

The British Suffragette Movement: The history of feminist thought

Part I. The development of wide-ranging and conceptual feminist frameworks



Lin Lovell - Centre for Employment Studies Research (CESR),
University of the West of England, Bristol

lin.lovell@uwe.ac.uk

In the early years of the Twentieth Century women were oppressed in many ways. The denial of the vote was both a manifestation, and a cause, of their oppression. But women were far from passive recipients of this oppression. Two main campaigning societies emerged to challenge the status quo: the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) and the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). These societies dominated the suffrage movements between 1905 and 1914. It seems fair to speculate that the activities of the women in these societies has shaped the modern agenda for women and without their efforts the lives of women today would be far worse. The participation of women in society and political life had been, and continued to be, severely restricted during both the Victorian and Edwardian eras. This was due primarily, to the existence of patriarchal systems and, for many women active in these two groups, class relations.

Although the Edwardian period represents an important period in the understanding of women's history it also has implications for the study of women's history in general. The term 'Feminist' came into use in the English language during the 1880s indicating support for women's equal legal and political rights with men (Bryson 1992). Throughout history women have largely been excluded from making war, wealth, governments, art and science (Kelly-Godal 1976). The emergence of women's studies in the 1960s had a dual goal, namely, to restore women to history and restore our history to women (Kelly-Godal 1976). Seeking to add women to the fund of historical knowledge has theoretical significance. This first paper (in a series of four) will focus, therefore, on the development of wide ranging conceptual frameworks that women have explored in order to understand the nature and causes of women's oppression. Paper two considers the further development post the 1990s of the growth and changes of the contemporary analysis of patriarchy and class. The third paper will explore the concept of intersectionality between patriarchy and class. The final paper will provide an overview of suffrage activity in the South West regions, with particular emphasis on class structures within the movements.

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The current paper, then, will briefly explore the history of the development of political participation from the 1860s. The development of early feminist thought and action has been uneven, and until recently a popular image of window smashing dominated the views of women's political action. This paper explores the development of feminist political thought from the 1860s with a brief inclusion of women's involvement in political pressure groups in the South West. It will then

provide a summary of the 'new history' emerging in the 1960s and the late 1970s when discussion focused, primarily, upon whether gender could be developed as a category of analysis. An interest in race, class and gender developed also, with a commitment to history that included stories of the oppressed attempting to understand how the inequalities of power were organised. This encouraged radical, liberal and Marxist feminist analysis. This new and emerging analysis was undertaken by what became known as second wave feminism.

One of the key texts in the history of feminist thought was Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) that challenged the biological explanation of women's suitability for the public sphere. She was writing at a time of industrialisation, which although opening some opportunities for workingwomen, also subjected them to poor conditions and low wages. For women in the emerging middle classes, they began to see the separation of home and work. The basis of (capitalist) class differences between women started to emerge.

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But political goals were never far from the surface. Women's pressure groups began to be formed and preceded the emergence of the Edwardian suffrage societies. Women in cities like Bristol played an active part in political movements in the

late Eighteenth Century (Malos 1983). From the 1860s in Bristol, groups of women began to work together to reflect upon the factors that limited their involvement in society and politics. Their predominant concerns were with issues such as a lack of higher education for women and their exclusion from the professions, such as law and medicine. At the time the franchise for all men was also a contentious issue. Numerous women were convinced that the winning of the vote should be their priority.

The Bristol and Clifton Society for Women's Suffrage was formed in 1868. Women also joined and supported more than one issue or cause. For example, Anne Priestman, a middle class woman, involved in the suffrage movement from the 1860s, supported the strike action of the Barton Hill cotton workers (1875) and their right to be unionised.¹ It seems reasonable to argue that, although the leadership of the Bristol suffrage movement was generally middle class, it was also concerned with the problems of working class women (Malos 1983).

One leading figure in the feminist movement, Sylvia Pankhurst, challenged the male dominance of Socialist politics. Although remembered for her part in the women's social and political union (WSPU) she concentrated her efforts on the poor in the east end of London – where she lived and campaigned from 1912-24. She insisted on grass roots democracy. She, along with other nascent Marxist feminists, argued for the collectivisation of housework and condemned marriage (Bryson 1992).

After the gaining of the vote and the intervening two world wars, feminist activity seemed to have entered an harmonious period. In the immediate post world war two epoch, there was no mass Feminist movement as had been the case in the early part of the century. The vote had been gained, and although opportunities were still unequal it could be argued that key pressures of earlier feminists had been met. New sources of employment for middle class women through the 'typewriter revolution' had taken place. Women had gained a significant degree of legal independence and importantly changes in social behaviour and expectations of women had transformed women's lives. It seemed too many that a new age had begun and that the drudgery

¹ The Priestman sisters of Bristol were involved in the signing of the petition for women's suffrage presented to parliament by John Stuart Mill in 1866 (Malos 1983). They were involved in the suffrage movement. Both Anne and her sister Mary challenged no taxation without representation by refusing to pay their taxes and the authorities seized their possessions.

of domesticity had been removed and women could make choices about the career they wished to follow. There was pressure for equal pay, primarily, although not exclusively, from professional women. The developing welfare state ensured that there was some recognition of, and financial support for, women based primarily on their maternal role. In addition, there was a rise in living standards and the availability of consumer goods. It seems that any consciousness raising and protests were isolated and confined to a small minority. For most women there was no ready access to Feminist debates and few knew anything of feminist history and the importance of Simone de Beauvoir's book *The Second Sex*. This book, published in 1949, was for a generation of women the only available feminist text.

In the 'new history' emerging in the 1960s and the late 1970s the accounts of women's history rested upon whether gender could be developed as a category of analysis. A developing interest in the intersection of race, class and gender was the first commitment to history that included stories of the oppressed. This included an attempt to understand how the inequalities of power were organised. Concepts of class most often rested upon Marxist economic principles, working with or against a set of definitions that involved causality running from the economic base to the social and gendered superstructure (Scott 1986). Marxist feminists asked the question 'how do ghettos of women's work arise?' In the early years they attributed this, often in a functionalist manner, to the needs of capitalism itself. Employers benefitted from the existence of a pool of unskilled labour and their subsequent actions caused gendered inequalities in pay and conditions (Phillips and Taylor 1979). Later, this Marxist feminist perspective was revisited by feminists such as Heidi Hartmann (Hartman 1979) who highlights the need to re-think economic categories relating to women's work. She argues that we must use Marxist analysis to understand the economic laws of motion and the feminist analysis for its strength in understanding the particular predicament of women (Hartmann 1979). But this does not explain why women end up at the bottom of the hierarchy (Phillips and Taylor 1979).

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Several arguments are raised against Marxist conceptions – or at against least feminist conceptions working with Marxist categories. First, because women's class has generally been categorised through their male partner's class, and not viewed as a separate class, this misses those cases where a co-habiting couple have different class positions. Socialist feminists sought to redefine and examine what class means to women. They argued that whilst women are not a separate (class) category, the classification of women's class needs to be re-thought. This, however, creates the difficulty of knowing what criteria to use to assign women to a class independently of their male partner's class – e.g. how should we classify a woman working as a low-paid shop worker, living with a male partner who owns his own business? Second, the unpaid work that women do in the home is conceived of in Marxist economic theory as non-productive – that is, non-productive of surplus value, the source of profit. Only productive, paid, labour produces profit and capital. This has (mis) led many feminists to argue that Marxists devalue unpaid, domestic labour on the grounds that it is 'unproductive'. This is misleading because it confuses a very strict economic meaning of 'unproductive' with different, and pejorative, meaning. Being unproductive of profit should not be interpreted to mean being a 'waste of time' or in some way more 'frivolous or less important' than paid labour. Indeed, Marxists have argued that unpaid domestic labour is necessary for the creation of profit via paid labour.

The 1960s was a period of the development of consciousness-raising women's groups. They began with the notion of sisterhood and a common struggle against men's power and began to re-define women's liberation without using categories like class. The proliferation of women's groups and centres campaigned on major issues as they affected women. This led to the recognition of a common sisterhood and the idea that, in general, women had different interests to men (Hartman 1981). 'Feminism was intended to develop as a universal theory to show women the nature of our oppression and as an international political practice to achieve our liberation' (Ramazanoglu 1989). This second wave of feminism, as it became known, not only produced overwhelming evidence of widespread social discrimination against women, it also asked new questions – although various groups often differed in the ways they accounted for women's oppression (Ramazanoglu 1989).

Early work by Firestone (1979), Morgan (1971) and Millett (1977) broke new ground in feminist theory. Although they provided an incomplete analysis, they outlined the basis for a critical analysis of male power. Their work also provided the beginning of self-awareness of socialist feminism. The 1960s saw the emergence of the New Left that became associated with a number of movements (Bryson 2003). Heidi Hartmann (1981), for example, outlined her theme of the unhappy marriage between Marxism and feminism. Her discussion was formed around the experiences of women's movements in the 1960s, where some women working in revolutionary politics began to question the theory and their role in day-to-day socialist work. They began to raise questions such as: Who writes the manifestoes and who cleans the office? For them, revolutionary zeal was replaced by a requirement by middle class males for women members to take on a nurturing role. The women of the left soon realised that whilst women might occasionally participate on the front lines as 'revolutionary cheerleaders', they would keep the home fires burning and be revolutionary nurturers as secretaries, typists, filing, phoning, feeding, loving, and supporting. Betty Friedan identified a strange stirring in the American suburbs where housewives nurtured their husbands and families and struggled alone afraid to ask the silent question 'Is that all' which she identifies as 'the problem with no name' in her book *The Feminine Mystique* (Friedan 1965).

The revival of an organised feminist movement after the 1960s brought the term 'patriarchy' back into popular and academic work and was beginning to be used as an analytical tool. Feminists were looking to distinguish between women's subordination as a sex and their oppression as a class. The argument over patriarchy was not new and there have been three forms of patriarchal argument (Pateman 1988). The first form emerged in the seventeenth century involving traditional thoughts of family and the authority of the father, followed by the second classic debate starting in 1860s and was a theory of political right and political obedience. The third form, modern patriarchy, is the current form that underpins much feminist debate. The third form sees patriarchy as fraternal, contractual and structures capitalist civil society. Pateman argues that older forms of patriarchy are a relic of old world status or part of the natural order of subjection and this older family form gave way to a more public form. Patriarchy seems to pre-date capitalism, suggesting that it is universal and that there is a necessary connection between patriarchy and capitalism (Pateman 1988). However, despite problems, the term 'patriarchy' has enabled women to 'see' the (alleged) common oppression of all women in relation to all men and this has been discussed and acted upon in a variety of ways (Ramazanoglu 1989).

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The concept of patriarchy, whilst essential and problematic in the development of feminist thought, has not been without its critics. Theorising patriarchy was the first step to understanding the subordination of all women rather than the subordination of working class women. As the term continued to be used, serious difficulties with the concept became evident (Beechey 1979). Radical feminist versions were seen as pursuing a kind of universal claim, where men everywhere oppressed women everywhere in more or less the same ways (Acker 1989). The term has also been criticised as a reflection of white, middle class women's reality (Acker 1989). The Marxist tradition linking of patriarchy to modes of production was also difficult because production and patriarchy operate as separate systems. At the end of the 1980s feminists from a number of disciplines began to develop new theories about the large-scale societal process. For instance, Walby introduced a model of patriarchy as six partially independent structures that have causal effects upon each other. The first is in the household where housewives are the producing class, whilst husbands are the expropriating class. The second relates to the economic dimension of patriarchal relations within paid work. The third refers to the role of the state in maintaining systematic bias towards patriarchal interests and policies. The fourth relates to the role of male violence and the relations of sexuality that follow this. The final structure is the set of cultural institutions which create the representation of women in a variety of arenas, such as religion, education and the media (Walby 1990). The model showed that patriarchy could be systematically elaborated to deal with historical and cross-cultural variation and, therefore, overcome some objections to the concept of patriarchy (Walby 1992).

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The development, between 1960s and 1970s, of the links between feminism and socialism increased into an understanding of the relationships between a system of power that was derived from capitalist patriarchy and how

the capitalist class structure reinforced the sexual structure (Eisenstein 1979). From this a synthesis of Marxist class analysis and radical feminist patriarchal analysis evolved into Socialist feminism (Eisenstein 1979). Three predominant theories developed, radical, liberal and Marxist, and there were variations within each of these. It is possible to sub-divide and distinguish between different strands of radical feminism, and to differentiate between Marxist feminism and Socialist feminism (Ramazanoglu 1989). Marxist feminist believed in the importance in the struggle against capital as 'workers' and not as 'women'. Socialist feminists agreed with radical feminists that there was a system of oppression called patriarchy but they also agreed with Marxists feminists that there was class oppression. They attempted to combine the two approaches in their analysis of society (Hartmann 1981).

The three approaches of liberal, radical and Marxist offer different political strategies. Liberal feminists work towards reform without changing the fundamentals of capitalism; radical feminists strive for the overthrow of patriarchy, which they believe will involve changing only the patriarchal parts of capitalism; and Marxist feminists fight for the overthrow of capitalism as a means of removing its patriarchal parts (Eisenstein 1979). The dichotomy between women's issues and the different versions of Marxism makes the relationship difficult to determine. Marxists analysis seeks to explain power relationships in terms of class relations and radical feminism in the 1970s dealt with the biological reality of power. An assumption of the classic Marxist interpretation was that whilst capitalism strove for profit it became 'sex blind'. Capitalists will employ anyone in their drive for profit and increasingly brought women and children into the paid labour market who were therefore subject to exploitation (Bryson 1992). The debate over women's domestic labour in general led to the common idea that housework done by women is not a personal service to men,

but serves the interests of the capitalist class. What is, arguably, more important is that the domestic labour debate drew attention to a neglected and previously rejected activity, meaning that domestic labour could not be sidelined (Bryson 1992). This means the objectives of the three different approaches are different. Ramazanoglu (1989) argues that both radical and Marxist interpretations are feminist because they question every aspect of male power, whereas, liberal feminist accept the status quo and believe that the use of legal pressures as a political strategy can be ineffective. She argues that liberal feminism is attractive to the middle classes within national movements, but has little appeal for the mass of women

Conclusion

Whilst the development of feminist thought has been uneven, and taken many twists and turns since the eighteenth century, the recent emergence of new theoretical and interdisciplinary concepts and has revitalised feminist theorising. In the next paper, I will explore the emergence of further feminist developments post 1990s, and in particular the growth of the feminist analyses and changes to the contemporary analysis of patriarchy and class.

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