a historical materialist link between women's oppression and class society. That led to the idea that what we're doing is fighting for the socialist revolution, and it's the working class that fights for the socialist revolution, and then because we'll have abolished class society we'll have abolished women's oppression and everything will be okay. That's proved not to be true, because the transitional societies didn't seem to have solved the problem.

The other problem with this idea is that it totally ignored the anti-capitalist dynamic of women's struggles themselves. Worse, it was often accompanied by a totally false class characterization of those struggles on the basis of the social composition of the movements, which is not a historical materialist way of judging the importance of a political struggle. If we were to judge the Marxist movement then many of its most eminent representatives, starting with Marx and Engels, were not sociologically working-class.

It was also very clear from the struggles of the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s that the anti-capitalist dynamic of these struggles brought many women to revolutionary politics. The experience of the 1970s brought into all the far-left organizations a new layer of women who had been radicalized through the women's movement. Through a fight on questions such as the question of the right to control one's own body they had come up against all the problems and seen that obtaining this right was impossible in capitalist society, and that therefore the only perspective was the revolutionary struggle. The fight was not only against the doctor who refused to perform an abortion, not only against the law, not only against those (men) who made the law, but against the system that allowed such laws to be made.

If we said that that's the reason why we support the women's movement, however, that would be a rather instrumentalist approach. We do want to recruit to and build revolutionary organizations. But we also want and have a duty to fight in the here and now to change things and improve things as far as possible. That's what trade unions do, that's what the other social movements do, and that is something therefore that we should do in relation to women's oppression, just as we build these other movements of the exploited and oppressed to take forward struggles in the best possible conditions. On this question as on others, if gains are won through collective struggle, this helps change the relationship of forces in general between the classes, and therefore is a contribution to strengthening all the struggles of the exploited and the oppressed.

7. The autonomy of the women's movement

Therefore a women's movement has a role now in the revolutionary struggle and will continue to have one even at the time when there is a revolution. Its role is to fight the manifestations of oppression, both now and in all the period leading up to the revolution: to create first the conditions for a revolution that will lay the material basis for eliminating women's oppression and second for a struggle that continues after the revolution. Women's oppression is certainly not simply a product of capitalism, possibly not simply of class society, so we have no absolute guarantee—indeed historical experience tends to demonstrate the contrary—that it will vanish. Thus the struggle will need to continue. But then the question is how the struggle can be carried on, and what the role of a women's movement is.

Women's interests have clearly not, in the historical balance sheet, been adequately defended by mixed organizations. Thus, a movement that takes as its starting point the intransigent defense of women's interests is a necessity. But to say that a movement has to take as its starting point intransigent defense of women's interests does not mean to say that somehow there is an apolitical way of defending women's interests. Any struggle around the interests of any group in society has a class character, because in the last analysis they're either pro-working class or pro-ruling class. And from what we understand of the inter-connection between women's oppression and class society, it's obvious that if we're going to intransigently defend the interests of the majority of women, that requires taking an anti-capitalist stance.

Thus we can't remain neutral on the politics of this movement. If we think that this movement is necessary, we have a responsibility to propose to it ways to take forward its struggle in the most effective way. That is not to say that we want to build a politically exclusive movement that requires that women first of all sign up and say that they're anti-capitalist before participating in a movement that defends their own interests. Because politicization, political understanding, and radicalization develop through participation in collective struggle; and because, to ensure that the defense of women's interests is primary in this movement, it has to be as broad, as large, as weighty as possible, with the most women possible involved in it, and not a movement that will accept that its

interests come second to those of any political organization.

It may well be that such a movement would make an alliance with a political organization, with several political organizations, but on the basis of best defending women's interests. It's for this that the idea of a party-women's movement, such as the Communist Parties, particularly of the Third International, tended to have, does not seem to us an adequate tool for leading the best defense of women's interests. But the exact form of organization of a women's movement depends on circumstances.

During the 1980s there was a discussion about the women's movement in Nicaragua in the period of the revolution and after the revolution and its relationship with the FSLN. It was a specific circumstance where there had been a revolution and there was a revolutionary government. One opinion was that the women's movement should take a position in defense of the revolution but should not accept the FSLN as a political organization dictating (for example) who should be the leadership of this movement. This seems to me the best approximation you could have in that very particular situation of what we would mean by the autonomy or the independence of the women's movement.

But that's a very exceptional situation. Our general stance would be that the women's movement, the different groups that compose the women's movement, should be not linked to any political party. Obviously there are going to be women from political organizations who participate in the women's movement, who may be more or less organized in certain forms, and we would be against the exclusion of organized political women from the women's movement. But we do defend the right of the women's movement to decide independently on the way to take forward its struggle.

We should understand the women's movement, the organized, conscious movement, as part of what we call "the vanguard", that is: a conscious minority that has been developed through the experience of struggle and the development of a systematic understanding of what's at stake in that struggle. It thus acts as a leadership, on the one hand organizing the movement and on the other leading it forward into a confrontation with the system, in other words class society.

It's important to understand that, and to have that understanding of "the vanguard", because revolutionaries, as a force consciously intervening in the struggles that break out, are not usually in a position to directly address masses. Most of us don't have a mass party or organization. Revolutionaries in the PT in Brazil may, some revolutionaries in the Philippines may, but for most revolutionaries it's not the case. Therefore we have a special relationship with the vanguard that has been created through the experience of struggle. And to pretend that we can directly address the masses and that we are the vanguard, which can for example propose to the mass movement to call a general strike tomorrow, is ridiculous. We can argue in our trade unions or elsewhere that there should be a general strike, but for a small organization of several hundred or several thousand activists, anything that we propose has to be in a sense addressed to the natural and organic leadership of those movements.

8. The revolutionary party

Our organizations today, for most of us, are not "the revolutionary party" that we might think about in some abstract way. What do we mean when we say "revolutionary party"? The first thing to say is that sometimes in discussions there is a big thing made about the question of the word "party". For the average person, a party is a political formation which has a programme and which stands in elections. It's actually a very simple word to use. But the term "revolutionary party" means something else as well.

If the level of consciousness, of class consciousness, of some form of collective consciousness was just left as it develops spontaneously, you would have many different parties and movements, on a regional basis, on an ethnic basis, on a sectoral basis. And we need many of those movements. But to develop a general plan for how to change society, a general idea of where we should be going and what a new society should look like, how a new society could be organized that would eliminate all the material and objective bases of exploitation and oppression and therefore make it possible to begin to eliminate all the ideological remnants of such oppression, you need something more than the conjunction of a number of different sectoral movements, which could not themselves be representative of the whole.

So the first thing we mean when we talk about the revolutionary party is a formation open to all those who are ready to discuss within a common framework on the basis of common principles and therefore a common programme. That's a condition for democracy, to have common principles and a common programme, because if you're not even discussing in the same framework, then it's impossible to discuss and come to any conclusion. If the starting points are so wildly different that you haven't even agreed on whether or not you're for women's liberation, then you could never discuss and decide what to do together.

Therefore revolutionary organization is in fact just a practical application of our Marxist analysis—which is that the inherent contradictions of the capitalist system are going to take the form of struggles which have a revolutionary potential, that they could change how things are organized in a positive way, but that requires an active intervention by an organized force. We can change the course of history, there is a common interest of the exploited and oppressed which goes in one general direction, which is the elimination of class society, and it is possible to create a more equal and just society. Here we return to what you might call the moral or ethical aspect of Marxism: we don't want to change society for the sake of change, we want to change it to make it better; we want to change it to eliminate injustice and inequality.

In order to have an idea therefore about where we're going, how we intervene to take things even a tiny little step forward in that direction, we have to have a programme that is not simply a reflection of a whole number of different experiences but has tried to put them together in order to see where the possible contradictions—because there may be contradictions between different sectors of the exploited and oppressed, at least apparent contradictions—and to see what the overall best way is to propose for the organization of work, for the way that life should be organized, for ecological questions, and so forth. In other words we need to make what we call a synthesis of all those experiences.

When we make a synthesis, to come back to my main question, it has to include the needs of women, and the best way for women's interests to be defended in the new society we want to build, and therefore how are we going to take the struggle forward today. This is not a question of being nice to women, it's a very practical question. How could we possibly have the pretention that we could propose anything to anybody about how society could be better, if we don't take into account the experience of half of humanity? This is something that it has taken us a long time to learn. Even now I don't think that we are able to do it at all times; we're still inadequate on this point of analysis and understanding and integration. But it is something that is absolutely crucial.

How does this process of synthesis take place? How do we then put into practice what we might have decided about how we should intervene in the struggles that go on around us? Well the traditional answer is summed up in two words, which these days are generally considered rather badly: the words “democratic centralism” or “Leninism”.

Before reacting let's look at what these words mean. If we want to act with the idea that we're going

somewhere and not just on an immediate, localized basis, we have to have a programme, something that sets out an idea of where we're going, and to act within that framework. But how do we get such a programme, how do we make the synthesis that I talked about? For that we have to have a political centralization. It is impossible to synthesize anything, unless the information, the points of view, the analyses are centralized somewhere. And they have to be within a common framework we want to develop, a systematic understanding.

We also have to have an organizational centralization for a number of other reasons. Because we want to intervene: if there are big struggles, when the contradictions of the capitalist system do provoke major upheavals, unless we are able to act in a collective and therefore centralized way, our impact is not going to be felt. We have to act in the struggles, and we also have to act on every occasion we can to help develop consciousness, whether that's in a period of big struggles or in a more propagandist way in a different sort of political situation.

Left organizations also have to be ready to act in a centralized way to change when the situation changes: to change our orientation, to change what we have decided to do, because when the situation changes, then that has to be taken into account and we have to make adjustments. We also have to protect ourselves against repression. And there is the classical argument that's always given for centralization, which is: the day will come when we'll be preparing to take power against a centralized state apparatus. So we need a centralization in order to be effective.

But what we should never do is confuse that need for centralization with a vertical, hierarchical, command structure of a party. It's not the same thing. Democratic centralism—I'm going to talk about the democracy—was never conceived of by Lenin as a set of internal party rules. It was in fact in the Third International that what Lenin had insisted on, which was the need for centralization after a democratic discussion in order to be effective, became systematized after his death in what was known as the "Bolshevization of the party".

What is the democratic side of democratic centralism? Would it be the best democratic discussion here if everybody just talked when they felt like it? What would happen? We all know: those who talked loudest would be heard, those who don't like to shout and impose themselves wouldn't be heard.

So democracy is not just the free expression of all points of view at all time. This point is made in the article "The Tyranny of Structurelessness". [4] This article is a product of the women's movement, a movement that from its very beginnings challenged traditional political organization, saying that it was hierarchical, bureaucratic and masculine, and that the way that things should be organized was locally, in small groups. But the balance sheet drawn in this article, which dates from very early in the women's movement, was that if you don't have any organization at all, if you just have anarchy in that sense, it is undemocratic. In order to ensure that everybody is heard, we have to organize that expression, and it has to take place in a democratic framework where there is a commonly agreed way of doing that. So the question of being centralized and being democratic is not a question of internal party rules or being administrative; it's a profoundly important political question in order to be able to do what we have set out to do.

But having said that, does that mean that there are no problems? If we say it doesn't mean internal party rules, but we're going to be centralized in order to be effective and we're going to be democratic, does that mean that there are no problems?

As Mandel said (and Lenin said first), there is a tendency to reproduce the social division of labour within the revolutionary organization. Now Lenin was talking about the social division of labour between intellectuals and workers, which undoubtedly exists also in left organizations. But what also

very definitely has a tendency to exist in left organizations is the sexual division of labour. Women have also been oppressed within Marxist organizations in the sense of being excluded; not by rules that say, We'll have no women, but by the fact in practice, there are few women in leadership positions. At least we have become conscious of that, and we know that simply having a revolutionary programme and a conception of democratic centralism which is not the Stalinist conception is not enough. We have to have, as Mandel says, counterweights or counter-tendencies.

The fact that the Fourth International, for example, has at least partly understood the problems that are posed within its organizations in terms of the place of women and has corrected its position in relation to the importance and strategic role of the women's movement since 1979 is in itself a proof of the effectiveness of this type of organization. Why in fact did the Fourth International take these positions? Because the women in its ranks fought for them; because there was a collective weight, a collective voice, an activity, that had an effect. The fact that there was an international experience was extremely important: this enabled people to see that there was a new rise of the women's movement which was taking a particular form and was expressing a certain balance sheet of what the past, including the revolutionary Marxist movement's past, had been and the way in which it fought women's oppression.

People had international experiences with the problems of the women within their parties, which made it obvious that it was not simply a question that this or that organization was working in very difficult conditions of clandestinity which therefore made it difficult to integrate women, or that another organization was very specific because it was very rooted in the industrial working class which is overwhelmingly male. The existence of an international structure made it easier to see that in all the organizations, whatever their situation, there were common problems being faced, and therefore this was a general feature that had to be dealt with. Obviously this was based on the classic programmatic positions of the Marxist movement. But women's experience and women's collective voice were necessary to solve the problems. This is again a demonstration that an active and militant party is the best guarantee against inner-party distortions.

9. Why is it so difficult for revolutionary parties to recruit and integrate women?

If we say that revolutionary parties are fighting for the interests of all the exploited and the oppressed, we would expect to see the exploited and the oppressed if anything over-represented in their ranks. Women for example have a particular interest in this fight, so that's where we should be.

The first thing we have to be clear on is the general dynamic in this society, which is a dynamic of exclusion of women from the political process. The political process is something that takes place in the public arena, outside the home; and the sexual division of labour in society makes the home and the family women's concerns and work and politics men's affairs. This is something that continues to exist even where majority of women work, are educated and have equal political rights. There are only five percent women in the French National Assembly despite the high level of participation of women in the workforce. This is so widely true today that even many bourgeois forces are becoming preoccupied about it. The United Nations produces reports on women's situations which tell us that women are discriminated against and only earn two-thirds of the male average wage. Also increasingly underlined is the lack of women in public affairs and in the decision-making process of societies in general.

This general process of political exclusion is reinforced because politics was traditionally organized in the place where class consciousness was seen to develop, and we have seen the classical

understanding of that process. Politics was organized through the workplace and the relationship between the workplace and the outside, so women were not involved in that. In terms of women's involvement in revolutionary politics we should also take into account the time needed to study in order to become a revolutionary militant. It's necessary to make a conscious effort to understand in a systematic way. This is something that's difficult for women, not just because of exclusion from the formal education system but because women, either for reasons of family responsibility or for other, more internalized psychological reasons, often individually give less time to study. They feel that they should be doing something rather than taking the time to study.

This may seem an extraordinary generalization. But I know of at least one revolutionary party in a Third-World country where a few years ago there were no women among the party's formal members. There were women in the broad layer of sympathizers, but the comrades demanded a level of political education in order to be a party member which they felt that none of the women comrades had attained. There was a problem in the way that they presented this—I think they had a mistaken idea of what level of education one should demand from somebody who's joining the organization—but there was also a problem in the fact that women spontaneously didn't feel it was important to spend their time studying the Marxist classics. It was important for this party to discuss how the question of education should be posed, and how education should be organized so that the women comrades would feel that they were able to participate.

A second question is the general dynamic of reproducing the dominant ideology and the sexual division of labour. The sexual division of labour is reflected in our organizations, with women tending to take on more administrative and technical tasks. It is relatively easy to say: this is absolutely unacceptable, the women comrades are doing all the typing, so we should make an effort and women should be given political responsibilities. But you should also see what happens when women are given political responsibilities. All of a sudden the post of (let's say) trade-union organizer, which when it was a post held by a male comrade required analyzing what was going on in the working class, in the trade-union movement, elaborating political perspectives—a very important political role—is no longer that when it becomes a role held by a woman. All at once the important thing is to make sure that this woman has sent out the letters that call people to the meetings and that the documents have all been reproduced in advance so people will have them, and that everything is well-organized.

Both the women and the men tend to have that conception of what is the important part of any particular responsibility, depending on whether it's undertaken by a man or a woman—obviously for different reasons. Why do women internalize that aspect? Because it's safer. You know that you can send out the letters on time and do the photocopying. It's a much more difficult thing to write an analysis of what's going on in the working-class movement in your country and therefore how you should propose that the trade unions recombine and fuse. It is surprising how many men do really think that they're capable of doing that. That's one way in which the division of labour also affects what happens in left organizations in a less obvious way than simply who's doing the typing.

There's also the political process among women and the way in which that is devalued. It is astonishing that leaders of women's movement work who have led mass movements fighting for women's rights, mass movements that have been able to create alliances with the trade union movement, with political parties, with a whole range of people; leaders of women's work who are engaged in educational work where they explain and make a critical balance sheet of Marx and Engels and place them in their context and explain historical materialism, what it really means and how you can use it to understand women's oppression, are consistently seen and treated as just specialists of women's work. You may understand historical materialism sufficiently to be able to make a critical balance sheet of how Engels applied it to the family, but nonetheless you're just a specialist of women's work. No one suggests that these skills could be applied to any other sector.

On the other hand, the young male comrade who has just been a leader of a student struggle and has shown his capacities to be a leader of the mass movement, is a leader; now he's stopped being a student he must immediately be put somewhere else so that he can lead some other area of work and use those leadership capacities he developed in two or three years of student politics.

I hope that this is a caricature; but I have seen all these things happen. We could go on.

Many women have noticed this, for example: you're in a discussion, and you say something—you give an opinion or you make a proposal—and the discussion goes on, and then somebody else makes more or less the same proposal, gives the same opinion. From that moment on, all we hear is everybody saying: Oh yes, he was right, he was right, I agree with him. Of course, you never said it. There's a Greek legend about a certain King Midas: everything he touched turned to gold. Sometimes women think that it's the reverse for us: everything we touch turns to something much less important than it used to be when a man was doing it.

Another problem that exists in left organizations is at the level of the individual relationships between men and women comrades. Because there is an unequal power relationship in what sometimes we call the real world, and because we are affected by the society that we're in, that unequal power relationship exists also within our organizations, and at the level of individual relations between one male comrade and one female comrade. I'm not talking about acts of violence which can happen, but just the way that people relate to each other in a normal way: the assumptions with which a woman goes into a political discussion and a man goes into a political discussion; the way in which what might be exactly the same behaviour takes on a totally different meaning when it's between two men or between a man and a woman.

When you have one of those passionate political discussions that we all love so much and everybody gets excited and raises their voice, it's one thing when it's between two men. But it is another thing when it's between a man and a woman, because it takes on an aspect of power and authoritarianism, which isn't meant but is there because of what we've all internalized from the society that we live in. And it can seem totally unbearable to be the object of that. There is the other alternative, which is that women in order to survive learn to give as good as we get. I can shout and bang my fist on the table too. But it's not a very pleasant way to have to discuss.

It's astonishing to what extent this can even be true of young comrades—I'm no longer very young and I do have a certain amount of experience—with their, I'm sure quite unconscious, arrogance. A few years ago at a youth camp, I did a report on the origins of women's oppression, in which I put forward the opinion that men derive certain privileges from women's oppression. A young comrade with a particular point of view came up to me and said, "You said that men have these privileges, well, I think you expressed yourself badly." I replied, "Well no, that's what I meant to say. I meant to say men have privileges, because that's what I think." And he said, "But you're wrong. You haven't understood." So I said, "Excuse me, but I have been discussing these questions for twenty years. You may disagree, but it's not I haven't understood." This unconscious arrogance came from somebody who must have been practically young enough to be my son. I heard: You expressed yourself badly, and then, You haven't understood about women's oppression: rather than, "I disagree", which is what he really meant.

Another problem that we face in left organizations is the difficulties that men have in looking at women as political individuals. For example, if there's a very lively discussion about something in a meeting, when you leave the room normally everybody continues the discussion. But it is extraordinary: at least 50 percent of the time, if as we go out of the meeting a male comrade speaks to a female comrade, the discussion will almost immediately turn to something quite different, not political, something more personal. They'll either begin to tell you about the latest exploits of their

children or their new job. But to continue to treat you, once you're outside the meeting, as a political being is quite rare. This is something that women have noticed sufficiently in our different countries to feel that once again it's a sign that women as political beings still, even in revolutionary movements, are under-valued because our opinion isn't given the same importance. When people want to know, Oh, you didn't speak in the meeting, what do you think?, the question is very rarely addressed to a woman comrade.

10. Changing the power relations

So the question is now, What do we do about it? First, this is not going to be some sort of natural process. The fact that we discuss the problems of women's oppression and how to fight for women's liberation does not mean that we can easily and naturally solve all these problems. As Mandel said, living in bourgeois society cannot be a school for how to be a proletarian revolutionary, that is to absorb and assimilate into our own consciousness a different way of behaving. We need counter-tendencies, counterweights to the prevailing division of labour and power relationships. Obviously there are no precise remedies that are going to be applicable in all places, at all times, and in all different forms of organizations. The answers will depend on the general evolution and political history, on the different periods and circumstances in which we are active. Many different ideas have been developed and tried, and we can learn from them, both from what has worked and what hasn't.

We can have some general ideas. The first one is that we should have organized feminist work. This is not easy in a period like today, when in many countries the feminist movement is either at its first stages of development or is in some sort of retreat. But we don't give up our other areas of political work because there aren't big struggles going on. We wouldn't dream of doing that for trade-union work, or work in the peasant movement, or any other form of movement.

We also have to have consistent education on these questions, and it should always be part of the education that we give in our organizations. In particular we have to pay attention to the demands of women comrades for organized education. That has to be seen as a party task, because of the internalized feeling that so many women have that we should be always doing something practical. Women are less ready to say, No, I am going to take the time to do it for myself. So we have to organize it.

We also have to pay great attention to our organizations' image and profile. What symbols do we use? Who are our spokespersons? Who do we send to meet other organizations? Comrades from some Third-World countries in particular say that this is a real problem. Sometimes when an organization wants to send a delegation to meet representatives of another party or of a social movement, there's a pressure to send men because otherwise the delegation may not be taken seriously. We have to make a conscious effort to combat that, and say, We think that our women comrades can speak for us, and that they are just as capable as male comrades of doing so.

This question of party image and profile may seem only to have a symbolic value. But symbolism is important. It can seem that it's most natural to put male comrades forward as spokespersons and representatives. But the more we fall into that "natural" way of acting, the less our organizations will be attractive to women, and we won't have the conditions for changing our organizations because we won't be attracting and recruiting women. We also have to change our inner-party functioning. We should rethink what democratic centralism means. When we talk about democratic centralism, we want on the one hand the expression of different points of view and experiences, and we want to be effective when we act. But if we want to ensure expression of points of view, then we

have to ensure that women's voices, which are so often not heard, are heard. This is not a natural process. We will have to do what may seem to be artificial things, because the "natural" is the exclusion of women: not to hear women's voices, not to give the space to women to express themselves.

To take an illustration from the history of the Fourth International: in 1979, when we discussed and adopted in our World Congress a very important document on the struggle for women's liberation and socialist revolution, as an appendix to that document we took a position, which I disagreed with at the time and still disagree with, that meetings of women within the party were anti-Leninist. The argument was that women's-only meetings were meetings of a biological sector of the organization, not on a political basis or on the basis of involvement in an area of work but on the basis of the fact that women were women. The argument was in my opinion totally mistaken, even from the point of view of wanting to be a functioning democratic-centralist organization, precisely because it didn't understand the need for special measures to ensure that women's experience is heard.

True, left organizations are not federations of the different sectors of the exploited and oppressed; women in our organizations are not representative of all women. But overcoming the obstacles to women's expression and participation is an important question for democracy in our organizations; and if this requires a special measure such as having women's meetings within the organization, then we should do it. At the same time, because we also want to be politically centralized, that experience has to come back into the organization as a whole. Such questions should not only be discussed among women, nor should women decide without them. Organizations have to decide collectively how to solve the problems that have been pointed out.

One of the problems that's often raised by women is precisely the way in which discussions often take place. Often people are expected to come into a discussion with a set position; you have to go in and defend that position in a very polemical way. Not all organizations necessarily have the same tradition, but often there is a tendency to have tendencies and have discussions that are posed in that way. This means that you have to have a complete alternative in order to contribute to a discussion. It even seems as if you have to be absolutely convinced that what you're saying is right and that what everybody else is saying is wrong, and fight for it in that way. If we just look at some of the vocabulary that is often used in organizational discussions, we can see this.

To tell another story, I was once discussing with a male comrade and asked, But why do you always have to attack when you want to give your point of view? Why can't we just put forward a point of view and have an exchange? He said to me, But you have to understand, when I'm convinced that I'm right, then I think that if the position I disagree with is adopted, it's going to destroy the organization. So I have to smash my opponents, because I don't want this organization to be destroyed. This is a conception that every political position can make or break an organization. That is a way that men are in general more likely to act than women are.

When women begin to discuss the questions of inner-party functioning, they raise the problem of how we can work in a more collective way. This can go from very basic practical questions—such as, if everybody had the documents in advance, and everybody had a chance to read them, then you would be able to have a discussion where everybody could contribute—to styles of speaking. Women more easily talk about themselves and raise their own feelings of personal inadequacy. They are more ready to say, I'm not sure, or I don't know much about this. Anybody who has looked at the actual functioning inside an organization will see that. So it does have an effect to change the composition of for example leadership bodies and to have more women in them.

This is not an automatic process, because a certain amount of informal discussion—the discussions that take place after the meeting, outside in the corridors—tends still to go on among the men. But

putting more women in leadership creates a pressure to change things in a way that can make the functioning more democratic and more collective. Of course this doesn't mean, and we have to be careful about this, that women are naturally better and more collective. Anybody who has been active in a women's group knows that women can also have bad ways of functioning. For one thing, many of the women who have spent some time already as political militants have had to learn to become aggressive in self-defense. So an organization cannot resolve all its problems simply by putting a lot of women in its leadership.

These problems of functioning are not just something that affects women. There is a whole problem of the relationship between those who are seen as leaders and those who are seen as rank-and-file militants, including among male comrades. Younger comrades feel this also, in the way that discussions are carried out with them. It's not just a problem for women: we very often have a problem in organizations of extending the leadership beyond the initial core. Many of the organizations that I know best were essentially rebuilt through the 1968 period, that experience and that political generation. What's incredible is that so many of the people who were formed through that experience, and therefore were very young at the time, are still there twenty-five years later. The core of the leaderships of a whole series of left organizations are still the same people. Now there's an objective reason for that, which is that the 1968 generation was formed through a very important political experience, at least for the Europeans. It was a period when revolutions seemed on the horizon, when there were whole new vistas opening up, and a generation was formed that had the self-confidence that they were going to make the revolution; and they came and they took the leadership. No generation since then has had a sufficiently strong experience to form a strong enough generation to say, OK, you lot, you're all now over forty, get out of the way and make room for us.

But we're not interested in just seeing what the objective or the natural process is. We want to do something consciously to change our organizations to make them as adequate as possible. We have to extend that initial core of our leadership. We have to extend it to women, to younger generations, to immigrants and so forth. We have to have a conscious plan for changing our leaderships, and have to have a conscious look at how we select leaders, what criteria we use. Do we use an individual star system? Does each and every individual person have to be brilliant at everything—very few people are brilliant at anything at all—or is our goal to build a collective team that within it combines all the different strengths that we have and that are necessary for the leadership of an organization?

Once we try to develop a conscious plan, the much-discussed question of quotas for women or other forms of positive action comes up. If we go with the flow, if we go with what's natural, then we're going to continue reproducing what is such a heavy burden on us: the ideology and the division of labour that exist in society as a whole. Many left organizations have discussed this. There's been a very strong contribution for example from the Brazilian PT. These things are difficult, because we have to be prepared to take measures that might seem to be "artificial".

11. Party responsibility for private life and individual behaviour

But this is not half as difficult as the question of the "private life" of comrades. We have another responsibility in revolutionary organizations, when we consider that we can contribute to taking struggles in a good direction. We have to have militants who have credibility, who have prestige in their political work. This means that they have to act at all times, if such a thing is possible, in a way that's in keeping with our programme. So a party has a responsibility for the behaviour and also for the well-being of comrades.

We have to create the best conditions we can for comrades to carry out the tasks that we give them, and ensure that there is no discrimination on the basis of material factors when we ask comrades to take different tasks and different responsibilities. For example, in a situation of clandestinity and repression an organization has a responsibility to do what it can to ensure its members' protection. If an organization asks comrades to work full-time, we have to guarantee that they are able to do that without materially suffering from it.

Another question is very often raised when women discuss the obstacles to participation in an organization: organizations have to take responsibility for childcare. If comrades are asked to do party tasks, they have to be able to do so in relation to their family responsibilities. Of course, there are just as many fathers if not more in left organizations than there are mothers. But because of the way the sexual division of labour works, it's very much more frequent that women comrades when they have children begin to drop out of political activity because it is so difficult. This is something that we have to take seriously.

Two points should be made about this. The first is that very often when we discuss the position of women and the obstacles to their participation, childcare becomes the major question that is discussed. But it is not having children that makes women oppressed or makes difficulties for women participating in political organizations. There is a general dynamic that applies to all women whether or not they have children that tends to exclude them. The question of childcare is important. We have to apply to it the same criteria, making it possible for women comrades to carry out party tasks. But we also have to take into account what burden can be put on other comrades in terms of their time or the financial responsibility if the organization has to finance childcare.

Second, we need to ask: Are we putting our comrades in a privileged situation compared to other women with whom they are active in the mass movements? Do we fight for collective childcare organized in the case of meetings of the mass movements, or do we simply deal with our own comrades? Are we substituting for what should be state or local government or something provision? The question of childcare is not something that we can simply resolve for our own comrades within our own situation without looking at it also in relation to what do we do to help all women who have the problem of childcare responsibilities. This general statement is of little help with the very difficult problems of when you're a woman in the underground, in clandestinity, and you have responsibility for children. That is a particularly difficult question because it also involves the feelings of women (and men) as parents and the difficulties of being separated from their children for a long period of time.

All these things will of course depend on what our organizations are able to do. They depends on the size and resources of our organizations.

Left organizations also have a responsibility for their members' behaviour, because organizations will be ineffective if our comrades' behaviour is in contradiction with what we say we stand for. We cannot allow comrades to have behaviour that puts the organization in danger in any irresponsible way.

Once again, this is a very difficult problem of different cultures. To take just one example, a revolutionary organization in India has a code of conduct in which they state that religious belief is in contradiction with their programme and therefore incompatible with membership. This issue is posed in a different way in countries or regions where there is a very strong progressive, radical religious movement like liberation theology, as is the case in parts of Latin America. It may well be that in those countries comrades feel that it is perfectly natural and logical that people who do have a professed religious belief should be part of revolutionary organizations, once there is agreement with them on the tasks and the programme. That's just one example of how this question is posed

differently in different countries.

However there is one aspect of behaviour about which in my opinion we certainly cannot say: This is a cultural difference. Our programme commits us to fighting all forms of women's oppression. Therefore we have to say that sexist behaviour is in contradiction with that programme. Here I agree with what the PRT (Revolutionary Workers' Party) decided in Mexico: [