

80 | transforming socialist-feminism: the challenge of racism

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Feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free *all* women: women of colour, working class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women - as well as white economically privileged, heterosexual women.

(Smith, 1982: 49)

This definition of feminism seems to capture what socialist-feminism in the 1980s should be about.¹ Through struggle, in heated arguments and in writings, black women have been trying to move socialist-feminist politics in this direction. In their article 'Ethnocentrism and Socialist-Feminist Theory' in *Feminist Review* No. 20, Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh have provided one recent response to these initiatives. The two of us are anxious to take seriously this attempt by white feminists to take up the challenge of the charge of racism, which has been made against white feminist analysis.

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Michèle and Mary promise a re-examination of their own work in the light of criticisms raised by black women, and they do summarize some of the criticisms which have been made (Barrett and McIntosh, 1985: 41–42). They endeavour to identify 'elements of ethnocentrism in our previous work, and [we] have pointed to important issues where the analysis we have presented has been seriously marred by the failure to consider ethnicity and racism' (1985: 44).

Although Michèle and Mary present an important and interesting contribution, it fails to open up the kind of area of discussion which is needed. This is because they lose sight of the central issue in the challenge which has been made – which is racism. By bringing another issue, namely ethnocentrism, into the foreground, they end up with their own previous conceptual categories intact.

Our own contribution arises out of our reactions to and discussion of their article. We also want to take up some of the arguments raised in 'Many Voices, One Chant', a special issue of *Feminist Review* (No. 17, 1984) produced by black women about black struggles. That issue was itself situated in a recent

history, which includes the setting up of the Organization of Women of Asian and African Descent, the struggles around Imperial Typewriters, Trico and Grunwicks, as well as the development of Women Against Racism and Fascism groups, the autumn 1980 Socialist-Feminist Conference on anti-imperialism and anti-racism, and more recent developments. We see the challenge of the charge of racism as having the potential to motivate a different kind of socialist-feminism. However, this is not realized in Michèle and Mary's article; instead the challenge is evaded, is taken up in a very limited way, or even in a way which is potentially reactionary.

the risks of entering this debate

In our conversations, both with each other and with others, we have tried to identify some of the problems of entering into these discussions, given the tensions that are involved. This means recognizing that black women and white women have different histories and different relationships to present struggles, in Britain and internationally. White women who enter these debates must acknowledge the material basis of their power in relation to black people, both women and men. It is also necessary to acknowledge the complexities of this power relationship – as between white women and black men, where white women may be privileged, oppressed, or both.

In contributing to these discussions white women cannot avoid the legacy of racism within feminism. This legacy has a long history which includes the dominance of eugenicism in both the early and more recent birth control movements, the eager acceptance by the majority of the suffragettes of imperialistic nationalism, and at best, the failure of anti-rape campaigns to challenge racist stereotypes of the sexuality of black men. Not only have these generally not taken up racism as an issue, nor seen how their campaigns against male violence are complicated in the context of racism, but by their actions they have reaffirmed racist ideas by marching through black areas and calling for greater policing.

However, we do not subscribe to a politics based on essentialism. We also feel that there are times when black and white political activists have to work together and in this article we are attempting to do that. While we may sound too critical at some points, not critical enough at others, and sometimes may seem to be stating the obvious, we write this as a political and theoretical piece. We hope that the discussions and actions which may result will contribute to a process which will shift socialist-feminism out of its present rut (sometimes known as its crisis!).

There have been important moments in contemporary socialist-feminism; in the development of analyses of women's work, waged and unwaged, in women's relation to men, to the working class and to capital, and in debates with radical feminists about sexuality. One important commitment of recent socialist-feminism

has been to confront the 'masculinist' assumptions which have distorted socialist theory and practice and to transform socialism into something which can more fully represent the struggles and aspirations of women. The *Beyond the Fragments* discussions, initiated by the book written by Sheila Rowbotham *et al* (1979), represent one such attempt in the last decade. In saying this, we are horribly conscious of the racism by omission in both the national conference and local discussions which participants of *Beyond the Fragments* rarely challenged. However, the book did represent an attempt to transform socialist-feminist theory. This commitment has been an important project, but only if it is seen as part of a larger process. This socialist-feminism must itself be open to being transformed under the impetus of black struggles. However, it is still hard to find instances where this has happened.

one femininity or many?

In a women's rights convention in Ohio in 1852, Sojourner Truth claimed the place of black women in the struggle for women's rights and at the same time asserted that the experience of womanhood is not the same for all women:

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best places ... and ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm!... I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could heed me — and ain't I a woman? I could work as much as any man (when I could get it) and bear the lash as well - and ain't I a woman? I have borne five children and seen them most sold off into slavery, and when I cried out with grief, none but Jesus heard - and ain't I a woman?

(quoted in Carby (1982 : 214).

These words have been widely quoted in the women's movement. But what sense has been made of them? Apart from intended racialism, lack of information has been used as an excuse for leaving black women out of analyses, or black women have been defined as problems, or black women have been exoticized. While Michèle and Mary present some sociological material about the situation of black women in Britain, they do not make black women *central* to their political analysis. It seems to us that black women are merely being added on, and the need to transform the whole analysis is not realized. Also, where they present examples to 'emphasize the complex interrelations of class, race and gender power structures' (Barrett and McIntosh, 1985: 38), they use one example from Papua New Guinea under colonialism and the Scottsboro case of 1930s Alabama, USA. While these examples are important in order to gain insight into the operation of British colonialism, and to understand how white women have used their racism in relation to black men, it is a pity that no examples are taken from the contemporary white-dominated women's movement also to illustrate these power relations.

The racism of the women's movement in Britain can be seen clearly from the following example. Reclaim the Night marches, held in the mid- to late 1970s, often went through black areas while demanding that the streets be made safe for women, sometimes with an accompanying slogan for 'better' policing. Despite the arguments and protests of black women then, and since, Reclaim the Night marches (e.g. one held in Cambridge in 1984) often still carry slogans for 'better' policing. Not only is it racist to march through black areas with demands for safer streets for women (which women?), but also, to understate it, we don't know of many black women who see police protection as any way of doing this. Racism operates in a way which places different women in different relationships to structures of power and authority in society. Certainly Cherry Groce and the family of Cynthia Jarrett are unlikely to have any illusions about 'better' policing. Whilst some white socialist-feminists would have no illusions about 'better' policing, their challenge to that demand has been weak.

There is an important analysis to be made about black women in the role of mother which we can only point to in this contribution. The shooting of Cherry Groce in South London in September 1985 and the death of Cynthia Jarrett in North London in October 1985 in the course of police raids on their homes indicate that many black mothers are in a different set of relationships to the police from white mothers. Black women, as mothers, encounter other state agencies such as the DHSS, schools and so on in a very particular way; they may be asked to produce their passports before being considered eligible for benefit, or before their children are allowed to be enrolled in schools. Clearly they experience these agencies in a way that white mothers would not. At this stage, we are merely trying to indicate that there is a need for further analysis on this issue.

The problem with the concept of gender is that it is rooted in an apparently simple and 'real' material base of biological difference between women and men. But what is constructed on that base is not one femininity in relation to one masculinity, but several. It is not only that there are differences between different groups of women but that these differences are also conflicts of interest. Whilst it can be difficult, socialist-feminism has to recognize these conflicts and tackle them politically.

the state deals with different women differently

For socialist-feminists, one way into these issues is through an examination of the state and the ways in which it deals differently with different groups of women. Struggles, campaigns, analyses by black people, especially women, against the immigration laws have focused political attention on the significance of these laws in revealing the state's projects in relation to black people. Since the 1940s, immigration and nationality legislation have become central instruments of state

2 The internal controls and checks on black people have been written about in a number of pamphlets and books. For example, Manchester Law Centre (1982) and Paul Gordon (1981).

3 The participation of black women in paid employment has been noted and commented on by a number of people such as Parmar (1982).

4 For a detailed discussion of these issues, see Bhabha et al (1985).

racism, irrespective of the political party in government. The state has become obsessively concerned with the entry of black labour into the UK and, in consequence, with the control of black people already here.² The main assumption has been that black men enter the labour market, or threaten it, while the extraction of surplus value from black women through their participation in that labour market has often been ignored. This is in spite of the extensive involvement of black women in paid employment.³ This assumption has been expressed in the sexism of immigration controls. For example, until recently there was some provision for black men to be joined by their fiancées but much tighter controls on women wanting to bring their fiancés into the UK. Appeals against this inequality were upheld in 1985 by the European Court of Human Rights on the grounds of sex discrimination. The British government responded by amending regulations further to tighten the controls on entry of all fiancé(e)s. This contrasts with an earlier decision, included in the 1981 Nationality Act, which allowed some (mainly white) women for the first time to pass on citizenship to their children born abroad. In the first case, the state abandoned its sexism in the negative sense that it reduced the rights of women and men to the same and worse level, and simultaneously consolidated its racism. In the second case, it also proclaimed commitment to sex equality and improved the rights of mainly white women, but further consolidated its racism.⁴ Thus under the rhetoric of creating 'equality' between women and men, the state develops further racist practices. While the two of us would not claim to have any easy answers, it is this type of conflict of interests which all of us as socialist-feminists need to confront.

racism or ethnocentrism?

The challenge of racism can often be avoided, particularly in quasi-academic discussions. In calling their article 'Ethnocentrism and Socialist-Feminist Theory', Michèle and Mary suggest that ethnocentrism is the central problem for socialist-feminism. To us, the central problem for socialist-feminist theory is racism, of which ethnocentrism may be a consequence. As far as we can see, the role of the state and international capital in creating and perpetuating inequalities between black people and white people is lost through the use of a term such as ethnocentrism. Further, the word and indeed the concept seem to imply that the problem is one of cultural bias, supported by ignorance. It then follows that, if more sociological information is presented, the problem can be overcome. We are arguing, however, that to consider racism as the central issue involves a fundamental and radical *transformation* of socialist-feminism.

Despite their intentions, Michèle and Mary's method of re-examination denies the possibility of a radical transformation of their own previous analysis. The conceptual framework of *The Anti-Social Family* (Barrett and McIntosh, 1982) provides the fixed reference point against which modifications and additions are considered in the light of more information about black women. 'Woman' continues

to be defined as a universal category and the oppressive and anti-social character of 'the family' is reasserted. Many feminists have been justifiably angered when (male) socialists have used this method in response to feminist critiques of socialist theories and practices. We do not dismiss the significance of the analysis of family/household forms and ideologies. However, we think that if we are to change the conceptual framework we have to begin by asking different questions. When we try to understand the condition of women we ask, what is it that oppresses women? What shapes the lives and identities of women? What shapes the lives and identities of black women? One way into the last question is through an examination of the political dynamic. If we consider what issues black people have been struggling over during the past five or ten years in Britain, we see that these struggles have revolved around challenging racism, specifically in relation to the state: over deportation and anti-deportation campaigns, and the police. From asking these questions and reviewing these struggles we are drawn to the need for fresh analysis of the relationship between the state and 'the family' and of how this differs for black and white people. This may lead us to an analysis, and some understanding, that the state may have different strategies for each group.

In resisting the pressure to review their conceptual framework/categories, Michèle and Mary let go of the possibility of developing a new and challenging discursive space. In reinstating 'the family' as a key concept and as a key site for the oppression of women, the only concession they appear to make to the charge of racism is in acknowledging culturally different household forms. Because they recast this charge of racism into ethnocentrism, they only identify cultural differences; 'race' drops out of focus and ethnicity comes to the fore and this is reflected in the title of their article. By treating racism as almost synonymous with ethnocentrism, they obscure, and thus avoid examining, how *racism* relates to black families. We shall try to demonstrate how we would approach the relationship between racism, the state and black households.

racism the state and black households

We begin from a recognition that not all family/household forms and ideologies are equal within Britain, nor are they dealt with as equally valid by the state. For example, the state's practices in terms of the ideology of family unity are pretty contradictory in relation to black people. As a consequence of immigration controls and practices, many black families are split up, either permanently or for a large number of years. The state shows no respect for the principles of family unity in these cases. For Michèle and Mary to equate this coercive action of the state in splitting up black families with the consequences of the political involvement of mainly white women in peace camps in Britain (1985: 42) is not naive, but an insult to the struggles of black people. But the state claims to desire 'family unity' for black families in other circumstances. For example, if a marriage

5 This is commented on by the writers and editors of *Worlds Apart* (Bhabha et al, 1985: 100–1).

of black people born overseas comes to an end, with one partner perhaps moving to their country of origin, the state attempts to remove/deport the rest of the family/household, using the argument that family unity must be upheld. For black people the British state's commitment to 'family unity' is strongest where such unity is outside the United Kingdom.⁵

To look at this more analytically we can examine the state's relation to black people through the notion of black labour as surplus labour. We are referring to the argument that capital has an interest in maintaining black labour as surplus labour. By this we mean that such labour is seen as temporary, easily expendable, easily replaceable and in excess of demand. Because of Britain's colonial relationship with the continent of Africa, the Indian sub-continent and the Caribbean, in the 1940s and early 1950s there was *some* rhetoric about colonial subjects coming to work in the 'mother country'. In this limited sense black people were initially viewed as potential settlers, although no social provision was made for such settlers in terms of housing or other human needs. Thus, black workers appeared to add to existing pressure on already scarce social resources in poor urban areas. In Sivanandan's analysis (1976), while the economic gain from black workers went to capital, the social costs were borne by labour, but capital and labour were united by racism. Internal and external political pressures including the influence of EEC policy on immigration control led to the rapid development of Britain's racist immigration controls through the 1960s and 1970s, through which black settlers effectively became redefined as migrant labour. Thus, employed black labour in the countries of the white capitalist world retains a temporary status. In Britain, the obsession of the state with the entry of black people into the country has kept alive the idea that all black people in Britain are immigrants – and that all immigrants are black. The use of the term 'second generation immigrant' (Barrett and McIntosh, 1985: 42) reflects these assumptions, though the words themselves are nonsensical. Use of the term implies participation in the racist discourse within which it is located. How long might it take to recognize that black people have been born in Britain? Centuries have clearly not been long enough.

In the contemporary situation of high and increasing unemployment in Britain, and the changing international division of labour, immigration controls were and are constantly being tightened against black people, and particularly against black men. The patriarchal assumptions of the British state as built into immigration laws must be situated in this dynamic of state racism. Thus Michèle and Mary's judgement that the 'opposition [to the immigration laws] should not collude in a reactive way' (1985: 43) is again telling. There is a certain insensitivity in informing those of us who try to challenge immigration laws and regulations that our methods of challenge are such that 'we accept the underlying logic behind the immigration laws of this country' (1985: 43). Many of us do *not* accept the underlying logic, but our solidarity with black people means that we want to

challenge the racism of the state. The importance, the problems and the contradictions of trying to win immigration campaigns organized around individual cases, and the political significance of the development of collective campaigns, have been clearly discussed by many of the participants in these campaigns.⁶

The state's relationship to black people is also marked out by ideas and practices that associate black people with crime, deviance and disorder. These ideas and practices are then used to 'justify' particularly heavy and coercive policing. We are not able to present the range of arguments about this here, but we want to signal that policing and 'law and order' are also major means by which the state perpetuates and legitimizes its violence against black people. Stuart Hall *et al* (1978), Paul Gilroy (1982) and Errol Lawrence (1982) are examples of writers who have presented analyses on these issues.

That many white socialist-feminists ignore racist attacks on black households is not new. However, in doing so, they also ignore that harassment and racist attacks from white women and white men, and sometimes white families, can impel a solidarity within black households. Whatever inequalities exist in such households, they are clearly also sites of support for their members. In saying this, we are recognizing that black women may have significant issues to face within black households. Struggles over sexuality and against domestic violence, for example, have been important issues for all feminists, including black feminists, and have involved confronting assumptions about domestic relationships. At the same time, however, the black family is a source of support in the context of harassment and attacks from white people.

The social potential of this base of solidarity against racist and racist attacks has been demonstrated in other situations of struggle. In the Imperial Typewriters strike in Leicester in 1974, when the white union leadership allied with the management, the strikers mobilized material, organizational and political support from family and community. Racism and economic exploitation were inextricable both in the causes of the strike and in the political issues which it raised. It is possible to compare this to the Grunwick strike where for a considerable period the trade union movement rallied in defence of the right of workers to organize, and although family and community networks gave support, the political significance of racism and of support from the black community was overshadowed.⁷ It is such issues which produce contradictory sets of relationships between black women, white women, black households, the state, and the predominantly white women's movement.

The instances which we have discussed above suggest to us that the analysis of *The Anti-Social Family* can not be stretched to cover the situation of black women in Britain. In many circumstances 'the family' is not socially privileged and protected in respect of black people; indeed, it is often under attack from the state and from individual racists. In the context of racist

6 See, for example, the conclusions drawn in Bhabha *et al* (1985) and the discussion by Hansa and Rahila (1984).

7 This has been noted by a number of the strikers as well as, for example, Bhavnani (1982) and Parmar (1982).

oppression, black families are often not 'anti-social' in the sense used by Michèle and Mary but can become not only a base for solidarity but also for struggle against racism. Not only is there a basis for solidarity within black households, but that can also lead to very real material distinctions between black women and white women. For instance, as we have noted elsewhere, black and white mothers may have completely different experiences and perceptions of the oppressive nature of the state. The worries black mothers may have about children being home late from school can be as much to do with fears of police harassment as with fears of sexual assault. To carry this discussion further requires a fuller analysis of the relationship between 'the family' upheld by the state, in dominant ideology and social practice, and black families, within the overall context of a racist society.

in conclusion

We do not wish to summarize our article here – rather we want to tease out some implications of our arguments and to raise further questions. The first point we would wish to make is that through arguing that an analysis of racism must be central to socialist-feminism, we do not claim to be presenting 'an answer'. We would, however, see that an analysis which we all, as socialist-feminists, need to develop is based on the idea of a racially structured, patriarchal capitalism (excuse the mouthful!). This leads us to examine how 'race', class and gender are structured in relation to one another. How do they combine with and/or cut across one another? How does racism divide gender identity and experience? How is gender experienced through racism? How is class shaped by gender and 'race'? To take these questions on does require a fundamental redrawing of the conceptual categories of socialist-feminism, and it may help us to develop a more adequate politics.

To have placed 'ethnic difference [as] necessarily... as important a consideration as racism itself (Barrett and McIntosh, 1985: 28) is, at best, to forget the substantial critiques of the concepts of 'multi-culturalism' and 'ethnicity' and the ways in which these can be used to bolster and legitimize racism (e.g. Carby, 1979). Thus, Michèle and Mary's conclusion (1985: 44) can appear rather dishonest. They summarize their article but do not explicitly state that they have, in effect, *rejected* the criticisms of Hazel Carby, 'Many Voices, One Chant', and so on. These critiques, among many others, have jettisoned ethnicity and ethnic disadvantage as analytical concepts, but Michèle and Mary do not take up and challenge these arguments; they reject them by ignoring them. As we have tried to show, one consequence of not understanding the centrality of racism and its challenge is that socialist-feminism becomes distanced from the political dynamic. The danger of this distancing can be seen in the language used: Michèle and Mary's use of 'disabling' ('[we have] to recognize this disability in

ourselves' (1985: 24)) is inappropriate and offensive. Offensive because it ignores the movement of women with disabilities and the criticisms they have made about disablist assumptions. Inappropriate because when feminists have ignored and refused to see or hear black women, this has not been due to a 'disability'. White academic women, especially, are not so powerless; they have some responsibility for the political and academic choices which they have made. In the instance of Michèle and Mary's piece, they have *chosen* to highlight ethnicity as an analytic concept rather than racism. Thus, they are not 'disabled', they are mistaken.

The importance of this is in relation to political action. Many feminists employed as academics and teachers have been struggling within their educational institutions for greater equality of opportunities for women through challenging conditions of service, employment practices, gendered segregation in jobs and education, and so on. Rarely do these same women, if white, challenge the racism of such institutions with the same clarity and energy. Indeed, sometimes they see anti-racism as competing with anti-sexism for resources and support – for example, in recruitment of staff or students – thus operating on an assumption that anti-sexism concerns white women and anti-racism concerns black people.

The final point of our conclusion is to repeat that an assumption of automatic sisterhood from white women towards black women is ill-founded. Sisterhood can only be nurtured and developed when white women acknowledge the complex power relationships between white women and white men in relation to black women and black men. This needs to be done not only through acknowledgement, but also through re-examining feminist practices, for example, the practices of Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW) groups. Even if socialist feminists have tended not to get involved in WAVAW activities, they still have a responsibility to challenge the politics of other feminists. This re-examination might lead to some insight, and therefore more appropriate political action, in relation to violence against black people – a violence sometimes perpetrated by white racist women. Another example of an area where black women have had to criticize demands made by white women has been around abortion rights. Yet Michèle and Mary state that 'the right to abortion can unite women across race and class lines' (1985:40). The demand for 'The Right to Choose' and to assert control over our own bodies *can* unite women – including those who may be defined as infertile. 'The Right to Abortion' has often succeeded in dividing women – rights for white women have meant the abuse of black women

The attempt to try and transform socialist-feminism is not a worthy cause but a political necessity. As Barbara Smith says:

White women don't work on racism to do a favour for someone else, solely to benefit Third World women. You have to comprehend how racism distorts and lessens your own lives as

white women – that racism affects your chances for survival, too, and that it is very definitely your issue. Until you understand this, no fundamental change will come about. (Smith, 1982).

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