Lynne Segal

Whose Left? Socialism, Feminism and the Future

Political generations appear and disappear with astonishing speed.* Thirty years ago, a budding anarchist and sixties student radical, I shared with certain others of my generation and class a politics of generalized anti-authoritarianism and free love. In Australia at the time, coming out of the rigid conformity of the Cold War, such a politics was not as vapid as it sounds today. The Communist Party was banned outright, along with James Joyce, James Baldwin, and any sex at all that dared to speak its name. Non-white people were denied entry into Australia, black Australians were denied legal rights, even the right to vote, and devotion to monarchy, marriage and hyper-hypocrisy remained our sacred birthright. We read Reich, Nomad and Bakunin, remaining oddly innocent of any more solid socialist tradition.

Ten years later, student anarchism quickly transformed itself into the more class-oriented, anti-imperialist libertarian socialism of the seventies. In Britain now, I joined those attempting to win 'Power for the People' on the streets of London, in the local struggles of the day. And, just in time—as a single parent and comical colonial relic—I discovered women's liberation, then closely linked in with alternative or libertarian socialism.

Two decades on again, and it is hard indeed for socialist and movement activists of the sixties and seventies to contemplate the passing of our own one and only (and the Left's hopefully more cyclical) heyday. Today, depression, cynicism or political turnabouts are hard to avoid, even knowing we are not the first—and will not be the last—to face the defeat and disorderly retreat of the ideals, activities and lifestyles that transformed and gave meaning to our lives. Depression hits hardest when the withering of former struggles and aspirations begins to feel like personal defeat; often ending the friendships, the shared activities and the opening up of public spaces, so necessary for the survival of any sense of optimism in the future. The excitement of

* This article is an expanded version of a talk delivered to the Radical Philosophy Conference, *Values, Resistance and Social Change*, at the Polytechnic of Central London, in November 1990.

believing in the possibility of collective action for change has been replaced by the gloom of witnessing the erasure of the history of such struggles: an erasure which stems not only from the mainstream media, but from sections of the Left as well, busy exchanging new ideas for old, or else recoiling memoryless from the corpse of Soviet socialism.

Libertarian Socialism

Yet for over three and a half decades most Western socialists had battled not only against the destructive consequences of capitalist development, but also against Stalinism and the stifling, authoritarian regimes of Soviet-style state or bureaucratic socialism. And now, just when in Britain more people seem a little more aware again of some of the problems accompanying the inequalities tolerated, indeed promoted, by the unregulated free market of Thatcherism—if only to welcome the minor shift to Major—and just when, in the East, Stalinism is finally in irreversible retreat, those who worked hardest and longest for a more democratic socialism seem most silenced. Ten years of defeat for almost all egalitarian and collectivist endeavours has caused many of us on the left to fall into chronic mutual abuse, to fall upon our own swords, or to fall—some never to rise again—onto the analytic couch.

The resounding victory for the conservative alliance in East Germany, the one country of the Soviet bloc which appeared to have a democratic left opposition in New Forum, has been registered by many across the political spectrum as the proof that socialism of any kind will never have popular appeal. In fact, New Forum, a heterogeneous alliance of peace, environmental and human-rights activists under the umbrella of the Church, was never itself organized as a *political*, let alone a *socialist*, opposition. Its recent dramatic rise and fall tells us much about the extreme isolation of dissident intellectuals in East Germany, as well as the effectiveness of four decades of Stalinist rule in massively discrediting and impoverishing both socialist *and* democratic ideals and values.

What inspired the upsurge of Western radicalism in the sixties, which in turn spawned the feminist and other movements of the seventies, was never, in any case, 'actually existing socialism'. Every type of anarchist, dreamer, utopian, syndicalist, Trotskyist, pacifist, revolutionary, reformist and third roader appeared in the radical metropolitan scene at that time, but one rarely encountered a Stalinist, a command-economy 'socialist', the creature whose aspirations and beliefs today apparently typify 'socialism' itself. Although we were all aware of their existence. Anti-Stalinism was our common home, the place from which we all began, the air we breathed. The 'Party' member was, and remains to me, something of a puzzle: critical of Soviet societies, committed to democratic transition, but until recently (before some, like Gorbachev, swung over to become apparently uncritical allies of the market) still prepared to defend the obviously bleak and authoritarian, undemocratic Soviet regimes. The Leninist and social-democratic Left *shared* the belief that their own parties

(despite mirroring existing race, gender and, in the main, class hierarchies) could be trusted to administer a centralized state in the interests of all working people and their dependents: the former after the revolution, and the latter on election.

It was precisely these vanguardist and bureaucratic beliefs, precisely these hierarchical and centralized structures, that were *rejected* by New Left writers like E.P. Thompson, Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall from the late fifties, as well as by the emerging social movements from the late sixties—the largest and most influential, of course, being the women's liberation movement. They sought instead more devolved and participatory structures of organization and practice, which could empower people in their communities and workplaces. In one sizable segment of the independent or non-aligned Left that flourished in Britain in the 1970s, influenced by and often overlapping with the women's movement and other liberation struggles, 'democracy'—today's 'new' buzz-word—was fetishized: steering committees had to rotate regularly, skills had to be shared to prevent the growth of bureaucracy, committees sought equal representation of women and men, and discussion endlessly picked over the problem of the under-representation of Black, working-class and other subordinated groups. Indeed, if anything, the lack of commitment to working out types of viable and responsive centralized economic planning—today's new bogey word—or to building national structures capable of providing long-term support for grass-roots initiatives, was the problem for this part of the Left. The socialist case for some form of public ownership remains as strong as ever, if only because, despite the failures of the past, it alone provides the greatest possibilities for using resources and labour in ways which are more egalitarian, innovative and supportive.

The participatory democratic ideals of the libertarian Left never had a mass appeal, but they did play a critical role in grass-roots agitation over the most diverse array of popular needs and interests throughout the 1970s. Whether campaigning around single issues, foregoing careers to establish local information and resource centres, creating housing or workplace cooperatives, attempting to change local or national state policies, or supporting international struggles, the problems of that Left were many. But they were not those of adopting coercive, bureaucratic or economistic ideas and practices. Even though goals often bore slight relation to achievements, they were not those of ignorance of or unconcern about male-domination, class privilege, racism, homophobia or other forms of invalidation and exclusion long associated with more traditional labour-movement and left party politics.

By the close of the seventies, this Left, which had widened its own socialist agendas to include personal relations and social identities, was facing increasing problems building support and maintaining optimism against the combined obstacles fast overwhelming it: economic recession and the Right in power. It was the growing difficulties of finding strategies to overcome fragmentation and of forming new alliances that were to lead many into closer engagement with the

machinery of local government and other mainstream institutions in the 1980s, moving outside the demoralization of dwindling autonomous bases for jobs or other forms of contact inside the state or perhaps trade-union structures. These internal weaknesses in libertarian socialism, which contributed to its inability to withstand Thatcher, need to be studied. But what we have seen instead—for example in the 'new' politics of *Marxism Today*—is merely the removal of its innovations and influences (full recognition of autonomous groups, multiple sites of oppression, rejection of vanguardism and authoritarianism) from the messy terrain of political engagement into the calmer waters and cosier spaces of cultural studies.

A Wilful, Deliberate Forgetting

'With the onset of economic recession the libertarian Left died out in the early 1980s', Jonathan Rutherford declares in his introduction to the latest Lawrence and Wishart collection of essays, *Identity*.[1] But Rutherford's burial of this particular socialist tradition is premature, indeed illustrative of the very problem it faced. The early to mid eighties actually saw a resurgence of alternative left ideas, still committed to creating structures and resources for grass-roots democracy and the recognition of the diversity of subordinated groups, finally beginning to influence the mainstream Left of the Labour Party and labour movement. It would be foolish to ignore the problems or exaggerate the significance of the burst of creativity and democratic and egalitarian hopes raised when, for example, the Labour Left took control of the GLC in 1981 and opened its doors for direct discussion with Black and women's groups, trade unionists or housing cooperatives, seeking to channel institutional power and resources into marginalized and disadvantaged sectors organizing on their own behalf. But it is even more foolish to 'forget', within a few short years, that such attempts were made. A wilful, deliberate forgetting.

The GLC's economic-policy unit under Robin Murray was, ironically, the first to theorize post-Fordism in Britain, as it ambitiously set out to find ways of encouraging viable alternative forms of industrial production which might, though adopting more human, creative and egalitarian employment practices, nevertheless survive the rigours of multinational competition. We cannot assess the ultimate fate of these initiatives, as within a few short years the GLC and its policy units were closed down. By the mid 1980s Thatcher's generals, having provoked and defeated every trade-union struggle since their election, knew just where next to direct their fire. Ignoring overwhelming opposition and the widespread personal popularity of Ken Livingstone, Thatcher first abolished the GLC and other metropolitan councils outright, and then launched one attack after another on the capacity of local government to provide any focus or hope for popular resistance.

Yet throughout most of the 1980s, right up until the third Thatcher

[1] Jonathan Rutherford, 'A Place Called Home', in J. Rutherford, ed., *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, London 1990, p. 14.

victory in 1987 (and in pockets still today), more libertarian, less bureaucratic ideas kept emerging in the new terrain of local government and in women's and other sections of the trade unions, which, *significantly*, effected official recognition of issues of racism, sexism, harassment, abuse and other forms of specific discrimination, while for a time at least providing some focus for creative if conflict-ridden interaction with political activists—whether Black, feminist, or collective consumer campaigners. But these developments were also to highlight some of the weaknesses which can follow from commitment to notions of the absolute autonomy of each oppressed group to organize itself and assert its own needs and identity. Splits and hostilities rapidly appear, often demoralizing if not immobilizing the pursuit of political ends, as one group competes against another, claiming the mantle of the most oppressed.

Incessant problems spring to life when attempting to rethink our concepts of democracy in practice, attempting to move beyond the limitations of either representative democracy or purely individual understandings of rights, towards the dismantling of inequalities. But rather than assessing such problems in practice, this politics of autonomy has been adapted for the 'New Times' outlined in *Marxism Today*, and re-theorized, as though quite new, to become the politics of 'identity' or (confusingly displaying its deep ambivalence) of 'difference'. But old songs resung by different bards, now more removed from sites of political engagement, will not overcome the rifts arising when autonomy becomes fragmentation, and the mere affirmation of difference replaces strategic thought—whatever the hopeful appeal to the thinking of Laclau and Mouffe who suggest we may call upon some conceptual 'chain of equivalence' between different identities.[2]

Identity Politics, Feminism and 'Difference' Theory

The problem is that social identities are not necessarily or even desirably political identities.[3] Nothing illustrates this better than the pains and perils of contemporary feminism. We may wish to celebrate our lives as women, but be desperately seeking to cast aside the bewitching female romance of virtue and maternal connectedness: the identity of woman as we have known it, and attempted, so hazardously, to live it. No clear political strategies follow from our either embracing or rejecting a gendered identity as such. In the name of women's specific needs and interests, women have fought progressively for peace and public welfare. But they have also at times made 'cowards' of reluctant warriors, and opposed women's professional, creative and employment prospects. In the name of shared human rights, women have fought tenaciously against exclusion from the economic, political and cultural citadels men dominate. But this may also invalidate the

[2] See, for example, Chantal Mouffe, 'Radical Democracy or Liberal Democracy?' *Socialist Review*, vol. 90, no. 2, 1990, p. 63.

[3] For a useful exposition and critique of the thinking of Laclau and Mouffe along these lines, see Peter Osborne, 'Radicalism Without Limit?: Discourse, Democracy and the Politics of Identity', in P. Osborne, ed., *Socialism and the Limits of Liberalism*, Verso, London, forthcoming 1991.

significance of interdependence and community, a reality that can weigh so heavily upon the backs of women.

Pointing out the inevitability of women's oscillation around their gendered identities, and the need to embrace rather than reject or attempt to transcend its multiple contradictions, US feminist Ann Snitow points out: 'The urgent contradiction women constantly experience between the pressure to be a woman and the pressure not to be one will change only through a historical process; it cannot be dissolved through thought alone.'[4] Yet feminism has torn itself apart over the recurring divisions between those who stress the similarities and those, increasing in number and influence since the late 1970s, who stress the differences between women and men.[5] As constructed within contemporary feminism, the former have tended to pursue strategies for equality and power sharing, the latter to assert the significance of 'maternal' ways to celebrate 'female' pleasures and to denounce and seek protection from 'male' violence and abuse. But outside feminist thought, women have stressed either similarity or difference with quite other objectives in mind: perhaps to assert similarity in constructing a shared superiority over 'inferior breeds', perhaps to stress gender difference in deference to the word of God the Father, or in the service of more mortal *Führers*.

The point is that identities do not spring directly from gender, class, race or ethnic position, or from sexual, religious or any other particular orientation, so much as from a sense of belonging to specific social and historical milieux. The strength and confirmation that context can offer, and the currently unfashionable consideration of its political orientation on the Left/Right divide, will determine whether the contemporary Western proliferation of identities offers new forms of resistance, or conservative retrenchments in the face of change.

Within feminism, these conflicts and the extent to which gender similarities or differences have been the focus of debate, are not unconnected to feminism's declining relationship to socialism from the close of the seventies, which in turn is not unconnected to the declining fate of socialism itself. Little more than a decade ago many feminists who were also socialists still believed (despite the difficulties of working with the traditional Left and the labour movement) that what was important and distinctive about our politics was its capacity to change and enrich male-centred socialist agendas and theories to include women's experience, personal life and cultural politics, alongside the interests of all oppressed groups. Today, with the Left itself battling to survive a cold destructive climate, more would agree with the North American feminist Zillah Eisenstein, a leading theoretician of socialist feminism in the USA in the 1970s, who recently declared—adapting to what she sees as new realities, rather than expressing

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[4] Ann Snitow, 'A Gender Diary', in M. Hirsch and E. Fox Keller, eds., *Conflicts in Feminism*, New York 1990, p. 19.

[5] For a fuller exploration of the developments of these conflicts in British and North American feminism over the last two decades, see Lynne Segal, *Is the Future Female: Troubled Thoughts on Contemporary Feminism*, London 1987.

anger or sectarian sentiment—that 'the specification of feminism *as* socialist has little *political* context today.'[6] Socialism, she feels, seems to hold out little promise for women, and the radical edge of feminism is now to be maintained through a focus on 'the particularities of women's lives'. In agreement with those known as 'difference theorists', Eisenstein now argues that it is in their specific identity as women that feminists should seek a politics which unites all women through the assertion and revaluing of our experience of 'difference'.

Illustrating her argument, Eisenstein cites the feminist struggle over reproductive rights: 'the starting point for theory and politics here is *both* the individual (her specificity) and her right to reproductive freedom (which is universal).'[7] But, despite the importance of the issue of abortion, this is a less than convincing strategy for a common political struggle to unite all women. Nothing, in fact, so *polarizes* women, including a small number of women who call themselves feminists, as the issue of abortion: the main and ferocious opponents of women's abortion rights in the West are other women. They fight their battle—blowing up clinics and terrorizing pregnant women—expressly in defence of women's specificity, women's difference (backed, of course, by the Catholic Church, and other forces of the Moral Right).

It is precisely the issues arising from what is most distinctively female that today most dramatically *divide* rather than unite feminists fighting for women's interests. Feminists stressing 'difference' unsurprisingly emphasize the female body, sexuality and human reproduction (or, in the more sophisticated versions of 'French feminism', the unconscious and psychic meanings attaching themselves to the female body and maternal experience). Yet it is easier for women to unite over demands on the economic front than it is for women to unite around sexuality and the meanings of the female body. While many feminists now give most of their time and energy to combatting 'pornographic' representations of sexuality and the female body as the root of women's oppression, others battle against what they see as sex-negative positions on pornography (or erotica) which threaten to enclose women anew in repressive, patriarchal fictions of female virtue.[8]

That there is such fierce disagreement over what many see as the bedrock of feminism is not so surprising. At least it is not so surprising once we recognize the complexities at the heart of all talk about 'identities'. We can never stress enough, it seems to me, that both 'femininity' and 'masculinity' are always more complex and nuanced than any

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[6] Zillah Eisenstein, 'Specifying US Feminism in the 1990s: The Problem of Naming', *Socialist Review*, vol. 90, no. 2, 1990, p. 48 (emphasis in original).
[7] Ibid., p. 53.
[8] See Ann Ferguson, 'Sex War: The debate between Radical and Libertarian Feminists', *Signs* 10, 1984; Estelle Freedman and Barrie Thorne, 'Introduction to the Feminist Sexuality Debates', *Signs* 10, 1984; Carol Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, London 1984; Catherine MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law*, Cambridge, Mass. 1987; G. Chester and J. Dickey, eds., *Feminism and Censorship*, London 1988.

cultural symbolism can register.[9] That which at one minute we may wish to embrace, in defiance of shared oppression, we may, at the next, wish to discard as trapping us within traditional cultural discourses, institutions and practices. The celebration of female specificity makes use of the existing structures of meaning that establish sexual difference, which as feminists we also need to contest, even when we try to invert the existing androcentric system of values that accompany such difference. Women as women, however oppressed, do not necessarily adopt oppositional identities. Indeed, the reverse is more likely. This paradox of difference theory for feminists is shared, I believe, by any politics of identity, as divisions inevitably proliferate both inside and around the assertion of any specific identity.

Does Feminism Need Socialism?

It is certainly true that twenty years of feminism has *failed* to improve the economic and social position of all women, although it has brought many gains for some. This is as true in Britain as in most other Western countries. But nowhere is it quite so clear, nowhere are the contrasts between the lives of women after twenty years of feminism quite so stark, or the conflicts within feminism and their declining relationship to socialism quite so dramatic, as in the United States. The USA best illustrates the problems around feminism, identity politics and the Left.

Despite the existence of the largest, most influential and vociferous feminist movement in the world, it is US women who have seen least *overall* change in the relative disadvantages of their sex, compared to other Western democracies. As Barbara Ehrenreich illustrates, within the professional middle class, women have made huge gains, increasing their representation among the most prestigious and lucrative professions by 300 to 400 per cent within a decade.[10] They have also cracked open the corporate business world, in which 30 per cent of managerial employees are now women, while Masters' graduates from business school jumped from 4.9 per cent in 1973 to 40 per cent by 1986.[11] But outside the professional middle class, the situation for many women has been one of frustration, defeat and, for a significant number, increasing misery.

The first big defeat for the women's movement in the USA came in 1977 when the initial Hyde amendment was passed and Medicaid abortion was withdrawn, just four years after the right to abortion, affordable for women of all classes, had been won. The next, deeply symbolic defeat, ensuring frustration and retrenchment for feminist organizers and activists throughout the USA, came with the dismantling

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[9] This is the theme of my latest book, *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men*, London 1990. Snitow has asked, pertinently, referring to some feminists' fear that seeking gender equality will lead only to women becoming more like men, 'are we perhaps quite close to men already at the moment when we fear absorption into the other?' Sintow, p. 27.

[10] Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class*, New York 1989, p. 217.

[11] Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Worst Years of Our Lives*, New York 1990, p. 164.

of the ERA (Equal Rights Amendment), exactly ten years after its resounding success when passed in 1972. Meanwhile, and connected with the defeat of ERA (as women of the New Right like Phyllis Schlafly mobilized around the slogan 'STOP ERA'), the Reagan decade of the 1980s had ushered in massive welfare cuts and steep increases in poverty—especially among black and ethnic-minority women and men. More women, particularly women raising children on their own, were not only poorer than women of their class and race had been twenty years earlier, but their poverty, with new spending cuts, became the more disabling. (They now battle to survive and raise children in an environment where, it is said, more people have been murdered in the streets of New York in the last fifteen years than Americans died in the Vietnam war.[12])

In this time of triumphal victory for the Right, some formerly self-declared feminists, like Sylvia Ann Hewlett, have drawn massive media attention by blaming feminism for the current plight of so many women in the USA. Feminism failed to protect women who are mothers, she accuses; claiming, falsely, that it never made demands of the state around child care and welfare.[13] Hewlett now opposes all equal-rights legislation in favour of an exclusive focus on child-care support for women. But her argument that it is women, and women alone, who in the end perform all the labour of caring is itself a capitulation to the very cornerstone of conservative thinking: the thinking that has overseen the deterioration in the lives of the poor, rewarded the rich, and—with its traditional family rhetoric and judicial removal of relevant funding—fought till it has all but smashed the seventies' feminist vision of moving beyond existing gendered conceptions of 'public' and 'private' to a world where nurturing and instrumental tasks could be mutually shared by women and men.

The growing immiseration of the US poor was not a product of the failure of feminist equal-rights and affirmative-action programmes for women; indeed many succeeded. It resulted rather from the now historic weakness of the US labour movement in protecting either male or female workers' rights, or winning any comprehensive welfare system.[14] From its already battered and shrunken state in the early 1950s (around 30 per cent), after direct attacks from both corporate capital and the state, trade-union membership declined calamitously in the USA, down to its current 17 per cent. And, as research like that of Pippa Norris and others indicates, political parties and the level of trade unionism do seem to matter in assessing women's relative disadvantages compared to men. In countries where there have been longer periods of social-democratic government and stronger trade unions, there is far less pay-differential and occupational segregation (both vertical and horizontal) between women and men, and far greater expansion of welfare services. In Sweden, that familiar example in

[12] See Kate Soper, *Troubled Pleasures: Writings on Politics, Gender and Hedonism*, London 1990, p. 61.
[13] Sylvia Ann Hewlett, *A Lesser Life: The Myth of Women's Liberation in America*, New York 1986.
[14] See, for example, David Plotke, 'What's So New About New Social Movements?', *Socialist Review*, vol. 90, no. 1, 1990.

many ways similar to other Scandinavian countries, where the Social Democratic Party has been in government since the 1920s and trade unionism in both the public and private sector is around 90 per cent, we find the highest levels of welfare spending and the lowest discrepancy between women and men's wages (women's wages are around 87 per cent of men's).[15]

Given that the USA is the *only* major Western democracy where women have failed to improve their wages at all relative to men's over the last two decades (remaining at 59 per cent of men's hourly wage, compared to Britain's 69 per cent), and given the favourable contrasts between the Scandinavian countries and the USA regarding child-care facilities and other welfare benefits (again, Britain comes somewhere in between), as well as women's proportionately far higher representation in parliament, it seems strange for feminists to ignore the traditional objectives of socialist or social-democratic parties and organized labour in their search for feminist goals and strategies, whatever their limitations and weaknesses, and however much their successes have depended on the hard and difficult slog of women within them. At a time when the advances made by some women are so clearly overshadowed by the increasing poverty experienced so acutely by others (alongside the unemployment of the men of their class and group), it seems perverse to pose women's specific interests *against* rather than *alongside* more traditional socialist goals.[16]

The question is whether, as so many now feel and Eisenstein expresses, 'socialism seems to hold out little new theoretical or political promise for feminism'.[17] The answer, I suggest, depends upon where you look, and whether you allow what has been the most creative and dynamic rethinking on the Left to be forgotten, or perhaps resuscitated as flimsier new fashions eager to flaunt their distance from what remains of the theoretical and organizational strengths of the 'old' (New) Left and labour movement. Today's critics who would say goodbye to socialism for a politics which recognizes 'the centrality of difference' usually reject as inevitably oppressive the 'totalizations' of *any* socialist project in the name of the 'irreducible plurality and indeterminacy' of the social. Yet the force of their argument (esoteric philosophical confusions aside) comes from what should by now be *familiar* criticisms of Leninist and Labourist forms of socialist politics. That Marxism, let alone the Left, rarely did and does not now reduce to either Leninism or Labourism is ignored, along with the writings of Marx and Engels themselves, not to mention the libertarian critics of Lenin.

There are many weaknesses in the Marxism that has inspired most of the Left for over a hundred years—its economism, homogenizing of class interests, and inability adequately to theorize the position of

[15] Pippa Norris, *Politics and Sexual Equality: The Comparative Position of Women in Western Democracies*, Brighton 1987.
[16] Here, like Kate Soper in her excellent collection of essays *Troubled Pleasures* (see footnote 12), I refer to 'socialist' goals as those which 'conflict with the logic of the untrammelled market' involving forms of planning and redistribution of wealth at odds with the logic of capital accumulation.
[17] Eisenstein, p. 50.

women and other non-class oppressions. But that tradition was never *synonymous* with the elitism and authoritarianism that has characterized Leninist notions of the vanguard party substituting itself for mass support, any more than it was synonymous with the paternalism that has characterized Fabian notions of the democratic state reforming from above and hostile to extra-parliamentary culture, movements and struggles.

Today we face a cultural climate where much of the Left, like those associated with *Charter 88*, has moved so far to the right that nineteenth-century liberalism has become its centre. Few people across the political spectrum could object to a project that seeks 'a constitution which protects *individual* rights and the institutions of a *modern* and *pluralistic* democracy'. The USA has precisely such a Constitution, as does Colombia. At a time when Thatcher was so aggressively attacking existing democratic rights, *Charter 88* provided a rallying point for a broad oppositional democratic alliance. It also highlighted the many anachronistic structures of the existing British state—from the House of Lords to the nature of the judiciary. However, it left open for debate the crucial issue of whether social needs for health, housing, education and adequate welfare, which must be met *before* people can put to any good use their rights as citizens, should be guaranteed as well. In the face of the real economic and cultural factors which limit the participation of many in active citizenship (not least the many women whose primary relationship to the state is one of dependence rather than autonomy), the Charter once again exposes the very real limits of liberalism, however progressive, articulated over a hundred years ago in the contradictions of John Stuart Mill.[18]

Desperate to adapt in this new cultural climate, there was little discernible trace of socialist strategies in the most recent Labour Party Policy Review. Much of the Trotskyist Left, on the other hand, which has now taken up some of the rhetoric of the new social movements around women, Blacks, gays and lesbians, has done so only, or primarily, as part of a politics of confrontation with what remains of the reformist structures of social democracy in local government and the trade unions.

But, before we say goodbye to socialism, should we not take the time to learn from the mistakes of the past, and reject, as did the social movements of the seventies, the centralized, authoritarian, top-down practices of *both* social democracy and Leninism? Should we not also pause a moment to recognize the weaknesses of the new social movements themselves? Without access to the resources of strengthened social-democratic reformist structures, as decentralized and accountable as possible, and without strong trade unions, the social movements (particularly as conceived by the theorists of difference) can offer little more than the enjoyment of an endless game of self-exploration played out on the great board of Identity.

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[18] The first of still very few left critiques of *Charter 88*, pointing out the complicated and confusing politics behind it, and the crucial omissions for socialists within it, is Peter Osborne's brief but lucid 'Extensions of Liberty: What *Charter 88* Leaves Out', *Interlink*, February/March 1989, pp. 22–3.

Prefatory Note

We draw readers' attention to this letter from Andrzej Walicki, and to the postscript at the end of the article.

25 September 1990

Dear Editor,

I appreciate your proposal to publish my paper on Poland (given at the Center For Social Theory and Comparative History at UCLA, California on 21 May 1990). Your readers, however, should know that I have never been close to the New Left. I consider myself a right-wing liberal democrat and would not like to create confusion about my Political sympathies.

I am not a man of the Left but, as a liberal, I take it for granted that the Left, including the post-communist Left, should have its legitimate place in Polish politics. I am critical of the noisy right-wing populism in Poland because its use of popular anti-communist feelings creates an atmosphere of intolerance, diverting attention from real problems and posing a threat to the rule of law. I oppose its demand for 'strict limitations on the former nomenklatura's participation in the economy and state institutions' (see M. Zalewski, 'Let Solidarity Break in Two', *Newsweek*, 16 July 1990, p. 6) because this amounts to a call for *Berufsverbot*, which is incompatible with law-abiding democracy. I reject the idea of 'revenge' for both pragmatic and moral reasons: because the Polish ex-Communists, who had surrendered their monopoly of power in a peaceful, negotiated manner, are now a weak, ideologically disarmed, intimidated minority; and the real test of a democracy is its attitude to the defeated. In a word, I fully agree with Adam Michnik—whose newspaper has recently been stripped of its right to represent Solidarity—that 'if a logic of retaliation gains the upper hand, we will again face the hell of a dictatorship.' (See Flora Lewis, 'Post-Communist Blues', *New York Times*, 22 September 1990, p. 15.)

My views on the pitfalls of anti-communist crusades are known in Poland. I have presented them in both right-wing (*democratic* right-wing) and left-wing periodicals. Hence I see no obstacles to appearing, as an invited guest, in the pages of *New Left Review*.

Sincerely,

Andrzej Walicki

University of Notre Dame, Indiana.