

LYNNE SEGAL A new morality



The Left has failed to develop a progressive sexual morality, or even to consider what one might look like. This failure gives the Right the political initiative, so Rose Schapiro concludes in her punchy post-Gillick survey of the current strength of the moral Right in Britain (*MT* February 1985). Although our moral Right remains a 'moral minority', failing to win over widespread popular support for its anti-permissive, pro-traditional gender and family arrangements, it does succeed in pushing our predominantly liberal welfare agencies onto the defensive: they now speak only a language of bureaucratic paternalism rather than one of support for the stated choices and wishes of young people, women and sexual minorities. But why is the Left silent? It was, it seems only yesterday, once full of sound and fury on the subject.

Twenty short years ago, the new Left, and even the social democratic Left, did have a clearer sexual morality, which it saw as unquestionably progressive. The abortion, male homosexual and divorce reform bills of the late 60s all reflected a belief in the importance of greater tolerance of sexual variety and of separating sexual pleasure from the quite different experience of producing and raising children. Most of the Left in the 60s were firm believers in the Reichian view that more orgasmic sex, in itself, created happier freer people: sexual freedom was the prerequisite for the non-authoritarian, co-operative society.

Today, only the brave or the foolhardy few dare risk such sentiments. If it has learnt little else from feminism, the male Left has learnt that the 'sexual liberation' of the 60s displayed a phallocratic failure to perceive the sexual objectification and compulsive coercion of women which was built into all our images of (hereto) sexuality. It also learnt that it had usually failed even to pleasure women. A failure of orgasmic, silencing, significance.

The women's liberation movement of the early 70s was also clear on the need for a new sexual morality: a morality which rejected the coercive and sexist nature of heterosexual practices, and insisted on every woman's right to sexual pleasure – with or without the necessarily reconditioned services of men. It also insisted on every woman's right to complete control over her own fertility, but in a context of new economic and welfare supports allowing women the choice to mother

without financial burden or social isolation.

By the late 70s, however, feminists were deeply divided over sexual morality. Many new pressures – the inadequacies and growing setbacks to piecemeal reform, closer engagement with the reality of men's violence against women, and the growing fragmentation of the women's movement – had produced a new focus on sexuality as *the* primary site of women's oppression, with male violence and rape (seen as condoned and encouraged by pornography) as *the* primary means through which men control women. A new feminist sexual politics emerged – though now a fiercely contested one – premised upon the idea of women as timeless sexual victim and men as all-pervasive sexual threat.

On this feminist perspective it is women who, as in times past, are assigned clear moral pre-eminence. The male Left can therefore once again more easily leave aside questions of sexual morality as primarily women's concern, except in so far as women need protection from other men. And the Left gradually, pushed by feminist action, has begun to support campaigns against the sexual harassment of women. But in the charged discussion of male violence, there is little space for the Left, particularly the male Left, to take up the question of heterosexuality – outside of objecting to the oppressive nature of heterosexism for all sexual minorities.

If heterosexuality, as some feminists have argued, in itself maintains and expresses men's power over women, no morality, however new, can prevent its fateful consequences. If however, as others believe, there is nothing intrinsically coercive, aggressive or degrading to women in men's most vulnerable and fragile appendage, or even in its most typical functioning in heterosexuality, then a new sexual morality needs to begin with the attempt to dismantle the ideology which transforms the penis, as the distinctive signifier of men, into something which can be seen as a potential weapon, and used to confirm men's power. That ideology, I would argue, is constructed from *all* the institutions which give men power in the world and not simply or even primarily from sexual practices.

Burdened with the weight of all our fierce fantasies for unconditional acceptance, contact, pleasure or escape, sexuality could not be other than conflictual and fraught, however pleasurable. No new sexual morality can protect us from the ambivalent, often distressing, entanglement of our sexual desires and fantasies:



majority they will not defend the existing version of the *British Road*. It will rapidly revert to a pre-1977 version. If some of them have their way we would witness a return to the 1930s and 'for a Soviet Britain'.

On the other hand, if Congress upholds, as I hope it will, the current leadership, it will similarly have major implications. First it will mean that democratic rules will apply to all. Those who do not accept that democratically agreed rules are binding on all will, I hope, have the courage of their convictions and resign.

The second major development should be that at an early date there should be an opportunity to thoroughly revise the *British Road* to remove those ambiguities which allow Foster to present himself as a defender of those parts of the programme which accord with his narrow economic vision. So many major developments have occurred since 1977 which need to be assessed and reflected in the programme that in its present version it is seriously outdated.

Not only have there been major changes in the general political and economic situation, but there has also been the profound crisis within the Communist Party that will make possible the presentation of a much more coherent and persuasive case for the democratic road to socialism.

with the excitements and traumas of power and personal relations. It is this which makes any new sexual morality such a subtle, complex, tricky affair. It has first of all to recognise all genuinely coercive sexual practices, which certainly includes pressure on young women to fuck, and to be the partner responsible for contraception despite possible health hazards; it also needs to take steps to provide real support and protection to the women, children and at times other men, who can be the victims of these practices.

And it has to distinguish such sexual coercion from the separate but connected

problem of how men in general, ideologically, economically and politically, come to have power over women. The connection, most crucially for some men's sexual practices, comes from the belief that 'real' men should not only have, but be seen to have and to exercise, power over women. Men's sexual performance with women (or other men) is one crucial symbol of that power.

It's going to take a very long time for a new sexual morality to transform the ideology and imagery of sex, linked as it is to all our mythologies of masculinity and femininity. And this is despite the fact that the

actual sexual experiences of individual women and men perhaps bear little relation to such imagery, or at the very least appear more complex and contradictory.

In the meantime, a new sexual morality does need to support the ways in which, against all odds, most of us do continue to seek sexual pleasure and contact; offering support and not prohibition particularly for the dilemmas of young people, women, the elderly, disabled and handicapped. It must do this while, at the very same time, it engages with the struggle to overturn all our sexual hierarchies, and their accompanying mythologies of sex.

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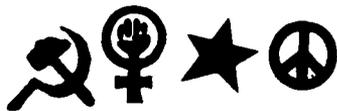
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EXPANDING DEFICITS

Ben Mowbray (*MT*, Feb) takes me to task for being too generous to Reagan over his economic policy. What I pointed out was that unemployment had fallen rapidly in the States and that this had been the result of the expansion of the Government financial deficit.

When the Americans started to expand their deficit, the Tories said that it would end with no extra jobs and galloping inflation. In the event the British economy, which continued with the low deficit policies of which Ben Mowbray presumably approves, continued with rising unemployment, low economic growth, higher inflation and interest rates and a collapsing pound.

It is certainly true that high US interest rates are a contributory factor to the problems of industrialised countries and they are a disaster for Third World debtors, but it is not true that the deficit was more than one factor in the high interest rates. It is the pursuit of tight monetary policies in most industrial countries which has done that.

The main reason why the savings of the industrialised countries are attracted to the US are because the Americans – both Government and private sector – are using them. Restrictive policies in other countries have ensured that investing in other countries is not a productive circuit of capital.

The remedy for other industrial countries is not to moan but to introduce exchange controls and expand their deficits also.

Henry Neuberger, London N1

GRAMSCI FOR LABOUR

George Daveysmith (letters, *MT* March) requests evidence that the Labour Party has been influenced by Gramsci. Sadly, I have little to offer. But those of us who draw our analysis and inspiration from Gramsci have an important role to play in Labour's reconstruction.

Regrettable civil war ensued in the wake of Labour's catastrophic defeat in 1979. This was not, as Austin Mitchell puts it, 'four years in the death of the Labour Party'. It was a period of ideological renewal when Labour sought an ideology radical enough to revitalise Britain and credible enough to defeat Thatcherism at the polls. The party still hasn't found this formula. Gramsci is possibly the key. There is a pressing need to weld onto Labour's traditional working-class base the issues which appeal across the spectrum of Britain's changing class structure. These issues must include peace, ecology, feminism and decentralisation. Many of us on the Labour Left, particularly in the LCC, take every opportunity to

point the party in this direction.

I am sure that much of this is old hat to *Marxism Today* readers. My purpose in writing is to show that Mr Daveysmith has missed the point: the question is not what Gramsci has contributed to the Labour Party but what his ideas can contribute in the future.

Peter Grosvenor, London W4

LAZY COMMUNISTS

Built around first-class articles and interviews, the March issue of *Marxism Today* was magnificent, demonstrating once again that it is Britain's outstanding Marxist publication, and makes nonsense of the wild charges of 'deserting the class position'.

What amazes me about many of those defenders of 'class politics' is the way they refuse to discuss what is happening to *our class*, the working class. Aren't they interested? Don't they care?

Why did such a big section of miners refuse to fight? Why were the best, most capable and militant among other trade unionists unable to deliver practical solidarity action? Why are former powerful 'left unions' (AUEW and EEU) now such pillars of the Right? Why is it that areas often weak in mass response are so strong in left sectarianism in the Communist Party as well as the Labour Party? eg the North East, North West, Notts, Derby-Leicester, to say nothing of the New Communist Party that sprang out of the Surrey stockbroker belt?

When we have examined these questions in depth we will understand better the value of the broad alliance so effectively demonstrated in South Wales. Otherwise we will become what Dimitrov described as lazy communists shouting general slogans but unable to formulate strategy and practical policy to meet the specific conditions, problems and needs of the hour.

Tom Mitchell, Luton

THORNY QUESTIONS

Further to Matthew Gandy's letter (*MT*, March), I have experienced amongst comrades on the Left, a reluctance, when pressed, to define 'economic growth'. An increase in the arms programme would, I presume, constitute economic growth. This would not necessarily be followed by an improvement in living standards. A switch of resources from arms to goods for peaceful uses could, on the other hand, bring about improved living standards without any economic growth.

Another example of language proving a barrier to constructive thought on the Left is the manner in which the term 'incomes policy' is used. Everybody, without excep-

tion, supports an incomes policy of some kind. Increases in wages at the expense of profits with free collective bargaining is an incomes policy. But the Left, reasoning from experience of right wing governments, gives incomes policy only one definition, wage restraint. This dogmatic insistence inhibits constructive discussion on a policy for all incomes that could win public support, and in the process undermine right wing economic theory and isolate the right instead of the trade unions.

Bert Ward, London SE26

ARM-WAVING

There is a startling omission in Dave Cook's article (*MT*, Feb). The main leverage which opponents of the current CP leadership possess is that since 1977 the membership of the CP has declined precipitately.

It is difficult to ignore one particular feature which caused the exit of people such as myself – the complete inability of the leadership to recognise that discussion of issues like socialist democracy remained unconvincing whilst the internal organisation of the CP remained wedded to undemocratic practice. Many examples could be given but the most striking in the present context might be the manner in which the current editor and industrial editor of the *Morning Star* were appointed over the heads of the staff. Seldom has a petard been so well hoisted. Closer to home the editor of *Marxism Today* might like to analyse the democratic process underlying his appointment.

As Cook's article seeks to demonstrate with respect to other matters, the point is of wider relevance. Much of the Left concerns itself with other people's democracy whilst justifying their own political practice, if at all, by vague arm-waving or recourse to history. Once, just once, a left politician when analysing the recent past might begin by saying 'Well, I really screwed it up when . . .' Till then, I am afraid I must express my reservations about having to choose between the two sides so neatly carved out by Cook. You can pick the sides, comrade, but remember that the spectators may be finding other ways to play the game.

Mike Prior, London N5

SHODDY THINKING

Dave Cook's linking of Militant's opportunist approach to that of an orthodox Marxist class analysis (*MT* Feb) is an act of intellectual dishonesty.

In Liverpool, the appointment of Sam Bond was not an 'interpretation of the necessities of class politics'; it was sheer political nepotism.

Moreover it is only one element in a package which has included the irresponsible posturing over last year's budget and the consideration of autonomous peace, women's black groups as, at best, misguided Labour Party fodder, and at worst petty bourgeois and peripheral. The latter category would also include white collar unions affiliated to the City Council Joint Stewards' Committee, the recent destruction of which has been another Militant 'success'. The worst element has been the attempt to blur the distinction between employer and employee (socialist Council = trade unions).

Communists in the city have been to the fore in attempting to stem Militant's influence and to build genuine socialist perspective. In the current atmosphere in the party many would be, indeed certainly already have been, labelled 'reductionist', if not 'factionalist' (still no evidence produced).

If that were not enough, they are now equated with the very sectarianism they have been fighting. Such shoddy thinking contributes to the unnecessary and simplistic polarisation taking place within the party on complex issues around which there is still a greater potential for unity than division.

P Murray, Liverpool

TRIUMPHALISM

Premen Addy's triumphalist tone (*MT*, February) comes as something of a surprise in a journal such as yours and from an author such as he.

Yes, Rajiv Gandhi had a massive majority, but then in all elections since 1952 the ruling party has had absolute majority. To obtain more than two-thirds is quite common and Congress under Mrs Gandhi failed to do so only in 1967.

Caste, region, language factionalism may be on the wane, nevertheless, Telugu Desam is the largest opposition group in Lok Sabha and in Tamil Nadu the regionalist AIADMK won the most seats. The Communist Party (Marxist) which held West Bengal is a one region party in all but name. Further, national elections were held in the two most sensitive areas, Punjab and Assam where regionalism may have made an impact.

India may have achieved a debt free, nuclear-powered, agriculture locked-into-industry economic development but up to 50% (350 million people) of the population live below the official poverty line, giving rise to persistent communal and rural violence.

There are three kinds of struggle that anyone looking at India from a left perspective must take on board