

# 80 | **ethnocentrism and socialist-feminist theory**

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## **preface**

This paper, of 1985, was a response to the criticisms by black feminists of white socialist-feminist theory (see *Feminist Review* issue 17). We assumed that all white feminists would have to re-assess their work in the light of these telling criticisms. Raising our heads above the parapet, we quickly became a target for attacks from several different positions. We felt, given the ferocity and range of these criticisms, the effect was to silence discussion.

Our article does not ignore race and racism. It contains a section arguing that black/white racial inequality is crucial. The article tackles our own ethnocentrism, rather than racism in society. We were not trying to defend feminism against the charge of racism, but attempting the limited task of re-assessing our own ideas.

Kum–Kum Bhavnani and Margaret Coulson used our article as a peg on which to hang their political criticisms of many variants of modern feminism. But we are no more nor less responsible than they are for the failings of the suffragettes, of radical feminists in the 1970s, or the immigration policies of the British government.

We were very reluctant to have this article reprinted; *Feminist Review* has persuaded us that the climate is now different.

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## **the political context**

Until recently most of what has been published in this country as 'feminist theory' has been written by white women. Most of these women believe, following the ideas of consciousness-raising, in the importance of personal experience as a basis from which to develop political analysis. Most of these white feminist writers are middle-class intellectual women who are immersed in specifically British traditions of education and political thought, largely left and libertarian. Most of them, however, disadvantaged as they may feel as

women, have immense privileges in terms of race and class, which give them access to publishing, the media, teaching, public meetings of various kinds. These privileged white feminists, such as ourselves, have been able to make their voices heard and, to some extent at least, respected.

For some time now, black women have been making these points to us, but most of us have not really listened – too absorbed in playing our own role of oppressed womanhood, too committed to our existing positions, too insistent, perhaps, that we should only speak from our own experience. For many feminists like us, the dramatic struggles on *Spare Rib* in the course of 1983, when ‘women of colour’ castigated the existing collective for its racism, and when women attacking the state of Israel were accused of anti-semitism and those criticizing them were in their turn accused of racism, were so highly charged that we tended to keep our distance. White feminists have found it easier to give support to black sisters in their campaigns than we have to re-examine our own practices. So instead, we might well have subscribed to *Outwrite*, a paper which since March 1982 has covered anti-racist and anti-imperialist women’s struggles and the international feminist movement generally. Clearly, it is important for white women to support and engage with these struggles and to take up issues like deportation and depopulation. But we need to reconsider our existing politics as well as simply adding our support for new campaigns. The title of Hazel Carby’s article ‘White Woman Listen!’ in *The Empire Strikes Back* (1982) rightly indicates the importance and urgency of white feminists paying serious attention to themselves – their own practice and their own ideas.

Although we are well aware that some white women have listened, rather than turned a deaf ear, to the black feminist critiques of their work, we believe that not enough of us have yet attempted any serious re-thinking of our ideas in the light of the points raised by black feminists. Clearly, there is something of a dilemma here for writers like ourselves, for to engage in a public reconsideration of past work is to assume that this work was significant enough for it to be useful to ‘set the record straight’. Hence, there is something pretentious, by definition almost, in the idea of indulging in an auto-critique. In addition, there is the danger of a public breast-beating exercise that enables white women to carry on as before but with the added reassurance of having articulated some fashionable guilt. In the end we decided that these risks had to be faced, largely because our own history in relation to the feminist critique of men and sexism has taught us some lessons that seem uncomfortably relevant, now that we see ourselves on the other side of a political critique.

Black feminist critiques of the work of white women have made two particular points that, taken in conjunction with each other, form an argument not unlike those mounted in the 1970s by feminists against predominantly male political, socialist and academic writers. On the one hand it is argued that black groups are typecast, stereotyped and ghettoized; that the dominant racist ideologies,

especially as they apply to black women, are reproduced rather than challenged in white feminist work. So black women appear as hospital ancillary workers, bus conductors or West Indian matriarchs, or as the docile 'victims' of arranged marriages, in white feminist work as well as in television sit-com. On the other hand, and more likely in view of the fact that the dominant ideological construction of black women is to make them *invisible*, it is argued that they are invisible and unheard in white feminist work. Where crude stereotypes are not being aired, white feminists have simply assumed that whatever they say will apply to all women. White feminists do not bother to say how their arguments about pensions, or pornography, or poetry, would apply to women of different ethnic origin; they do not say whether, or how, a history of racism would give a different meaning to these things. In doing this, white feminists deny the importance of ethnic difference and racism. By ignoring these questions their work claims to be of relevance to all women but is in fact grounded in the specific experience of white women: it is ethnocentric.

These twin criticisms have some familiarity for feminists who still find men both stereotyping women and also assuming that their arguments about men apply to women, often with completely contradictory consequences for their arguments taken as a whole. Surely we as white socialist-feminists have enough experience of the deafness of male socialists to enable us to recognize this disability in ourselves? The writings of black feminists are at present ghettoized and marginalized from the mainstream of white feminist publishing in Britain, as feminist writings have been in the past from the socialist mainstream. In some ways this is a matter of choice: black feminists have different issues to address, different things to say and want their own audience. But it also reflects the lack of concern of the mainstream, which remains unaffected by the black current.

Such criticisms add up, in our view, to a powerful critique of much that has been written by white socialist-feminists. We do not accept that such work is necessarily racist, nor indeed that it is necessarily inadequate as an analysis of the position of women from different ethnic groups. This remains to be seen. We do not necessarily accept that women can be polarized into black and white as has been true in some of these debates. We reject some of the specific allegations of racism that have been made. In particular, it seems wrong that women who have attempted to discuss differences should be accused of racism while those who have avoided the question of race are let off the hook.<sup>1</sup> But we do accept the central point made against white feminists such as ourselves – that our work has spoken from an unacknowledged but ethnically specific position; its apparently universal applicability has been specious. We now believe that such work needs to be overhauled and re-examined in a fundamental way in order to see where the analysis holds and where it needs to be changed in order to overcome the problem of ethnocentrism. In *The Anti-social Family* we attempted to signal our belated anxiety about this in the following passage added to the preface:

**1** A recent example of such accusations would be those made by Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar (1984). Maxine Molyneux's carefully qualified comment that '... the changes brought by imperialism to Third World societies may,

in some circumstances, have been historically progressive', which was accompanied by a discussion highly critical of the impact of imperialism on women (Molyneux, 1981: 4), has been traduced in their statement that 'Black and Third World women are being — told that imperialism is good for us' (1884: 7). This reaction assumes that the only politically correct position on the Third World is that of dependency theory, rejects the possibility of comparative work on women's subordination, implies that white women have no right to views on these questions, and amounts to a militant cultural relativism. Equally to write of the 'racial chauvinism' of Bujra and Caplan (p. 6) or of Lewis's patronizing and condescending understanding of Black women' (p 7) in the same article, reads more as an objection in principle to white women being engaged in such work than as an argument against the substance of what is said or the status of the evidence used.

We do not make it clear whether the analysis we present applies across the several family forms of the different ethnic groups in Britain or is restricted to the dominant 'white' family. The appeal of these different family forms, and their constraints and tensions, are undoubtedly distinct, the more so because they exist as forms of ethnic solidarity in a hostile environment. Nevertheless we believe that the same principles of critique would apply, though it is not for white feminists to work out the detailed form that these would take. Some of the strategies for change that we propose would open up new opportunities for everyone in the society whatever their ethnic origin.

This passage is inadequate not because it is politically wrong — we do still defend a view of the family as profoundly anti-social in varying ethnic contexts — but because it sprang from an ignorance and neglect on our part that pervaded the book as a whole. We simply did not know any of the details to which we thought others might pay attention and had seen no need to acquaint ourselves with these different family forms. It is the blatant ignorance of racism and ethnicity shown in the rest of the book, rather than the argument itself, that made the remark in the preface a hostage to fortune.

The present article is an attempt to begin the work of reconsideration that is needed. We do not think it is the exclusive responsibility of black women to develop an analysis of the interrelation of class, race and gender; we see this project as that of white feminists too. It is, however, one whose theoretical difficulty cannot be overestimated, and we attempt here merely some introductory points with regard to our own past work. In 1982 Hazel Carby wrote that 'The dialogues that have been attempted have concentrated more upon visible empirical differences that affect black and white women's lives than upon developing a feminist theoretical approach that would enable a feminist understanding of the basis of these differences' (1982: 221). But we tend to think that many white feminists at least are still relatively ignorant as to what these empirical differences might be and how they affect existing arguments, and hence we want to start at this basic level.

## **the category of 'race'**

Before looking at these empirical differences we need to reflect on what exactly it is that is being studied. The category 'race' is not a biological one but a social construct; it does not parallel the socially constructed category of gender, since this does at least — however grotesquely distorted in many versions of gender — refer to a biological difference between women and men. The social category of 'race' has no comparable biological referent, and the minor phenotypical distinctions on which racist ideology bases the social category of 'race' are scientific chimaera. (see Rose *et al.*, 1984.) As a social category 'race' is a term that relies on both self-definition and the definitions of others: Daley Thompson may have declared that he was not a 'black athlete' but in this culture the children

of, for example, one white and one Afro-Caribbean parent are regarded as 'black'. The category of 'race' is a social and political one, but there is no biological logic or scientific basis to it (Miles, 1982). *Racism* exists, and *race* is real enough in practice, but we must remember that the reality we are trying to capture in empirical data is not an absolute reality but the construction of a particular time and place.

Debates about the category of 'race' are acutely relevant to feminist politics. Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis in an earlier issue of *Feminist Review*, have argued that the polarization of women through a distinction between black and white is very unsatisfactory; it denies the existence of women who fit into neither category and denies the real complexity of the issues involved. They point out, for instance, that some struggles would affect all migrant women rather than only black women, and that others might affect only women of a particular religious or cultural group. Hence, they argue, the category of 'black' is too wide and too narrow to be a useful basis of political mobilization (1983: 63). Instead they believe it is more useful to speak of *ethnic* division, a term which enables us to analyse more comprehensively the effects of racism and the interrelations between ethnicity, gender and class.

In the course of their argument Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis make some incisive critical points against previous socialist-feminist analysis, to which we shall refer later, and they rightly stress that sisterhood across the boundaries of ethnicity needs working for and cannot be assumed. Their approach to the black/white distinction, and to the women/men distinction, is a deconstructive one: they think that these generalities are unhelpful in formulating goals for campaigns and struggles. ('Political struggles... which are formulated on an ethnic or sexual essence, we see as reactionary' p. 73.) We agree with them that a politics based on biological sex differences, or on supposed racial essences, would be reactionary from a socialist-feminist point of view. The problem is, however, that to adopt a purist line on this would be to distance oneself from possibly a majority of the struggles that have taken place within both feminist and anti-racist movements – since many of these struggles gain their political mobilization from some form of raised consciousness about the experiences that follow from these characteristics. Of course we can point out that slogans such as 'Black is Beautiful!' or 'Sisterhood is Powerful!' rest on a mistaken perception of the categories of race and sex as unitary, thereby denying the specificity of particular historical conjunctures and the complex inter-relations of ethnicity, gender and class. But the danger of this critique is that it is disabling to the large-scale political mobilization for which such slogans are necessary. The politics generated by this critique of essentialism (however correct it may be at an analytical level) are very precise and local.

The arguments put forward by Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis have the effect of rendering racism a phenomenon that is difficult to grasp and disparate in its

effects. To reject the black/white distinction in favour of a concept of ethnic division is to reject the political, social and ideological force of racism in our society. There is convincing evidence that, notwithstanding the substantial oppressions of other ethnic groups in Britain, the level of racism directed explicitly against black people is overwhelming. Back in 1974 Political and Economic Planning (precursor of the Policy Studies Institute) produced decisive evidence of a straightforward colour bar operating in recruitment and so on. Their research involved controls designed precisely to test whether ethnic minorities that were not popularly seen as black suffered similar discrimination, and proved quite conclusively that they did not (Smith, 1975). The evidence was strong enough to fuel the campaigns for legislation and indeed the Race Relations Act of 1975 was a consequence of this proof of anti-black discrimination at an institutional level. In their latest report the PSI defend their use of the black/white distinction by referring to what they still regard as the incontrovertible evidence of 'prejudice and discrimination based on skin colour', as opposed to the complex features of migrant and immigrant peoples and those of non-black ethnic minorities (Brown, 1984: 4). We would agree with Robert Miles and Annie Phizacklea (1980, 1982) that the Irish and the Jews have been, as they put it, 'racialized' at earlier periods of English history, in much the same way that blacks are now. Residues of these racisms can still be mobilized on occasion. But there are many varieties of ethnic prejudice and migrant disadvantage that do not amount to forms of racism, and awareness of these should not be allowed to dissipate the struggle against racism.

These arguments form part of a much wider debate about the nature of social reality and the political implications of different ways of understanding social divisions such as those of gender or race.<sup>2</sup> The position taken by Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis is a relatively mild expression of a deconstructive position that, taken to its logical conclusion *as a guide to political strategy*, is in our view completely disabling of political mobilization on anything other than a very small scale. For these reasons we believe that it is politically important to insist on the economic, social and ideological existence of 'race', and of racism, and on an oppositional definition of 'black', even where the supposed biological determinants of the category are completely rejected.

Ethnicity is different in principle from 'race'. It is not necessary to put it in quotation marks because it refers to differences that exist between peoples: in culture, traditions, history, habits, beliefs and practices. Individuals have choices about their ethnic identity in a way that they cannot have about race. Although different in principle, the social boundaries of the two may overlap. Racialized groups may very well be ethnically differentiated groups as well. This is certainly true in England where racialized groups have been immigrant groups bearing with them un-English cultures and traditions. So the situation of black people in Britain is marked by both racism and ethnicity and, in the discussion of black women that follows, ethnic difference will necessarily be as important a consideration as

**2** The traditional certainties of Marxism and other views of the world based on realist epistemology – the belief that there is a distinction between reality and knowledge – have been challenged by the development of (a) discourse theory and the idea that reality is itself discursively constructed and (b) Foucault's view of episodic history and the dispersal of power into micro-social units. For an elaboration of some of these arguments in relation to feminist and anti-racist politics see the critical discussion of the philosophical assumptions of so-

racism itself. We have used the term 'ethno-centrism' in our title because one accusation that black women have made is that white feminism's racism takes the form of ethno-centrism in excluding the ethnically different views and experiences of black women. But the other accusation, that white feminists ignore the impact of racism on black women and see them as suffering only from sexism, is an equally telling one.

## definitions and sources of data

Definitions relating to ethnicity and race are muddled and politically contentious. Empirical information is often collected on varying criteria and this makes it difficult for adequate comparisons to be made. We propose to follow the most usual definition of 'black' in the British context by using the term to refer to people of Asian, African and West Indian origin. Hence we include people from the Indian sub-continent and their descendants (sometimes excluded in strict definitions of 'black'), African people and their descendants and, most importantly as far as Britain is concerned, people from the West Indies – sometimes known as 'Afro-Caribbean' society or the African 'diaspora' (dispersed peoples) – and their descendants. This definition draws a sharp line between 'black' people and members of other ethnic minorities (Chinese, Cypriot, Iranian and so on, who may suffer comparable conditions in some respects). Amina Mama, writing in *Feminist Review* No. 17 on these and other definitional questions (1984: 34), endorses this general approach; it is also the one followed in the recent survey by the Policy Studies Institute from which unique information is available. We shall discuss in due course some of the difficulties created by this definition, but for the moment it seems the most desirable one to adopt. In practice most British statistics break down the category 'black' into two groups based on Asian and West Indian origin.

In comparison with the situation in the United States the ethnic composition of contemporary Britain falls fairly clearly into the way the Policy Studies Institute (hereafter PSI) entitles its report: *Black and White Britain* (see Brown, 1984). In the US, the black population is complemented by substantial Hispanic, Pacific Asian and American Indian minorities, rendering the empirical data far more complex. We are not in a position to give an adequate discussion here of either the empirical or the political dimensions of race and gender in the US, although obviously some of the debates in Britain are directly influenced by previous developments there. Nor can we address the situation in the rest of Western Europe, where the patterns of race and ethnicity are different again.

The major sources for empirical information are, in the absence of data from the census of 1981 (information about place of birth is not very helpful and the ethnic origin question was in the end rejected because of its political sensitivity), the *Labour Force Survey* and the recent PSI report. The Government *Labour Force*

cialist-feminism in Feuchtwang (1980). For critical discussion of these developments and a defence of a more traditional position see Barrett (1980: chapter 3); Barrett and McIntosh (1982: chapter 3); and the discussion between Barrett and Coward and the editors in *m/f* no. 7 (1982).

*Survey*, 1983, included a significant set of questions on the basis of ethnic origin as defined by the respondent; it is summarized in *Social Trends 15* (Central Statistical Office, 1985). The survey was used to calculate details of the ethnic distribution of the British population (94% white, 1% West Indian, 2% Asian and so on); as far as women are concerned it was of use in that some questions, particularly relating to employment, generated data that was broken down by sex. (The LFS was an improvement on the *General Household Survey*, which has generated data on ethnicity, but based on the interviewer's assessment of ethnic origin and much less reliable.) The PSI survey has provided completely different information in that it was an extremely detailed study using very long interviews with a smaller sample (a nationally representative sample of 5,000 black people of Asian and West Indian origin and a nationally representative sample of over 2,000 white people). It is systematically broken down by sex and covers many topics of interest to feminists, such as household composition and so on. In addition to these major sources there are useful figures in *Britain's Black Population* (The Runnymede Trust and the Radical Statistics Race Group, 1980). In using aggregate figures of these kinds, there is a great danger that the categories that are used ('white', 'Asian', 'West Indian') will be seen as homogeneous. We hope that in challenging old stereotypes we will not be guilty of parading new ones: evidence that one group earns more on average than another does not mean that all its members do, or that they are absolutely well off.

Furthermore, aggregate figures such as these may occlude and mask class variation of a more general kind within ethnic minorities. In what follows we attempt to reconsider some of our previous work in the light of the question of race. Although we believe it to be typical of – certainly indebted to – a much wider body of socialist-feminist work, we feel it is easier and less contentious to re-assess our own work than to take on this much wider field. We begin by looking at the relationship of household and wage labour, move on to broader questions of theory and ideology, and conclude with our critique of the family.

## **household organization and wage labour**

Many socialist-feminists have in the past argued a close connection between the organization of the domestic household and the characteristics of wage labour in capitalist society. In particular it has been argued that the idea of a male breadwinner, whose wage is designed to support a dependent wife and children, has the effect of weakening women's position as workers, establishing men's dominance and women's subordination in the home, and rendering single women with dependents very vulnerable. These theses can also be combined with the idea that women workers form a continuous supply of marginal and flexible labour and that some women workers (particularly married women) may form an industrial reserve army of dispensable labour to cushion the boom and slump of capitalist

production. These analyses can then be tied in with an emphasis on the state and welfare policy as an instrument for regulating the labour supply through altering the level of benefits relative to wages. In our previous work we have argued this line of analysis, or adapted the arguments of other socialist-feminists on these topics, without considering the degree to which the data we cited or the illustrations we used would apply to the distinctive household and wage labour patterns of different ethnic groups.<sup>3</sup>

Taking first the idea of the male breadwinner/dependent wife couple as the model or norm on which the household is typically based in contemporary Britain, we can see that the picture changes substantially if we look at the evidence for black households. In all, 26% of white households in the PSI survey fitted the family model of adults living with their children, compared with 36% of West Indian and 56% of Asian households (Brown, 1984: 51). The explanation of these figures, however, is quite straightforward and has more to do with age-structure than with different cultural patterns. The pattern of immigration has meant that far fewer ethnic minority households, particularly Asian ones, consist of single pensioners. (If we exclude pensioners the white figure rises to about 38%.) More interesting, perhaps, is the question of whether these relatively conventional family-households contain the male breadwinner and full-time housewife couple. We can look at this by examining the 'economic activity' rates for adult women of different ethnic groups. The 1981 *Labour Force Survey* showed that 23% of white women, 42% of West Indian women and 25% of Asian women were in full-time work; 17% of white, 14% of West Indian and 5% of Asian women were in part-time work (Central Statistical Office, 1983: 183). (Unfortunately the figures are not available in this form for later years, but the ratios of full- to part-time work have not changed much.) It is worth noting, against the usual stereotype of the Asian woman as confined to the home, that *more* Asian women work full-time outside the home than white women do – as a proportion of the group – and this is true even if you allow for the fact that there are more older and retired women among the whites. It is also worth noting that the tendency for women to work part-time – the supposedly ideal combination, in western family ideology, of employment and responsibility for children – is shown much more strongly by white women than by either of these ethnic minorities. So at first glance perhaps it looks as if this model of family is one that is characteristic of the white family-household, but less so of West Indian and Asian households.

If we look at women's employment and household situation in more detail a number of features can be seen. The most striking differences are probably those that concern West Indian women: they show most clearly the injustice and irrationality of a 'male family wage' system. Eighteen Percent of all West Indian households are headed by single parents, the vast majority of whom are women, and 31% of West Indian households with children are single-parent units. The corresponding figures for white households are 3% and 10%; for Asian households

**3** The principal references here are McIntosh (1978); Barrett (1980: chapters 5 and 6); and (perhaps the clearest statement of the political implications of these arguments) Barrett and McIntosh (1980).

they are 4% and 5% (Brown, 1984: 49 & 51). West Indian women with responsibilities for dependants are much less likely than white women to receive any financial help, such as maintenance for children, from outside the household, and are much more likely to be single rather than divorced or separated (Brown, 1984: 232). These figures point to the fact that a higher proportion of West Indian women than of white or Asian women shoulder financial responsibilities, especially for children. In general there are far more West Indian female 'heads of household' than there are in the white or Asian samples (32% as against 6.5% Asian and 14% white, using figures that exclude single-pensioner households – Brown, 1984: 51). These facts put into perspective some otherwise surprising features of West Indian women's employment – not only are they more likely to work full-time than white or Asian women, but when they do their average weekly earnings are better. The PSI survey found that whereas the median wages of black men were substantially less than those of white men – as widespread evidence has confirmed – the median wage for women of West Indian origin was £4 a week higher than for white women and £8 a week higher than for Asian women (Brown, 1984: 212). This pattern is weakened if you look only at women in the age range 25–54 years, so it may be that older white women are pulling down the white average (p. 181).

There can be little doubt that a male 'family wage' system is particularly iniquitous when considered in relation to this information about the household responsibilities and dependents of West Indian women. If we turn to some of the features of Asian women's employment, further differences emerge. The traditional stereotype here is that Asian women are immured in the home through religious and family customs, unable to speak the language, kept in purdah or allowed only to work in small family businesses. Parita Trivedi suggests that we abandon this stereotype and look at the facts.

Conjure up a picture of an Asian woman: what comes in your mind's eye? Reflect on it a moment: write it down: draw it. Have the words 'passive, submissive', been a part of your portrayal? Have you imagined a woman beaten down and subjugated by the arranged marriage system – a woman ruled by the wishes of her family – a woman not able to assert her own ambitions and desires – let alone fight against poverty, degradation, repression? If so – this portrayal of an Asian woman is a figment of your imaginings. Racist imaginings which have taken strands from oppressive Hindu practices, imperialist ventures, capitalist projections, and welded these into an inhumane, whole which shackles us down.

(Trivedi, 1984: 38)

It is, perhaps, a tribute to the force of this stereotype that feminists such as ourselves have failed to see the operation of a myth in the Asian context that we have unmasked in the white family. It is the myth of female dependence. It is true that on a world scale the official labour-force participation rates of women in Islamic countries are markedly lower than in other comparable countries and this

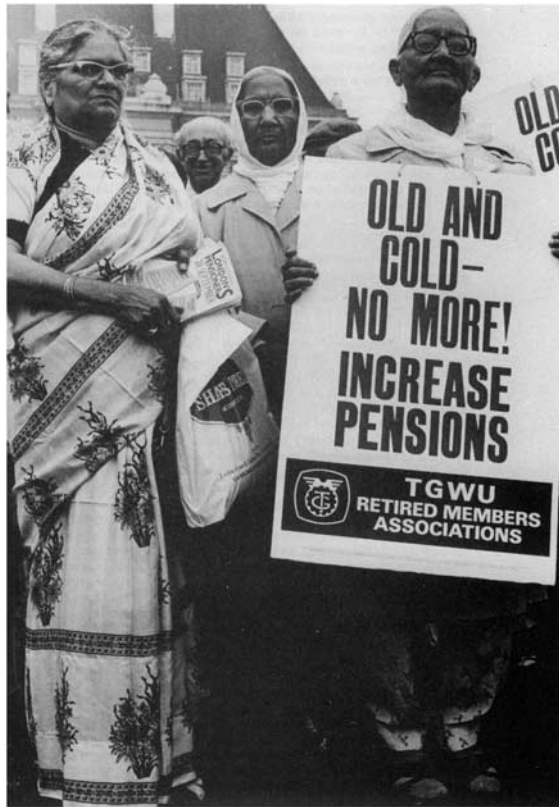
must represent some difference in the position of women. It is probably as much due to the distinctive patterns of social control and economic obligation in the kinship institutions as to simple differences in cultural beliefs about women's role (Haggag Youssef, 1974). It is also probably true that such figures mask the fact that women do huge amounts of productive work, including work that brings in money. White socialist-feminists such as ourselves realize that British white women 'have always worked', that the family wage system has never existed except for among a tiny group of the labour aristocracy in Britain; we recognize the ideological character of the belief that men can support women and that their

Images such as these, showing women trade unionists in India and women workers of Asian origin in Britain, are not commonly used in Britain such is the force of the myth of Asian women's passivity.



Trade unionist from the Punjab demonstrate in Raj Pat Delhi, 1981.

status rises as a result of this ability. Yet Pratibha Parmar gives many examples of academics and policy makers reinforcing beliefs or assumptions about, Asian women's passivity and exclusive home orientation: she argues that these errors rest on a complete misapprehension of the roles of women in the Indian sub-continent. Even among Islamic peoples, where purdah is practised, women principally work outside the home in the farming economy; their labour is described



Pensioners Day of Action, London, 1983.

as 'unorganized', but it is central to the household economy and recognized by all but those who choose not to see it (1982: 254ff). While it is true that the labour force participation rates in Britain are lower for Muslim women (principally from Pakistan and Bangladesh) than for Asian women of Hindu or Sikh background (and Asian rates are lower than white or West Indian ones), the interpretation of these facts is complex. Sheila Allen observes that followers of Islam aspire to the ideal of women not working outside the home but that this is not the case in actuality; however, the belief that women should not work outside the home leads to a serious under-representation of women in the enumeration of workers (1982: 134–5).

Information about the employment of black women adds a further dimension to the picture that white socialist-feminists such as ourselves have drawn of job segregation. Asian women are over-represented in the textile and clothing industries, in repetitive assembly work; they are numerous among Britain's hyper-exploited category of homeworkers. West Indian women figure

disproportionately in low-grade professional work and in the service industries generally (Brown, 1984: 203). Amina Mama has summarized the racialized character of occupational segregation for women in the following eloquent terms:

In accordance with racial differentiation, we are to be found in the lower echelons of all the institutions where we are employed (this in itself reflecting the patterns of a segmented labour market), where the work is often physically heavy (in the factories and mills no less than in the caring professions), the pay is lowest, and the hours are longest and most anti-social (night shifts, for example). In accordance with gender divisions, Black women tend to be employed in particular industries (clothing and food manufacture, catering, transport and cleaning, nursing and hospital ancillary work). Jobs in the 'caring' professions (nursing, teaching, community and social work) exploit oppressive notions of 'femininity', and yet actually involve heavy labour as in the case of nurses, ancillary workers and cleaners.

(Mama, 1984: 26)

These patterns are as yet inadequately theorized but there can be no doubt that discussions of job segregation and a gendered division of labour in employment that simply ignored them (for instance chapter 5 of *Women's Oppression Today*) are profoundly unsatisfactory. Equally and classically ethnocentric are statements such as '... the parallel between the married woman worker and the semi-proletarianized migrant worker cannot be pushed too far...' (Barrett, 1980: 159). Such a sentence can only be written on the assumption that the married woman is white and the migrant worker is male; it falls with all four feet into the ethnocentrism identified in the acute book title *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* (Hull *et al.*, 1982). The phrase 'Ain't I A Woman?', coined by Sojourner Truth in the 1850s and revived in Bell Hooks's book of that title (1982), may not be as redolent of one historical moment as we might think. On the left and within feminism, and as part of the daily work of socialist-feminism, white people slide into ways of expressing things that systematically negate the existence and experience of black women. It is only comparatively recently that the voices of female migrant labourers have been heard above the academic and political arguments that ignored them (see *Migrant Women Speak*, 1978; Phizacklea, 1983).

## some conceptual questions

We want to look first at the concept of *patriarchy* in the light of these debates about race. Socialist-feminists have tended to argue that an analysis of patriarchy as universal dominance of men over women is too simple (see the extended discussion of these issues in Beechey, 1979). We have tended to argue (see, for example, Barrett, 1980: 10–19) that we need a more precise definition of patriarchy – if the term is to be retained – that will encompass differences

4 'I would not, however, want to argue that the concept of patriarchy should be jettisoned. I would favour retaining it for use in contexts where male domination is expressed through the power of the father over women and over younger men. Clearly some societies have been organized around this principle, although not capitalist ones' (Barrett, 1980: 250).

between men in hierarchical situations.<sup>4</sup> If we look at slavery, colonialism and their legacies it is easy to see that black men are systematically barred from positions of power in the social hierarchy. In colonial situations, some black men may be appointed by the colonial authorities to positions of relative power over their own people, though always needing the continued blessing of the white rulers. But most are subordinate to all white people, whether men or women. White women's social power in slave, colonial and racist societies may be restricted to the home, the locality, to the interpersonal relations of mistress and servant and the ritual forms of inter-racial deference, but it is nevertheless an undeniable fact that white women can dominate black men. Radical feminists have sometimes claimed that in such situations white women are really only pawns in a white man's game. But we would argue that the interplay between white power and male power is more complex. A legal provision like the White Women's Protection Ordinance (enacting the death penalty for even the attempted rape of a white woman) in Papua New Guinea under British rule did, in a sense, posit white women as mere symbols of white 'civilization', protected as part of white men's ruling strategy. On the other hand it did give white women, as women, a measure of power over black men, as men. It is not simply a question of the racial hierarchy overriding the sexual: it can actually reverse it in a specifically sexual sphere.

An even more striking instance is the much debated 'Scottsboro Boys' case in Alabama in the early 1930s. Eight of a group of nine black youths were sentenced to death in 1931 for the rape of two poor white women riding a freight train to Chattanooga. They were later reprieved after a campaign led by the Communist Party. It became clear that the women had been bullied or persuaded by a posse of white men to give perjured evidence against the youths. The campaign for reprieve exposed the white women, in all the familiar terms of rape trials, as 'po' white trash', vagrants and prostitutes. Over forty years later Susan Brownmiller (1976: 230–35) comes to the defence of the white women. She knows that they made a false accusation of rape, but it was, she claims, understandable in terms of their oppression as women. Angela Davis criticizes her: 'In choosing to take sides with white women, regardless of the circumstances, Brownmiller herself capitulates to racism. Her failure to alert white women about the urgency of combining a fierce challenge to racism with the necessary battle against sexism is an important plus for the forces of racism today' (1981: 199). The reprieve campaign focused only on racism; the radical feminist position risks leaving it out altogether. At the time it was necessary to take sides, but now it should be possible to see a complex situation in which racism was the dominant theme. The Scottsboro Nine were total victims, nothing they did or said could save them, only a campaign from outside could get them a second, then a third, trial and eventual long prison sentences instead of death. The two white women, on the other hand, were bullied, they were disbelieved and their reputations were besmirched, they were kept in jail for a while before they gave evidence. But the younger one did recant in the second trial: they had some choices.



Jamaican Christening party in London, early 1960s.

In this image we could easily read the father's proud possessiveness and the mother's sad abstraction as a critique of the family. The family form represented here is the same as the white, nuclear stereotype, but does the fact that the people involved are black necessarily make the critique irrelevant?

Examples such as the White Women's Protection Ordinance and the case of the 'Scottsboro Boys' serve to emphasize the complex inter-relations of class, race and gender power structures. The bulk of this article is an attempt to demonstrate how difficult it remains to theorize the relations of race and gender, but this is not the only problem involved. Socialists are currently divided as to whether the social divisions associated with ethnicity and racism should be seen as absolutely autonomous of social class, as reducible to social class, or as having different historical origins but articulating now with the divisions of class in capitalist society. Obviously, it is true that racism, like women's oppression, existed long before capitalism, cannot be reduced to arguments about the supposed needs of capitalism, bedevils socialist societies, and so on. Yet it is also true that, unlike

gender divisions which have to accommodate the fact that women are distributed across the whole of the class structure, the social divisions of race correlate closely, in a society like contemporary Britain, with class divisions. The fact that racial status (unlike gender) is inherited makes possible an association with class, which is also largely inherited. Black workers are clustered in easily identified sectors of the labour force, distinctive patterns apply to particular ethnic minorities, predictions can be made about labour migration and the relative costs of labour in different geographical areas. In these and other ways it is possible to see a correspondence of some kind between class and race, and of course many black activists and writers take a 'class position' on racism and imperialism.

Leaving aside those unresolved questions about the theorization of the race and class relation we would argue that the definition of patriarchy as unambiguous male dominance found in many versions of feminist theory is less able, potentially, to cope with the question of race as a cross-cutting division to the social divisions of gender than a more complex socialist-feminist approach. Socialist-feminists have tended to reject the idea that male dominance is the principal, or only, line of power and exploitation in our society because we see the power and exploitation of social class as irrefutable. Without claiming to see much progress on this question so far, we do nevertheless think that in general the socialist-feminist critique of the concept of patriarchy offers a better way forward to the understanding of race divisions than do the standard feminist definitions that pose men as universally powerful.

In the context of these general issues we see the concept of patriarchy as one with a valuable but specific purchase. We are still of the view that it is not a very useful noun – we see only rarely a society that we might want to call 'patriarchy', whereas we quite frequently see societies we might describe as 'capitalism', 'feudalism' or 'slavery'. (This is a question of what forms the organizing principle of the society.) We do believe, however, that the adjective 'patriarchal' has a specific and illuminating quality as a description of certain types of social relations. When we consider the situations where the relations involved seem to be captured best by the word 'patriarchal', what do we find? We suspect that the common characteristic is that these particular social relations combine a public dimension of power, exploitation or status with a dimension of personal servility. In the experience of women it is this combination of public and formal power with private and personal servitude that is highlighted by the term patriarchal. In relation to slavery Eugene Genovese (1975) has used the term 'paternalism' in a similar sense. He writes: 'Southern paternalism... grew out of the necessity to discipline and morally justify a system of exploitation. It did encourage kindness and affection but it simultaneously encouraged cruelty and hatred.' It was encouraged by the fact that masters and slaves lived closely together and it was 'accepted by both master and slaves – but with very different interpretations – (and) afforded a fragile bridge across the intolerable contradictions of a society

based on racism, slavery and class exploitation that had to depend on the willing reproduction and productivity of its victims' (1975: 5).

Reading Genovese, we can see illuminating parallels with relations of gender: 'Wherever paternalism exists it undermines solidarity among the oppressed by linking them as individuals to their oppressors. A lord...functions as direct provider and protector to each individual or family' (1975: 5). Others have argued that slavery weakened the patriarchal power of male slaves; the similarity of form suggests that this may have been because the personal bond of slave to master is an exclusive one that displaces the personal bond to the patriarchal husband. Patriarchal social relations are characterized by the personal, often physical, exploitation of a servility whose causes are usually economic and always strictly regulated through a hierarchical order. The forms of women's employment in capitalist society owe something to patriarchal attitudes in that the type of work women do for wages is often similar to the work of personal service they undertake in the household. And, taking up Amina Mama's suggestive description of black women's work as both 'feminine' but also heavy, physical labour (1984: 26), we could add that for many black women the ideological model of their work is not that of the wife but that of the servant.

There is not the scope, in an article of this exploratory kind, to consider systematically the conceptual arsenal of socialist-feminist thought, or even the ideas that we ourselves have found the most useful, from the point of view of their adequacy in connection with race. We would like, however, briefly to mention two further concepts whose uses we believe should be examined in a new light. These are the concepts of *ideology* and of *reproduction*. The use of both of these terms should, we think, be reconsidered from two points of view. The first is that of their capacity for description. For example, it is widely stated that an important component of the way in which gender divisions are recreated over time is an 'ideology of femininity' (and masculinity), which has been analysed in many contexts. Yet we know enough to say that the construction of femininity and masculinity at an ideological level differs in different ethnic groups as does the specification of acceptable behaviour in relation to sexuality and so on. If it is difficult, as we suspect, for white women to attempt to summarize these differences without running the risk of stereotyping on the basis of ethnic community, it is still possible for us to familiarize ourselves with the many accounts and analyses of these socialization processes that have been written from a basis of experience. (See, for example, the discussions of upbringing and femininity to be found in Wilson, 1978; El Saadawi, 1980; Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1981; Smith, 1983; Kishwar and Vanita, 1984, and the many relevant fictional works including Walker, 1982; Angelou, 1984; Cade Bambara, 1984.) Also we need to be more aware of the ways in which white femininity has been constructed ideologically through negative and offensive stereotypes and myths about black sexuality and femininity. It is now widely recognized that class prejudice, and

myths about working-class female sexuality such as were fostered in the 19th century, have played an important role in the historical definition of bourgeois feminine respectability and notions of passive feminine sexuality. Perhaps we need to pay more attention to the ways in which a specifically white construction of femininity has been formed through what Trivedi calls 'racist imaginings'. An example of this can be seen in the dramatic representation of the myth of black nymphomania in the treatment of Antoinette Crosby in *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys. And Lucy Bland and Frank Mort comment that there is an equally racist-tradeoff in relation to white femininity and black masculinity: 'The image of women as passive, white, civilized victims worked to intensify notions of its opposite – primitive, animal masculinity, seen as non-white, 'non-European and non-civilized' (Bland and Mort, 1984: 145).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> There is a considerable literature on aspects of the relationship between race, racism, sexuality and gender identity. See Fanon (1967), Hernton (1966), Hoch (1979), Firestone (1971: chapter 5) and Brittan and Maynard (1984).

The question of 'reproduction', seen in terms of the politics of biological reproduction, is one that has received considerable attention in the light of the issue of race. The move from an emphasis on women's right to abortion to one on women's reproductive rights in general represented a move from white feminists' priorities towards a less ethnically specific campaign. While the right to abortion remains a demand that can unite women across race and class lines, we are all now more aware of the extent to which compulsory sterilization and the use of depo-provera, for example, form part of a long-term global picture of the reproductive abuse of women from the Third World and from ethnic minorities. There can be no doubt that the politics of biological reproduction have been decisively shifted, and rendered far more complex, by the attempt to rid existing campaigns of an ethnocentric and class bias. Casting the term in the light of social rather than biological reproduction also generates difficulties, as Hazel Carby has pointed out, since we have as yet no means of dealing with the ways in which black female labour reproduces racialized relations of production through domestic service work (1982: 218).

With both of these concepts, however, the question is not restricted to the substance of the material that they can be used to describe and analyse. It is not only a question of what content you include when you decide to write about the ideology of femininity or about feminism and biological reproduction. For both of these concepts have been developed, at times with some difficulty, in a dialogue with the Marxist analysis of society that they ultimately stem from. For both of these concepts it has been a problem to clarify where their use by socialist-feminists follows or departs from the meaning they carry in Marxist theory in general. From this point of view the question of race as an independent social division is an extremely pressing theoretical one. Do we take the view that the introduction of a third system must necessarily fragment the analysis that was already creaking at the seams over feminism? Or should we regard race as easier to incorporate into a classic Marxist analysis than feminism proved to be? Or should we concentrate on the relations between race and gender and ignore for the

moment the consequences of this for a class analysis? Or should we apparently back down from these academic debates and adopt a more pragmatic political approach by identifying areas of common and progressive struggle? Can we argue that racism, like women's oppression, has independent origins but is now irretrievably embedded in capitalist social relations? These questions remain as unresolved as the debate around the concept of patriarchy that we discussed earlier, but they set the agenda for further work.

## **the critique of the family**

In *The Anti-social Family* we argued for a sweepingly critical stance on the family, although one that rested on an appreciation of the reasons underlying the commitment people felt towards it. Various lines of criticism could be, or have been, levelled against our argument. Hazel Carby argues (in response to Barrett, 1980) that the family can operate as a prime source of political and cultural resistance to racism; that the degradation of black female sexuality has come about through white racism and not within the black family; that the denial of career opportunities to Asian girls comes about through white assumptions about their family ideology rather than through those families themselves (Parmar, 1982); that white feminists assume western romantic marriage to be better than models of the family with which they are unfamiliar; that the British state's pathologizing of the black family has influenced progressive opinion; that these attitudes all betray a patronizing (imperialist) approach towards so-called underdeveloped societies and their family customs (Carby, 1982: 214–7). These points could be complemented by the terse remark of Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis that 'the family may not be the major site for women's oppression when families are kept apart by occupying or colonizing forces (as in Lebanon or South Africa)' (1983: 73).

Before dealing with these political arguments we think it would be useful to go back over some of the evidence we used to support our case with a view to seeing whether or not it would apply to the family forms of black people in Britain. Our first major point referred to the family's central role as the reproducer of class division; the evidence we adduced showed how the family passed on privilege and disadvantage. The PSI survey of 1982 compared the data with that generated in 1974 to look at social mobility among the black population during that period and arrived at depressing conclusions (Brown, 1984: 179). Shirley Dex's study of employment among young second-generation immigrant West Indian women reveals higher levels of mobility, and aspiration, although it is not clear how much this is specifically the product of the high employment-orientation of West Indian women in general relative to other groups of women (1983: 69–70). It seems likely that a consideration of ethnic variation would not cause a major upset to the analysis of the family as an institution that passes on existing inequalities from

one generation to the next: certainly there is no evidence from which to argue that ethnic-minority families are exempted from this general criticism.

Our discussion of individualism would have been written differently and would have recognized the cultural specificity of ideas about romantic love and marriage. Our critique of marriage rested on one particular model and did not discuss the central issue of arranged marriage and the debates on this subject among feminists. We did not look at the extent to which our critique of the family as a privatizing influence on women would be supported or challenged by a comparison, for instance, between white and various Asian family forms; nor did we consider the effect of family businesses or self-employment of heads of households on the woman's situation. Our discussion of housework would have been different if we had considered ethnic variation, and equally our treatment of systems of division of income within the household rested exclusively on the white traditions. On all these questions the information needed to answer them properly is difficult to come by, and we do still believe that white women are not the best placed to tackle these specific matters. This may change as the general level of awareness among white feminists such as ourselves rises, but at present it would seem contentious for us to deal with these questions on the basis of little experience and sketchy reading.

However, we would argue forcefully that nothing has so far emerged that would lead us to modify our general critical stance towards the family. Let us take first the argument that the enforced splitting up of families makes a critical position irrelevant. Of course it is true that war, apartheid and restrictive immigration laws have the effect of splitting up families (although so, of course, do progressive national liberation struggles or women's peace camps).

We object as militantly as anyone else would to the forced separation of individuals from their nearest loved ones. And we object to the forced splitting of a people that wishes to remain together. But to collude in the belief that all that is wrong is the splitting of families is to reproduce their power and privilege. As we frequently see, many white people will sign petitions or take some action in favour of a particularly heart-rending 'family' case of children being separated from their parents or something similar. But to argue for these personal family cases, or for the rights of a certain narrowly defined category of dependants, is to accept the underlying logic behind the immigration laws of this country: it is to agree that blacks are a problem and that 'we' only want a few of them. It is also to impose on other people 'our' own (nuclear-family based and heterosexist) ideas of what a family should be. The problem is that the immigration laws enforce these rigid familial definitions. The opposition should not collude in a reactive way, but should contest the legal and procedural racism involved.

Furthermore, without wishing to condemn from the outside the family forms of other ethnic groups, we cannot adopt a position of total agnosticism or relativism.

To do so would be to fail to give our support to the many feminists who have expressed their own criticisms based on their experience. To take an international example, the collection of papers from the journal *Manushi* focuses clearly on the oppressive character of specific family practices and experiences in an Indian context – using headings like ‘Family Life: the Unequal Deal’, ‘Women against Dowry’ or ‘Married, Marketed and Murdered’ (Kishwar and Vanita, 1984). Numerous other examples could be listed, including those within contemporary British politics (such as the campaign to set up a network of refuges for Asian women who have been battered) where surely white feminists should show their solidarity (though we agree they should not leap first to the attack) with other feminists expressing a sharp critique of their family system. In saying this we are aware of Audre Lorde’s warning about the danger of white feminists drawing on the experience of black women only to criticize: ‘Did you ever read my words, or did you finger through them for quotations which you thought might valuably support an already conceived idea concerning some old and distorted connexion between us?’ (Lorde, 1983).

We would argue that what white feminists should develop is a much clearer and full understanding of the different forms that a critique of the family might take in varying contexts. The white Western critique of the housewife’s isolation in a nuclear-family box living on a diet of tranquillizers is completely inappropriate in other contexts. This is not to endorse platitudes of the order that extended families are better than nuclear ones, for we need to acquaint ourselves with the ways in which they may be less egalitarian or more patriarchal, and be more directly controlled by a male head of household. Our aim, in the meanwhile at least, should surely be to develop feminist knowledge of different family forms and, whilst resisting ethnocentric or culturally relativist extremes of opinion, try to work on bases for some solidarity.

In conclusion, we want merely to summarize briefly what we have tried to deal with in this piece. We have recognized elements of ethnocentrism in our previous work, and have pointed to important issues where the analysis we have presented has been seriously marred by a failure to consider ethnicity and racism. We have also looked at the ways in which debates about race, class and gender might alter the ways in which theoretical concepts have been used in socialist-feminist work. We have given almost exclusive emphasis to a comparison between white women and black, focusing on women of West Indian and Asian origin in Britain. We are aware that these communities are not themselves homogeneous (particularly the Asian communities here lumped together), and that we have completely excluded consideration of many other forms of racism and ethnic disadvantage. We believe that there are issues on which women can work together and hope that, at least, this article might contribute to an atmosphere of more constructive dialogue.

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