

Sex on the agenda

About 120,000 teenagers will become pregnant over the next 12 months and two thirds of them will become mothers. The decision not to have an abortion may be the only positive decision many feel they've ever taken. Even if it's only a decision not to decide.

Their own mothers may welcome the new grandchildren but grit their teeth because they know what their daughters are letting themselves in for, that it's the agony and the ecstasy, and they know that their daughters don't know – yet.

Many of them will be the children of mothers who belonged to the first generation of women whose sexual lives have been lived in the era of scientific-chemical birth control. The daughters are all part of that era themselves.

And all of them are regarded as having done the *wrong* thing, ruined their lives.

I'm their mothers' generation, and like many of them I was a teenage werewolf, a thrill-seeker prowling around respectable coffee bars and dance halls for pleasure. The pill did not improve the quality of sex but it certainly allowed respectable girls to go for it.

The fact of the pill apparently offered the historic possibility of fear-less sex. Strangely enough, when it came to thinking about having, rather than not having children, it enabled women of the pill era, to do what in a sense, today's teenage mothers have done: decide not to decide – for a while. That's what I did anyway in my heterosexual days. Now my fertile days are numbered and I'm in my

lesbian incarnation, so it's a bit more difficult: I'd have to decide to decide.

This is the first problem: to decide or not to decide. The great thing about birth control has been that it has allowed women to defer the decisions. But the trouble with family planning ideology is that it is exactly that: it suggests that it's all rational and planned, and therefore it is not ideologically fitted to the irrational and the indecisive and the unplanned. So it benignly disapproves of the teenage mother.

Young single parents have few political allies; they are now the target of a new Tory demonology, which has to some extent cheekily borrowed legitimacy from the very success of the birth control movement. The birth rate among teenagers has dropped by about 50%, since the early 1970s. So there's a notion that there's *no excuse!*

The Tory party's reaction to Sara Keays was that she must have known what she was doing, and therefore should never have got pregnant. It could cope with her being a cabinet minister's 'mistress' but not with her daring to be a single mother.

And on the extremist edges of the Right there is now a witchhunt against the single parent. Dr Rhodes Boyson told a Tory Party conference fringe meeting this year that the single mother is to blame for the evil hordes of wild boys, whose mothers failed to give them fathers. And Sir Frederick Catherwood suggested at another fringe meeting that they should have their benefits cut off.

Where does birth control politics stand amidst all this? Of course it defends 'choice', as it must, and it defends the young mothers. But its ideas about 'choice' are infused with WASP (white anglo-saxon protestant) and Yuppie (young upwardly mobile professional) values. It laments the teenage mother because she's ruined her life and because she's poor, the assumption being that she's poor because she's feckless.

Meanwhile, there's been a baby boom among Yuppies of

30+; they are family planning's success story. They are having their babies before its too late, but not before CSEs, GCEs and degrees have been passed, careers established, houses bought, nannies hired. If they're feminists they talk about motherhood a lot and keep threatening to write books about it. And some of them get married, too.

They *chose* to be mothers, it appears. Perfect mothers, perfect babies.

But there's something wrong here because it is not choice that differentiates the teenage mother and the 30+ Yuppie mother: it is class that makes the Yuppie mothers a success and the teenage mothers supposed failures. The teenage mother hasn't got her CSEs, and who knows if she'll ever have what's called a career. All she's got is a baby for whom, unlike her Yuppie sisters, she alone is totally responsible, 24 hours a day, in return for which she's got a passionate relationship. It's the one relationship that gives her any power and status and it makes her a woman.

But she didn't choose! It just happened. Anyway choice presupposes alternatives – between what? Being an adult and having to remain a *child*, infantilised by school, by unemployment, by baby wages on a work scheme and semi or unskilled jobs, by having to live in someone else's space, your mam and dad's home, sharing a bedroom with a little sister?

Recently I heard an eminent and pro-woman gynaecologist saying that pregnant teenagers would be better off pursuing their careers and wasn't it all awful.

No doubt she'd agree that part of the problem is that this society isn't fit for mothers. Childcare, for example, is the most successfully privatised bit of what the welfare state should have been. It should be a major political priority, but it isn't.

Yuppie mothers *buy* private solutions to what are public and political problems for

the majority of mothers in Britain. They buy some other poor woman's time. And that applies to feminist Yuppies, too. This is not to condemn, it is just to say that there is an enormous class-culture gap between them and the young single mothers, who lack just about everything money can buy. What their problems expose is the isolation of politics, with some important exceptions, from the people living on the hardest edge.

What they could do with, and what they haven't yet got, is a caring party that cares for them. And to be more precise, that means making the space in politics so that they, too, can join in. And it means ordinary things, like they will be among the million people who get the jobs (no use if they don't get childcare, too) after – if – Labour wins the next general election.

A further thought about sex and birth control. The early birth control movement was both about the maternity crisis among working class women in particular, but about the pleasure crisis, too.

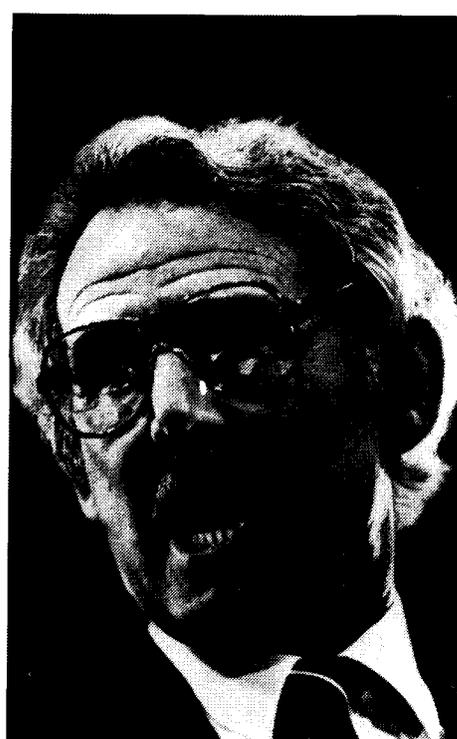
Birth control politics now, as then, needs to address women's sexual disappointment. It is that feeling which Victoria Gillick articulates in her pessimistic outlook. She speaks to the problem of teenage pregnancy by trying to proscribe both contraception and conception among the young. I think she wages war against girls becoming sexual women because she thinks men have been doing women over since Adam. And she doesn't buy the idea of free choice because she doesn't think women have any.

Sexual politics is the territory feminists share with Gillick. Don't get me wrong, I think she's horribly wrong, but Gillick with her angry pessimism marches in where Yuppie liberalism feared to tread – she's put the sex back into the technocratic politics of birth control. At least, she's put it back on the agenda by trying to take it off. Are we going to make sure it stays there? ●

Beatrix Campbell



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Black Workers

I read the September issue of *Marxism Today* as usual with profound interest. Beatrix Campbell in her interview with John Edmonds raises numerous issues confronted by the unions. She touches upon the condition of women as employees in the union and their under-representation in the leadership, but in the whole article there is no reference to the condition of black workers.

It appears to me that blacks are not regarded as a part of multi-racial society, while the TUC admits that West Indian men get as much as £20 a week less and Asian men £18 less than white workers. It is also evident through the Labour Research Department that only 47% of all white workers are trade union members as compared with 56% of black workers, and there are only 13 full time black officers in the

unions. Is it the view still that black workers are not part and parcel of the trade union movement?

Black workers are discriminated against, racially harassed, racially abused and racially attacked in every walk of life in Britain. I wonder why Beatrix as an interviewer failed to raise concern in regard to black workers' conditions.

I strongly feel that black people settled in Britain have made positive contributions to the society, which should be recognised and portrayed much more vigorously to counter the racists in the trade union movement; otherwise, the enemy of 'wage slaves' will continue to divide on the basis of colour. In no way can the divided workers challenge the power of capital. ●
Avtar Singh Sadiq, IWA

Lost Illusions

Raphael Samuel (Comment, October *MT*) has not enhanced his stature as an historian of the contemporary labour movement. In his article there is not a trace of an objective assessment of the miners' strike.

Instead, he uses it as a pretext for an outpouring of political gall against *Marxism Today* and the Communist Party.

His accusation that the Communist Party has abandoned its stand for 'unity' is so unrelated to reality that one can only assume that the characterisation is the projection of a 'deeply sectarian' political position on the part of the writer. Talk of unity comes strangely from one who displays such venom in the ancient business of bashing the CP.

Building unity depends on policies and actions which

advance the interests of the labour movement and the majority of people, and that is what the strategy of developing a broad democratic alliance is all about. The process of achieving the unity of the labour movement and building alliances does not mean a cessation of criticism within the Left, nor silence about mistakes made in important struggles, as Raphael seems to believe. Constructive criticism is essential to the development of unity.

Of course, facing up to present realities can be an uncomfortable process. Raphael evidently prefers to live in a lost world of illusions, in which setbacks are victories, leaders of industrial struggles are incapable of making any mistakes, and any criticism of them is to be branded as treachery. ●
Betty Matthews, London

Not Marxism

Having taken the politics out of psephology, it is understandable that Eric Hobsbawm would want a chance of putting them back in again. Unfortunately his pedestrian review of the experience of Labour government (*MT* October) contains not one single insight into the predicaments of democratic socialism or how

they might be overcome by making the next crisis a reason for going beyond our promises rather than for going back on them. It is utterly impractical to think in terms of rebuilding Britain first and going forward to socialism subsequently. Hobsbawm is standing on his head. This is not Marxism today or at any other time. ●
Royden Harrison, Sheffield

Health Care

Steve Iliffe (*MT* October) identifies the need to strengthen local authority involvement in health care. Already cities like Sheffield, Leeds, Nottingham, Oxford and Liverpool, plus several London boroughs, have started to re-establish 'public health', forming health liaison committees and employing staff not only to campaign but to build data bases from which the real evidence of inequitable distribution of health care is emerging. Based upon the initial work of the 'Black Report', *Inequalities in Health*, these authorities are now able to demand from their health counterparts a redirection of provision. It is at this point that socialist class politics

emerge since it is still not possible to effect these changes within the existing framework of unaccountable health authorities and entrepreneurial professionals.

It is sad therefore to see the Labour Party retreating from a commitment to a salaried practitioner service, and the confusion on how health authorities should be structured. Steve Iliffe argues that priority should be given to social services, recognising that health is determined as much by housing, diet, employment or not, transport and environment. Whole health care can only be achieved if health is part of the local government machinery firmly subject to democratic control. ●
Keith Jerome, Reading

Separatism

I agree warmly with Kate Soper when she affirms women's good sense (*MT* October). Representing the sexes as complementary and unequal, women 'intuitive' and men 'rational', is part of the gendering process that has kept women down and now threatens everyone's survival. It is also true that, as she says, there is some over-the-top mysticising in some (untypical) corners of the women's peace movement. This is not feminist, it is feminine-ist.

On the other hand she is completely wrong, in my view, to throw doubt on the strategy of women-only peace camps and disarmament actions. In mixed institutions and public places women are subject to men's overbearing ways and to personal violence. And it is

when we are with men that we are driven into either acting feminine or behaving like men in order to get a word in. We need women's space precisely in order to transcend the gender trap and find ways of doing things that are less silly than either the masculine or the feminine.

It is because some women have been brave enough to make a space for other women that we have been able to develop a cogent, rational case for nuclear disarmament; to forge intelligent links with related movements; and create imaginative, enjoyable and eye-catching actions. Separatism is hopefully not for ever. It is a necessary expedient because centuries of being messed about in mixed situations has damaged our belief in our own logic. ●
Cynthia Cockburn, London



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