TOWARDS AN ANTI-RACIST FEMINISM

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> consciousness become a part of the discussion of social reality. Reality itself comes to encompass the relations of class and sex and race ... the dialectic will be self-consciously extended to the relations between consciousness, ideology and social reality.[7]

For Hartock, feminists have 'reinvented Marx's method' to provide 'a model for the rest of the left'.[8]

In Britain the struggles of feminists and black people have held up a mirror to the left revealing its inadequacies – its reliance on arid dogma, on economistic formulations, and on its own little hierarchies. Both women and black people have stressed the nature of their oppressions and the need to fight them on their own terms without subsuming their struggles to the class struggle or indeed of deferring them till 'after the revolution'. They have emphasised the importance of not viewing racism and sexism purely in terms of their economic function. And implicit in these demands to organise autonomously around their own oppressions and redefine the content of political struggle is the redefinition by both groups of *where* that struggle takes place. For the orthodox left, the factory floor has been the site of struggle, with the traditional political fight defined as that between the owners of the means of production and the sellers of labour power. But for both white women and black people, fighting an oppression which goes beyond (or is disconnected from) direct economic exploitation, the focus of the struggle has moved to the community. Women and black people have since the 1970s been at the forefront of community-based fights. The black uprisings of 1981 and the demonstrations of the women of Greenham Common are simply the dramatic examples of that trend.

The role of women outside mainstream factory production has been variously viewed by the WM. Analysts have mainly concentrated on women's isolation and powerlessness in the home or on their role in reproduction. A few commentators have turned the issue on its head to show that because women have been less directly incorporated into capitalist relations, they actually bear the seeds of a more revolutionary consciousness than men do. Samir Amin, for instance, argues that women's household tasks and relationships retain an element of use-value in a society where all other relations are dominated by exchange-values.[9] Alain Touraine takes up the same theme more explicitly.

> Of all social movements, the women's movement is the one most able to oppose the growing hold exercised by giant corporations over our daily lives. Only women have preserved those personal qualities which male domination has crushed out of men. Since they have been completely excluded from political and military power, women have succeeded in maintaining a capacity for affective relations from which men have been estranged by the structures of power.[10]

A. Sivanandan contends that capitalism has over the years not only divided and separated 'the economic and cultural aspects of struggle the standard of living and the quality of life', but has concealed them from each other and therefore divided the struggles. And because of the traditional labour movement's concentration on the standard of living, it has been left to black people and white women to struggle over the quality of life and restore that dimension to class struggle generally.[1] If we accept that women in the home are not merely reproducing labour power but social relations and ideology too, and that they, probably far more than their husbands, have a hand in fashioning the ideas and values of the next generation, then the concern of women over the 'quality of life' and their capacity for 'affective relations' carry within them the potential for anti-racist values and commitment.

It is against this promise that women hold out and in terms of the principles of feminism itself that I examine the nature of racism (or the limitations of anti-racism) in the white British WM. The purpose is not to suggest that we women are more or less racist than other groups or that there is a moral reason to bring us to book, but to show that anti-racist practice is closely allied to the way that feminist principles have been applied, betrayed or distorted. Essentially, I see anti-racism not as something outside of the WM but as intrinsic to the best principles of feminism itself. The extent to which the WM has failed its own principles is the extent to which it is racist. Conversely, and this is the direction I am writing from, to analyse our 'lapses' from anti-racism is to analyse flaws in the contemporary practice of feminism itself.

Borrowing from the left

To understand how we can fight racism as women, it is important to evaluate critically our past practice and learn from our past mistakes. And for that reason I want to look back at the main strands of feminist activity (or lack of activity) on race over the last few years. This falls into two broad phases: 1977-9, when anti-fascist anti-racist activity had a relatively high profile on the left generally, and 1980 to the present.

The British WM, probably unlike any other, does have a distinct though short-lived campaign against racism (and fascism) to its credit: that carried out by the Women Against Racism and Fascism (WARF). It arose out of a major mobilisation against a fascist march in North London in April 1977 when a number of women not affiliated to any political party took part and out of that experience felt the need to organise more systematically to protect women in street confrontations and to raise the issues of racism and fascism with other women. A few months later, the first WARF group was launched in London – followed by others throughout the country. Women attracted to WARF

as racial violence, police harassment and racist court decisions, it did so in the main as a result of pressure from blacks within its ranks and the fear of losing its black members. Even today, the left's response continues to be ad hoc, piecemeal and lacking a genuine comprehension of state racism.

But if the left parties failed to address themselves in a coherent organised way to the questions of racism and fascism, there were still individuals on the left who, feeling the impact of racist and fascist thugs on the ground, came together from 1976 onwards to form local anti-racist anti-fascist groups. The composition of these local committees differed from area to area, as did the issues that were taken up. Sometimes the committees were seen as little more than adjuncts to the state's Community Relations Committee network, sometimes they simply embraced a 'tea-party philosophy' of racial harmony, to be achieved through cultural and social events. But on all committees sat members of the left parties – the SWP, the IMG, the CP, the Labour left – and they were all primarily interested in fighting fascism. There was as yet no British tradition of fighting racism.* The liberal view reduced the issue to one of interpersonal relations – educating prejudice away – the militant view reduced anti-racism to anti-fascism.

Fighting racism would have involved seeing racism as a white problem which it was the responsibility of white people to deal with. It would have necessitated slow unrewarding educative and campaigning work in those areas where working people were already involved – such as tenants associations, trades councils, etc. Though most groups postured at doing local work, they rarely undertook much practical activity. Their excuse was that black people did not join and tell them what to do – thus they neatly absolved themselves of serious responsibility. In fact, if they had taken up local campaigns against racism, based on local issues, in earnest, black people might well have joined them – as was demonstrated in the support that the paper *CARF* (Campaign Against Racism and Fascism) got (and still gets) from black groups. (*CARF* is still the only political anti-racist forum in the UK.)

Because there were no strong guiding anti-racist principles, and little orientation towards truly local work, it was inevitable that fighting the fascists, either at elections or in street confrontations, would become the most popular and most publicised aspect of the work. Many local committees were dormant 'paper' organisations fired into reluctant activity by a fascist march or a fascist meeting on their patch and, lacking a local mobilising capacity, had to turn to the left parties for organisation and numbers.

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* Some of us based at the Institute of Race Relations were responsible for bringing together twenty-six local broad fronts into an All London Anti-racist Anti-fascist Coordinating Committee (1977-9) which also published a newspaper, *CARF*.

And it was this basic weakness of the anti-racist anti-fascist groups to draw out a clear anti-racist perspective grounded in local activity that made it possible for a powerful anti-fascist movement like the Anti Nazi League (ANL) to take over and submerge them. Whatever local anti-racist potential there had been was diverted even more readily into a movement against fascism, albeit popular and national – and temporary. The ANL, whose aim was to defeat the fascist threat at the polls, organised around slogans and definitions which were simply throw-backs to the 1930s. It made no pretence at analysing contemporary fascism or its relationship to racism and black people. (To be fair, it must be stressed that WARF aways opposed the ANL's attempts to take over and subvert the chief concerns of the movement. But this resistance probably owes more to a reflex distrust of male left organisations, which backed the ANL, than a commitment to anti-racism.)

Since the ANL, we have seen a downturn in activity against fascism and racism – not because either has diminished, on the contrary they have increased, but because left groups generally have turned their attention to other issues – unemployment, social and welfare cuts, nuclear disarmament. And left-wing Labour-controlled councils prefer to fund ethnic culturalist programmes rather than support anti-racist political activities.[15]

Women Against Racism and Fascism: form and content of struggle

Where does WARF fit into this scenario?* WARF was a broad front of women opposed to racism and fascism who for the first time could organise together outside the confines of the left parties. The group brought large contingents of women to its public activities. WARF women prided themselves on their impressive turn-outs and organised ranks, adopting slogans and songs to events: 'The women united will never be defeated' and 'Oh sisters don't you weep don't you moan ... the women's army is marching ...' But what were we mobilising for?

Essentially, we followed the lead of the white left parties into two key areas – both firmly within the traditional purview of left politics – industrial disputes and mobilising in counter-demonstration against fascist marches. In the Grunwick strike, for instance, white women took to the picket line, not when the black women had stood alone for months outside the gate and desperately looked for allies, but when the left had changed the underlying issue from one of racial discrimination to one of unionisation and made the dispute an 'official' left concern.[16]

* This account is based on my experiences in North London WARF and that group's relationship with other WARF groups and the All London Anti-racist Anti-fascist Coordinating Committee.

The tendency to supervene form over the content of struggle is not entirely absent, even in the best of socialist feminist writings – such as *Beyond the fragments*.[18] Here, three white feminists who have all worked both in left parties and in the WM explain how and why women had to fight against and outside the male left. For the first time in British feminist writings the issue has been tackled as one of politics – the problem, that is, is located not in the sexism of individual men but in the basis on which (male) left politics is organised. As such, the authors have provided some very exciting and influential ideas for the WM. But when they extend that analysis to how (as one of the contributors put it) 'new forms of organising within the women's movement' could become 'part of a larger recovery of a libertarian socialist tradition', they splutter and stop, their promise unfulfilled. It escapes them completely that black people were having to wage a similar struggle to women's against the left and under identical circumstances. Mukti, Samaj, Black Socialist Alliance, Flame, Awaz, OWAAD and so many other organisations bear witness to the battles black people (male and female) were waging in the 1970s against a white left which relegated their struggle and tried to sidetrack their fight. In this book, as in women's politics generally, there has been no genuine recognition that it is the same left which is *male* towards women's politics that is *white* towards black politics.

The betrayal of the black cause, however, does not rest here; it has been extended into what amounts to a denial of the inspiration that 'women's liberation' owes to the 1960s black movement. As David Edgar put it, 'The struggle for black rights in America was the first and defining political struggle of the 1960s ... Without Black Brotherhood, there would have been no Sisterhood; without Black Power and Black Pride, there would have been no Gay Power and Gay Pride.'[19] In a recently published collection of personal narratives from those involved in the struggles around the Vietnam war, civil rights and women's liberation in the USA in the 1960s – *They should have served that cup of coffee* – American feminists recall this history. 'We were aided in our recognition of cultural domination by the black movement's pointing to the power of the (white) Man's ideology in forming black self-perception. The black movement countered this domination in part with the slogan "Black is Beautiful". Could women together, make a similar affirmation about ourselves?'[20] 'The fact that the Civil Rights Movement had torn apart assumptions about equality and freedom in America allowed us the space to question the reality of our own freedom as women.'[21]

Compare this with the history recalled by the authors of *Sweet Freedom*.[22] For them, post-war feminism owed its inspiration to the pill, the ideas of Betty Friedan and the experience of sexism in political movements. It simply 'adapted the terminology of black liberation and

anti-imperialism'. Hilary Wainwright in her introduction to *Beyond the fragments* goes a step further and actually denies the legacy of the black struggle. For her, no left organisation 'had any real understanding of the subjectivity of oppression, of the connections between personal relations and public political organisation, or of the emotional components of consciousness, until the Women's Movement had brought these issues to the surface and made them part of political thought and action.' But long before the WM, the protagonists of the black movement (and the Chinese and Cuban revolutionaries before them) had insisted that there could be no dichotomy between one's personal life-style, behaviour, beliefs and the pursuit of liberationist politics, that who you are and what you do belong to the same continuum. The difference in emphasis between the two types of histories is not solely because one is British and the other American, for earlier British feminists did own to the influence of black power.[23] Contemporary British feminist history, however, is shifting the debate about the genesis of the WM from its inspirational origins to its organisational formation and, in so doing, is expurgating history – to create a revisionist 'white' history.

Women and the state

But even if white women fail to understand the parallel struggles for autonomy by black people, even if they fail to acknowledge the inspirational debt owed to the black power movement, one could still expect them to find common ground with black people through their common experience of the state. The WM, though, finds it difficult, like the left, to grasp the idea of state racism – not because it is hung up on the orthodoxies of capitalist exploitation, but because it finds it hard to distinguish between the individualised sexism of particular men and the systematic or institutionalised nature of state oppression of women. And there is even now a tendency in the WM to see men (en masse) rather than a system as primarily responsible for the oppression of women. Loosely stated, the extent to which the WM has viewed a system (of patriarchy or whatever) as responsible for oppression is the extent to which it has adhered to socialist-feminist ideas as opposed to radical feminist ones. A class analysis necessarily underlies an understanding of the state. Where marxist women have analysed the state, it has often been in a very abstract way, bearing little reality to actual or potential struggle. Consciously fighting state power rather than male power has hitherto been alien to the WM. Very often, where women have fought the state, it has been over 'local state' issues around welfare demands such as more nursery provision. Where women have tackled the national state, it has been around strictly feminist demands such as abortion. One can perceive in the WM an

undergone change, from 'how do we fight racism as women' to 'why is the women's movement so white'. Of course, feminists have to question why their own movement is white – it is the area that they have direct experience of and have the power to change. But in the way that they tackle the question, feminists are moving from examining the basis of racism in society, and their complicity in it, to examining an organisational problem in the movement. The line of argument followed – to explain that whiteness – neither takes the WM outward to examine state racism, nor takes it deeper into itself to examine feminist principles. Instead, it treats racism as a moral problem, a defect in sisterhood, and reduces it to an interpersonal issue. To understand how to treat one's black sister, one has to understand one's own prejudiced behaviour. To understand one's own prejudices, one has to become conscious of what they are and where they came from. Hence, consciousness raising (CR) and racial awareness training are being advocated (and taken up) in the WM today.[23]

Advocates of CR on race for women argue that racism dehumanises women (just as sexism dehumanises men). True feminists cannot oppress the black women that they work with. And they cannot expect black women to keep clarifying their racism for them – they must take on the burden of recognising it themselves. CR is a female form of thrashing out an issue; it 'encourages the "personal" change that makes political transformation and action possible'.[24]

Firstly, the argument for combating racism the CR way is a moral rather than a political one – it is about rescuing white humanity from itself. Second, it suggests that one can parallel the sexism visited by men on women with the 'racism' visited by white people on black. But this does not in fact hold true. Women feel their oppression by men directly and personally in the relationships of the home. Men's sexual oppression of women does not merely reflect society's inbuilt discrimination against women, for men directly benefit from women's oppression and subjugation and individual men hold physical and economic power over individual women in the home. This is not to say that the individual sexism of the man is not derived from the structural sexism of society, but it is to say that what most women feel most poignantly and are first conscious of is the power relationship between the man and the woman in the home. The same is not true of relations between black people and white people. Though most white people hold racialist attitudes, they are not engaged with black individuals in a relationship where they act out those feelings, nor do white individuals benefit in a direct personal sense from the oppression and subjugation of black individuals. But white people do benefit indirectly from the fact that a whole system exercises power over black people via institutionalised racism.

CR may be an ideal and tested female form for coming to

consciousness of one's own oppression as a woman, but that does not mean it can be extrapolated as a method of dealing with other issues such as racism. (Women have, in fact, told me that it often serves as a way of exonerating racialist attitudes – to acknowledge them and discover that others share them has confirmed some women in their racialist views.) In fact, CR on race is neither a female innovation nor a subversive technique. It has become a popular programme with race relations professionals in the US and in Britain. Feminism is borrowing a practice which belongs squarely within the conservative integrationist wing of race relations practice. Its underlying tenet is that bad race relations are caused not by state racism and discrimination but by misunderstandings between people. White people need only to be educated out of their prejudices – black people need only to be allowed their cultural identity. What is essentially a question of power and economics becomes transformed into a personal and cultural question. CR takes us away from a position where we can work with other groups (including black people) on *racism* and into a discussion about our attitudes, prejudice, etc (*racialism*). Working against racism means tackling political issues. Working on racialism means tackling ideas about black people.

Some feminist advocates of CR have argued that one needs both a political/historical understanding of racism and a personal/political understanding of how it affects one's daily life.[25] But, in allowing that there are two separate understandings and by implying that the first is 'orthodox', the second, 'feminist', they encourage feminists to tackle attitudes without tracing them to their material cause. Rather than integrating the 'personal' understanding with the 'political' understanding, CR divorces ideas from their acting out in a social context, so that it becomes a sort of special therapy through which one mechanistically learns how to relate to people not as normal as oneself. (Are we to have courses on how to deal with the elderly, the disabled and so on?) Instead of relating to black people through practice, CR tries to relate through ideas about them. The world, says CR, is in your head, not out there.

Seeing race as a personal problem rather than a 'structural' one is part of a more general trend within the WM against intellectualising and abstracting issues. The WM has quite rightly stressed that 'the personal is the political' in opposition to the white male left's dogmatic reductionism. But the tendency now, and the WM's attitude to race is only one example of the trend, is to go so far along that road as to reduce the political to the personal. Thus, the personal transformation becomes the be-all and end-all. Sexual politics has come to re-define 'the personal is the political' in reactionary middle-class terms to mean personalising the political, reducing politics to inter-personal relationships, political power to personal power.

'black and white working-class women have been the leaders of the *real* feminist struggle'.[31] Even if this is what Angela Davis says (and she does not), she would only be giving primacy to the activities of the majority of women. Her book is actually one of the first to connect the hitherto disconnected struggles of women and of black people and to analyse them through an understanding of class formation and class struggle.

The movement appears to find it divisive to acknowledge material and historically specific differences between women and relentlessly asserts the commonality of women qua women. In an eagerness to promote the idea of sisterhood, it has ignored the complexities of experience. While claiming to liberate women from biological determinism, it has denied women an existence outside that determined by their sex. And behind the idea that every woman is equally oppressed biologically is the idea that gender per se, rather than a particular system or set of relations, is the primary enemy of women.

And because the Western WM is the most developed in the battle of the genders, it seems to think that it holds the key to women's liberation everywhere. There is, even in the writings of avowedly 'socialist' feminists, a sense that western feminism is more liberated and liberating. Maxine Molyneux, writing on Third World 'socialist' countries, for example, attributes the low level of debate on feminism in these countries' women's organisations to the fact that western WM literature has often not been allowed to penetrate there.[32] Sue O'Sullivan, writing on 'How Cuba doesn't cope with sexuality',[33] manages, despite her expressions of solidarity with the Cuban revolution, to judge Cuba's socialism on western feminism's sexuality scale. She tries to balance her assertion that 'as feminists, we believe that sexuality, the possibility and struggle for choice around sexual preference *and* questions about sexual practice, are completely relevant to any questions of revolution', with the view that few feminists 'would deny the crucial importance of class, race, imperialism'. But instead of integrating the two approaches, she categorically throws out the notion that 'the complexity of women's different situations worldwide' should modify *our* conception of women's oppression which was 'recognised through the emergence of autonomous women's movements during the last 15 years' – in other words, via the recent western WM. And, throughout, her article is permeated with the view that lesbianism (which is forbidden in Cuba) is the highest stage of feminism.

There is nowhere in western feminist writing (save that coming from the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague) a sense that Third World women actually have an indigenous history and tradition of struggle from which western feminists could learn. This is the more significant since, in many ways, western feminists often try artificially to recreate

the relationships and feelings between women which exist in the non-nuclear, non-capitalist households of most Third World social formations.

But the object here is not so much to point out the cultural imperialism of the WM – though that there is – as to show the absurdity and inappropriateness of the universalist tenets of western feminism and its preoccupation with sexual freedom for women in the Third World. In countries locked in feudal relations, for instance, feminists have concentrated on exposing and attacking one aspect of a complex social and economic relationship, the custom of clitoridectomy; in newly industrialising countries which superexploit all female labour, they have concentrated on prostitution. But this is to isolate and judge sexual oppression outside of its social and economic context and outside the context of imperialism. The increase in prostitution in South Asia for instance is a product of poverty, of tourism and the absolute (as opposed to relative) exploitation of women by multinational corporations in Free Trade Zones, which renders them unemployable by the age of 25.[34]

By taking a practice out of its socio-economic context, by attributing it to a country or culture, rather than to a historical stage, feminists are well on the way to racial stereotyping. Instead of seeing that arranged marriages, circumcision, dowries and so on have been part of all our histories, they attribute the customs not to an epoch or to a social formation but to a racial group. And by taking customs out of their context, they not only fail to learn about parallels in their history, but also distort the very struggles of Third World women whom they claim to want to help. In the metropolis, the inability to relate customs to their social and economic relations is to range feminists alongside reactionary 'ethnic' sociologists at best,[35] or the Powellite lobby at worst. Such a view omits from consideration the facts of colonialism, the fact that Britain cajoled black labour here after destroying colonial economies, and that black 'customs' appertain to the peasant societies from which black people were wrenched, and that the social relations imported from another economy and society tend to get (defensively) frozen in an alien racist capitalist society.

By examining the position of Third World women from the vantage point of western feminist priorities, feminists often fail to see the role that racial and imperial domination play in the lives of Third World women. At the NGO Women's Conference in Copenhagen in July 1980, Nawal El Saadawi lamented that western feminists were sensationalising marginal issues. She asked how women in Beirut subjected to daily bombardment by Israeli planes could be expected to worry about their orgasms.[36]

The western WM has concentrated on extending individual sexual freedoms as part of liberal democracy rather than on fundamentally

changing society. What Third World, black and working-class women pose is a much more profound and total reorganisation of society itself and the relations within it. The idea of individualism is alien to Third World countries where familial, caste, tribal or national interests are often dominant. And in these countries the separation of women's freedom from other freedoms becomes impossible. Freedom from hunger, from dictatorship, from foreign domination – struggles which by necessity challenge fundamental power structures and benefit whole classes or nations – define *their* priorities. But they in turn should tell us about our own and shape our feminism – and point us, once again, towards the holism of which we are the legatees and to which we aspire.

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I want to thank Liz Fekete and Vron Ware, who though not necessarily in agreement with all my views, have helped me in formulating them.

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right to choose' when black and working-class women pointed out that *they* were having to fight not for the right not to bear children, but for the right to keep their fertility against enforced terminations, sterilisations and the use of dangerous drugs such as Depo-Provera. Some feminists have refused to take part in protests against male violence in red-light districts, where many black people happen to live, because they feel that the WM marches there give credence to the racist stereotype promulgated by the police and the state that all blacks are muggers and assaulters.

But even so, there is a reluctance in the WM to really question what underlies such 'errors of judgement'. 'We did not mean to be racist, so we weren't really being so', the argument runs. Adrienne Rich has used the term 'tunnel vision' – literally the physical inability to see beyond a certain narrow range – to explain this inadvertant racism and this has gained currency as a way of letting white feminists off the hook.[27] 'Explanations' such as these, however, pass off the act for the intent, they suggest no anti-racist yardstick to measure feminist practice.

Black feminists have pointed out that behind the WM's 'tunnel visions' lies the inability of the WM to provide policies or programmes which speak to the oppression of the majority of women – which would mean working-class women including black women – or the differential oppression of women according to race, class or history (social formation). What it has done is to universalise the middle-class woman's experience of oppression and her demands which have centred around her sexuality.

That the movement originated in and is still dominated by middle-class women is hardly contentious. But that middle-class and working-class women may perceive their oppression differently and have different ways of fighting it has hardly been examined. Ann Foreman hinted at it when she wrote that 'though the growing contradictions for women in the feminine stereotype together with a structural crisis in the position of women in society' affected both working-class and middle-class women, it was the latter who experienced it as a conflict between 'the traditions of femininity and their aspirations and abilities', and it was they (and not their working-class sisters tied by material necessity to their families) who were free to explore such contradictions. Ann Foreman goes on to point out that working-class women have organised at a different level – struggling over pay and job discrimination.[28] But, as Eleanor Leacock succinctly wrote some ten years ago, there is a very strong tendency in the WM not to deem the struggles of working-class women as fights for women's liberation at all.[29] This tendency to exclude as 'non-feminist' perspectives too closely bound up with black or working-class struggle is clearly revealed in a recent review of black feminist literature. Ellen Willis attacked Angela Davis as an 'anti-feminist' on the basis that in *Women, Race and Class* Davis states that

CR's route into anti-racism, for instance, is through the instilling of guilt into women for being white – and leads to a kind of confessional situation, with black people (irrespective of class or values) in the position of arbiters of our racialism dealing out the mea culpae. It absolves us from the responsibility of making our own judgements or shaping our own course of action and it actually suggests that white women are incapable of developing a practice that is anti-racist. Accepting anything black, promoting the black experience, a sort of cultural pluralism, passes as surrogate for a white feminist anti-racist practice.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the recent 'cult' that has been made of the black female experience. Feminist magazines and bookshops have suddenly 'discovered' the writings of black women. There has been in the last few years evidence of a very strong desire in the WM to include black women within sisterhood – to include black feminist experience in 'their' experience, black history in 'their' history. It is a conscious 'taking account of', reminiscent of the way the white male left 'tags on' race or gender.

The challenge of the black experience

The irony is that very often the black experience availed of by white feminists in Britain is from American literature and not from the events transpiring before their eyes. From the early 1970s, black women began to 'defect' from the British WM to address themselves to the issues of race and gender. Black women's groups sprang up all over Britain, with an umbrella organisation, OWAAD, a paper FOWAAD, annual conferences for black women, black women's centres and refuges, black women's marches and demonstrations – a black women's movement. But the WM, so self-conscious about 'hierarchy' and its own disassociation with a male left which had systematically excluded *its* interests, was conspicuously unmoved by the disaffection and flight of black women. And instead of examining how their sisterhood had in practice been antithetical to black interests and exclusive of black women – instead, that is, of examining the nature of 'sisterhood' itself on the touchstone of 'blackness' – the white WM has resorted to a policy of CR on the one hand and of cultural pluralism on the other. The 'blackness' of the feminist experience is seperated off, either for mindless celebration or as an 'odd' experience (like being disabled or an older woman) which ought to be learnt about. But, as Hazel Carby has pointed out, what black women are asking white feminists is not to render them 'visible' but to 'challenge the use of some of the central categories and assumptions of recent mainstream feminist thought'.[26]

Some concession to this view has been made in recent years. The call for 'abortion on demand', for instance, was changed to 'a woman's

rapist of twenty-three women in North London was convicted. Immediately, a number of his victims came forward in defence of the police and praised them for their sympathy and support. The fact that in this particular case the rapist was black had no doubt put the police on the side of the women. But in failing to distinguish – however poignant the task – between a rapist who happens to be black and the stereotype (often police) view that all blacks are rapists, the women had inadvertently reinforced the hierarchies of police oppression.

A similar lack of understanding of the state was illustrated recently in the magazine *Outwrite*, when a lead article in issue 13 calling for women's support for black community worker Dorothy Gbebikan and her family, brutally beaten up by police in their home, was headlined, 'Say NO to all male violence'. Would it have been all right if the police were all female? If more women were recruited into the police force, would black Dorothy be safer? It is like saying that if you had more blacks in the police force, the police would behave better towards black people.

What feminists should be doing is showing that the state is responsible both for the oppression of black people and of women. It is the same police force that does not protect women from male violence, that does not protect black people from racialist attack. It is the same media that exaggerates black crimes that portrays women as sex objects. It is the same legal system that humilates rape victims that sides against black defendants. It is only when we have a clear understanding of the role of the system in our oppression that we can clearly see at what point we have to fight male oppression and at what point the state. And, as anti-racist women, we have to find a way of fighting the violence from men on the streets without at the same time enhancing state racism against black people.

In America, where the question of rape has played a crucial role in the enslavement, lynching and oppression of black people and continues with all its emotive connotations to be used as a method of criminalising black men, feminists have advanced positions from which we could learn. For example, in the January 1981 issue of *Off our backs*, Aimée Sands asks which side she should be on when a white woman is pressing rape charges against a black man who says he has been framed. She concludes: 'We have to create a "new side": an independent feminist presence which offers support to the man *and* the woman in these cases, while maintaining steady and accurate criticisms of the police and courts.'

Taking race personally

But the likelihood of building the 'new side' now seems more remote than ever. Even the question that is being posed for women has

ambivalence towards the state. Is it an instrument of oppression or is it a welfare state whence concessions can be won? Often the strong 'reformist' wing of the movement, having confused parliament for the state, has implied that lobbying against laws constitutes the whole fight against the state.

In their failure to understand the state, the women fail to side with the blacks; in failing to side with the blacks, they play into the hands of the state. Take, for example, one aspect of state racism in Britain today. In order to justify police harassment of the black community and the demand for increased police powers, the state is, through the media, highlighting 'mugging' – a term used to criminalise the black community: black youth are all muggers, their victims all white women. If we keep silent, appearing to concur with this view, we become in effect a party to state racism. Furthermore, because as feminists we have been campaigning against male violence on the streets, we can, if we do not consistently attack this type of stereotyping, even as we fight male violence actually give racism credibility. Unfortunately, there are examples to show that women have fallen into the trap of reinforcing racist stereotypes of male violence – their views being promulgated on the women's pages of the national press. Gillian Widdicombe, in the *Observer's* 'Living Page' (1.2.81), wrote on street theft: 'A black skin must be regarded as an advantage for the professional mugger: far more difficult to see in the dark, or describe and identify afterwards.' Jane Kelly, writing on 'The rape of the liberal conscience' in the *Guardian's* 'Women's Page' (5.8.81) during the summer 'riots', analysed her feelings after a rape attempt on her.

> My attitude towards black people had received a massive jolt ... I could no longer accept an unselfcritical approach from the black community and felt vastly irritated by the idea of people making vociferous demands on society while continually putting themselves above and beyond that society's laws ... to my mind it is no part of feminist struggle to put black men above the law.

An aggrieved black woman writing in reply pointed out that though many black women had been attacked by white men, they 'did not make the mistake of thinking that all white men are rapists and therefore that all white people see themselves as above the law'. Jane Kelly, after attaching importance to the race of her attacker, had then generalised her individual experience to the whole black community.

Even when not engaged in this type of stereotyping, women, by failing to understand the parallels between their experience and that of black people, can fall into the trap of supporting the state's racism; by default they allow a wedge to be driven between women's struggle and the black struggle. For example, following closely in the wake of a national exposé of how callously the police treat women rape victims, a

approaching problems that prevented the formation of a specifically feminist broad front. Having thrown off male forms of organising (and continuing to do so in the fight with the ANL), the male political legacy was surreptitiously present at every turn. Instead of examining the reality of a situation, weighing up the contradictions, formulating a strategy, WARF tried to fit every event into a pre-set mould, deriving practice from dogma. If one did not accept one dogma, one was automatically branded another type of dogmatist. It was as though in rejecting a male left approach to politics as inappropriate for women, only half the lesson had been learned: the rejection of male organisational forms and the adoption of female forms instead.

And it was this concentration on forms of struggle to the exclusion of their context (in terms of race, class and sex) that led to the disintegration of WARF and stifled the anti-racist development within the WM. Conversely, because women did not have a feminist view of fighting racism, they concentrated on reformulating and reorganising struggle along feminist lines as a political end in itself. When women were confronted with forms of struggle reminiscent of those they had rejected or with which they were out of sympathy, they branded them as 'male' and fought them as though they, rather than racism or fascism, were the enemy. In one WARF group, for example, women suggested that the whole political practice of confronting fascists on the streets was male not female, implying that men liked violence and women did not.[17] This completely missed the point that as anti-fascists we were actually being given no choice in our tactics – none of us had *chosen* violence. And it was largely the organisational form of the first national anti-racist anti-fascist conference in 1978 – its adoption of rigid TUC rules, its concentration on plenary sessions and guest speakers – that caused the WARF (and gay) groups to disrupt the whole conference. It was their insistence that the conference break up into workshops – because workshops are a feminist way of doing things – that halted a plenary session aimed at locating racism in the fight against fascism – one of the conference's principle tasks. And in imposing their priority over and above the concerns of the conference, they were actually imposing on other groups a line that they did not accept – in particular, negating and overriding the political priorities of the black groups present.

It was a unique conference, in that it had brought together from all over the country rank-and-file trade unionists, black groups, local and women's anti-fascist groups. And there was a unique opportunity there to work out the politics of class, race and gender in a common fight against fascism. It could even have been a dry run for the bigger struggles to come.

* * *

Similarly, the women remained bound to the white male left's ordering of priorities in the anti-fascist fight, re-acting to fascism rather than acting against it – stomping it out on the ground, in its chrysalis stage of racism. Our activities as women did not mark a feminist departure from but a feminist involvement in activities defined and sanctioned, if not ordained, by the left.

And in supporting the left, we were actually supporting a political line which ran counter to feminist principles. For what the left was doing in fighting fascism rather than racism was subsuming the race question to the class question. And, in the Grunwick case, the left actually inveigled black people into giving up their right to autonomous organisation. Ironically, we feminists, who had fought for the right to *our* autonomy against the male left, were not prepared to extend the same principle to black people in their struggle. Instead, when it came to anti-racist practice, we succumbed, if only by default, to white male left politics – and betrayed in the process one of the fundamental tenets of feminism itself.

WARF raised the issue of racism and fascism mainly within the WM, speaking and writing for women similar to ourselves – middle-class and left inclined. WARF (like the left) did not speak to working-class women – it neither had the commitment nor the opportunity to do so (except for a minority of women who were engaged professionally on social and welfare issues). The majority of WARF (like the left) was without a community base and, inevitably, its work became abstract and theoretical. Not working in the community meant not reaching the very women likely to be attracted to racist or fascist ideas. And without that area in which practice could have informed theory and vice versa, it became even harder to develop an anti-racist feminism. Instead, WARF fell back on dogma and sloganeering. As we marched through Hackney on an anti-racist demo chanting, 'The women united will never be defeated', the heckling of fascist women on the pavements brought home to us the falseness of the proposition. WARF, like the left, had fallen prey to romanticising *its* constituency.

The influence of the left tradition was even more obvious in our internal meetings. For the majority of white women, WARF provided the first opportunity for anti-racist activity as women: the WM had none and the left was alienating. But they brought with them a whole baggage of ideas and concepts from both. To a group of us coming in as anti-racist women, who had not travelled via the white male left either to find our anti-racism or to consolidate our feminism, the different strands of feminist and left politics were real impediments to thrashing out a common anti-racist position. Leaving aside debates that WARF did manage to transcend (for example, about racism being male or all men being fascists), it was the way that women coming from the white left had been trained into thinking, organising and

the entrenched nature of British working-class racism – as though it were a sacrilege to acknowledge that the agents of revolution were not entirely without sin.) It is no sophisticated ideology that wins recruits for fascist parties today, but a quite simple belief that groups like the National Front and the British Movement are going to rid Britain of the 'coloured immigrants' who have taken working people's jobs, homes, schools, daughters, breed like rabbits, revel in crime, and so on. It may not be the working class who have created these ideas; that has been done by the British culture of racism and the policies of both Tory and Labour governments,[14] but fascists have capitalised on these beliefs in the working class to win recruits and build their organisations.*

The inability of the left to make these distinctions, to understand the nature of contemporary fascism stemmed from the flaws in its own anti-racist practice. Seeing black struggle as part of orthodox class struggle, the white left would only take up the cause of black workers qua workers. It would support them in industrial action because that was the sort of 'legitimate' activity that unifies the working class. Any demand not related to legitimate white-defined struggle, however, was written off as black nationalism. And the black activities of the early 1970s directed to fighting racism in the community – against the police, the courts, the education system, the attempts to build a black infrastructure through organising supplementary schools, youth projects, community organisations – went unsupported and unacknowledged. The left had no conception of state racism or of black oppression and was unable to comprehend, let alone applaud, any black 'self-activity' or any black analysis of society which stressed aspects other than those of class exploitation. It viewed these as 'splitist' (at best) or as racism in reverse (at worst).

When gradually through the 1970s the white left was forced by black struggle to acknowledge racism, it was still unable to define it in terms other than immigration law – and the 1971 Act in particular. And then the arguments it brought to bear against the Act were based on moral precept rather than political analysis. Lacking a theoretical grasp of the economics of immigration and the politics of state racism, the left was enticed into the liberal lobbyist orientation of groups like the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants and the National Council for Civil Liberties. When, subsequently, it was to take up other issues such

* If the inability of the white left to accept this analysis made it irrelevant to the black struggle, the inclination of the women to follow the left in moving the terrain of battle to the purely ideological plane led them to compete with blacks for first place in the oppression stakes. It did not matter that, on the ground, it was black people more than (white) women who were under threat; fascist ideology gave them both an equal status! Hence, an anti-fascist front had to be equally an anti-sexist front as an anti-racist one.

activities were almost all white and already active on the left of the WM. WARF groups were usually composed of a hard core of women who gave primacy to fighting racism and fascism and acted as a caucus within the WM proper – raising the issues through debates, conferences and articles and mobilising and organising women for large public events. WARF groups were an exciting development and had a huge potential. But this potential was never fully realised and after two years the movement sank almost without trace.* Women looking back on that era bemoan the passing of anti-racist concerns from the movement,[12] but without really examining what it was about WARF that made it so transitory.

Any notion that WARF was the prototype for women's anti-racism is based on a fallacy. The WM at that time was not anti-racist at all. It was, for a short period, like much of the left, anti-fascist and only incidentally anti-racist. This distinction between racism and fascism and the relationship between them has an important bearing on how struggle should be conducted, and therefore needed to be examined more closely. But the WM, in borrowing uncritically the left's analysis and approach to fascism and racism, replicated its failure to develop a coherent integrated anti-racist practice or strategy. So that when, after the general election to which it was geared, the anti-fascist movement wound down, women too, packed up their 'anti-fascist' bags and went home.

The chief error of the anti-fascist movement was and is to confound the explicit ideology of fascism with its organisational tactics and practice on the streets, and in so doing to concentrate the attack on fascist *ideology* and its outpourings to the exclusion of everything else. Where that ideology is not sufficiently explicated in current fascist analysis and writings, it looks to the 1930s for a fleshed-out picture of what fascism is really about. Jews, gays, trade unionists, women are all under threat from fascism in terms of its ideology – all have a reason for fighting it. White women can see that fascists do not believe in abortion (for white women), that fascism would relegate them to the home under the thumb of the white patriarch, that fascism is the incarnation of sexism in extremis.[13] But to concentrate in this way purely on the fascists' structure of ideas and ideology and their promulgation of them is to lose sight of the organisational basis of contemporary fascism – which is racism, anti-black racism. It is to leave out of the reckoning the breeding ground of fascism today – the fact that it has its roots in and derives sustenance from vast areas of ordinary working-class racism. (But then, the left has always had difficulty in facing up to

* The campaign against the use of Depo-Provera on black and Third World women was an important off-shoot – and is largely responsible for focusing national attention on the issue.

Feminism's anti-racist potential

Feminism locates the oppression of women not merely in the individualised actions of men but in a system of patriarchy. Such a system in its turn is conceived of as incorporating more than just exploitative capitalist relations. So that oppression comes to 'reflect the hierarchial relations of the sexual and racial division of labor and society'. Or, as Eisenstein continues, 'exploitation speaks to the economic reality of capitalist class relations for men and women, whereas oppression refers to women and minorities defined within patriarchal, racist and capitalist relations'.[2]

And the way that white women and black people come to an understanding of their oppressions is not through an abstract analysis of exploitation, but through their every day personal perception. 'By calling attention to life rather than theory, the women's movement has called attention to cultural domination as a whole – has begun a political analysis that does not take place in isolation from practical activity.'[3] Whereas the politics of orthodox class struggle does not necessarily demand that those involved 'question their very individuality', feminist (and black) struggle cannot be undertaken without questioning both the values, ideas, images imposed on women and black people and the relationship these have to the overall exploitative system. Thus the integration of both personal and political change is of the essence. According to Nancy Hartock:

> By working out the links between the personal and the political, and by working out the links between daily life and social institutions, we have begun to understand existence as a social process, the product of human activity ... changed consciousness and changed definition of the self can only occur in conjunction with a restructuring of the social (both societal and personal) relation in which each of us is involved. Thus feminism leads us to oppose the institutions of capitalism, and white supremacy as well as patriarchy. By calling attention to the specific experiences of individuals, feminism calls attention to the totality of social relations, to the social formation as a whole.[4]

The same idea is echoed in Sheila Rowbotham's argument that 'the liberation of women necessitates the liberation of all human beings',[5] and is picked up and amplified by Marlene Dixon: 'As women we must fight all injustice because ours is the universal, the fundamental image and reality of inequality and exploitation – to end ours, all inequality and exploitation must be abolished'.[6]

Feminism at root provides a new way of seeing things, a new series of questions to ask, a new way of conceiving of political struggle. It

> necessitates a reordering of priorities, particularly the question of consciousness in relation to the conditions of society. Questions of

When the Women's Movement (WM) as we know it today, took off in the latter part of the 1960s, the debt of inspiration it owed to the black movement was obvious and acknowledged. 'Black' slogans became 'feminist' slogans, the new perspectives thrown up by the anti-war, civil rights and black power movements harnessed by the WM served to show up their potential for all oppressed groups. The debt found its way without apology into feminist writings.[1] But since then the bonds have become frayed, the roots discarded, the lessons unlearnt, not least because of the changes in political direction within the WM itself. Today the relationship of the WM to black people is once again on the agenda. What is of concern, though, is the way the subject is being formulated and the uncritical way in which recent women's anti-racist practice is being assessed – not least in Britain. And as racism in Britain becomes more structured and pervasive, the task of setting our sights right becomes that much more imperative and our fight against it that much more urgent. The role of women in that fight should and does have its own particularity. But in its origins and development and in its particular understanding of oppression and exploitation, it has much in common with the struggles of black people.

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25 See ibid., pp 52-6.
26 Hazel Carby, 'White woman listen: black feminism and the boundaries of sisterhood', in Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (ed.), *The Empire Strikes Back* (London, 1982).
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29 Eleanor Burke Leacock, Introduction to F. Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (London, 1973).
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