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What Do Women Want? Woman Centered Values and the World As It Is.

At the end of her recent book 'Contemporary Feminist Thought' Hester Eisenstein writes:

'From the history of feminist thought since 1970, one can glean three options for women. First there is the option of agreeing to compete in the male-defined world of politics on its own terms

Second, there is the option of withdrawing from that world, out of pessimism as to its essentially patriarchal nature, creating instead, another world of female retreat. . . .

Finally, there is the option of entering the world and attempting to change it, in the image of the woman-centred values at the core of feminism.'

She believes that 'only this last option offers any hope'.¹ I agree with her. The first two are dead ends for the great majority of women. But the third course is a perilous and difficult quest. How do you create and assert an alternative in a world that is not your own? How can such an alternative prevail or become a defining element for transformation?

The strategy of active engagement involves alliances. Hester Eisenstein presents this as choice. For many women, it is a given and the problem as they face it is, what kind of overall political movement can allow women autonomous expression and accomplish its general aims. For example, Judy Kimble and Elaine Unterhalter consider the experience of A.N.C. women's struggles in South Africa. They point out that what women have wanted and what they have achieved have both been closely linked with the different phases of South African liberation struggle. Ask, 'If we start from the position that only women are able to defend on a large scale, and in any significant way, their own emancipation, the point that arises is, what are the conditions necessary for women to organise themselves and defend their inter-

ests, as they define them, in relation to the broader struggles in their society?"²

They approach the dilemma of strategic combination and the autonomous defense of the specific needs of women from the opposite pole to Hester Eisenstein but ask essentially the same political question. How is an alternative to be created which can prevail? What are the conditions in which this is possible?

While Hester Eisenstein is concerned with modern feminist thought there is a lot to be learned also from the tussles and struggles of other subordinated groups as well as the strategies and debates of movements for the liberation of women before as well as after 1970. There are certain discernible similarities in patterns of oppression.

A contesting consciousness

All the attempts of subordinated groups to counter established images, values and visions are at a disadvantage against the powerful. The dominant culture pervades. Even its negation comes from within its fastness. Moreover the dominant culture asserts what is, it is of more substance than dreams of what could be. It convinces more readily. The wants and desires of those who are oppressed are necessarily formed within the existing order. The very effort to break is thus conceived in alien terms. Our dreams of freedom come from unfreedom. Conversely apparent submission breeds its own subversion, as women know so well.

Luisa Paserini explores this problem in a study of the responses of working class Italians remembering their lives under fascism. Instead of the polarities of absolute resistance, absolute abnegation, she argues for approaching consciousness as a

problematic potentiality, never guaranteed yet nevertheless possible. Here is the clue to the ambivalence of 'needs' which always combine both a reference to the full potential of human nature and, on the other hand a partial acceptance of the existing order which denies their realisation.³

We all live within this ambivalence in varying degrees. There are certain moments in which the balance shifts towards the expression of potential needs, but more commonly acceptance and resistance are locked together.

For example, Anna Pollert, in a study of Bristol women factory workers in the 1970's, describes how the women deal with the collisions between views of their sexual destiny and their circumstances as workers. The women recognised their time at work was going to last

throughout their lives, yet they still feel a man should be supporting them. One observed:

I don't really believe in married women working. Well 'cos there's not much work anyway, and they ought to make room for people what've got to lead their own lives.⁴

Anna Pollert comments:

What emerge are the fragmentary ideas of unresolved common-sense . . . because it is a partial acceptance and partial rejection of ruling conceptions of the world it is full of contradictions.⁵

This view of a subordinate culture as 'problematic potentiality' means we avoid regarding oppressed people as either helpless victims—determined by social structure—or as possessors of an idealised virtue in permanent rebellion. It also makes for scepticism about the political creation of alternative values which deny borrowings.

Susan B. Anthony's assertion in 1871: "Away with your man-visions! women propose to reject them all and begin to dream, dreams for themselves," has the attraction of springcleaning.

But ways of seeing are not so neatly dusted down. After the tremendous upheaval of the Russian revolution, young communists envisaged a new proletarian culture which broke completely from bourgeois culture. Against this Trotsky argued that a working-class culture could not be contrived in this manner, but had to draw upon the cultures it opposed. If feminism seeks to present a contesting culture, it too draws on the dominant male-defined world.

Values are not intact. And nobody has the patent. They can have radical and conservative meanings depending on political emphasis and historical context.⁶ Freedom, collectivity, difference, recognition and connection can be used and balanced differently by popular movements of the right and left. Mothers and Amazons can be recruited by both sides. So already 'images of the woman-centred values at the core of feminism' has become a phrase with considerable risks attached to it. Our values, even in opposition, are part of existing culture. They are not created by an effort of will. They come from our own, often contradictory, perceptions of where we find ourselves historically.

A political idea, 'feminism', assumes a certain clarity, even programmes of action. But living a culture makes for confusion. A new combination of opposing ideas and a contesting culture of assumptions is vital for a political and social movement. But how do we define such values? Where should we concentrate our efforts; on establishing an alternative or taking it into the established order for instance?

Choices like these are of great strategic significance. They do not come easily. While these are dilemmas shared by all groups resisting oppression for women, there is of course a specific problem. Biological difference, social difference and social inequality constantly slither into confused combination.

Janet Sayers, in 'Biological Politics' examines both the feminist and anti-feminist perspectives. She also attempts to disentangle the various strands. For instance she remarks on mothering:

Although the biological differences between the sexes in relation to reproduction affect the situation of women and men in society there is no good evidence to show that these differences *determine* women's traditional role in childcare.⁷

Sayers argues that in recognizing elements in how the material circumstances of women differ from those of men we need to take biology into account—along with other factors. To state the obvious, pregnancy is possible for a woman but not for a man. There is a difference.

On the other hand as Sayers points out pregnancy is not just a biological affair. It is experienced psychologically in different ways by both the same and by different mothers. Equally it is a psychological experience for the father—or for a close companion male or female. Similarly the social meaning of pregnancy has changed historically and varies both between and within cultures.

There is a further dilemma for feminists. The attempt to transform the existing relations between the sexes touches such fundamental concepts and feelings about our identities that the external arguments of reason are frequently merely skirting the surface. This is true for both sexes. While women have the greatest interest in change, men too can certainly desire to shift the existing social forms of masculinity and femininity. But on both sides we are also desperate to hang on to certain valued differences—though there is no general agreement on which are to be ditched and which preserved, either between or amongst women or men.

It is evident that human beings live contradictions. We are not neat ideological packages. A simple political resolve towards sexual equality can go through an infinite number of psychological sausage machines. This is not to say you cannot change human nature. Just that it is as well to keep a sense of irony when you try and put 'the personal is political' into practice. There is a great resilience in what is known and customary. Changing deeply held cultural assumptions is not a linear matter.

For these last two reasons it is vital that feminist politics assert the values of women's existing social experiences as a means of gaining

space for women to determine, in particular historical circumstances, what they want to hang on to. For fear of losing the hold over deciding how we are different can provoke a separatist withdrawal or a profound conservatism. But the 'woman-centred values' which arise from the social and psychological experiences of women have to be not only about hanging on to what we know, but moving outwards to transform the dominant male defined culture, being in the process themselves transformed. Only thus can we avoid, in Simone de Beauvoir's words, "falling once more into the masculine trap of wishing to enclose ourselves in our differences."⁸ The tension between asserting difference and finding recognition and connection with other groups is not easy to maintain in practice. The quest for a new equilibrium is a vital force in feminist politics. Yet simply shifting the balance of male-defined politics is insufficient for this would be to contain 'woman centred values' within a separate sphere.

As Joan Kelly observed in 'The Doubled Vision of Feminist Theory' "women's place is not a separate sphere but a position within social existence generally."⁹

Conflicting Values

But women inhabit different bits of social existence and consequently our notions of what is woman-centered and what is not vary. For instance the sharing of domestic tasks has been a key demand in the modern women's liberation movement. Young educated women radicalised in western capitalist countries by feminism perceived housework as oppressive and demeaning.

But in *Fighting Two Colonialisms*, a study of women in Guinea-Bissau in the 1970's, Stephanie Urdang shows how women gained social status and access to political power in the guerrilla movement by transferring their traditional skills in cooking to a new revolutionary context.¹⁰ Many of the women did not regard this as a transitional phase but as freedom. The questioning of sex-roles is thus peculiar to particular kinds of society in which assumptions have shifted about what men do and women do as a consequence of material changes. The perception of certain divisions of activity as unjust and coercive varies. It is always within a specific social and historical context. Similarly the emphasis of the modern women's liberation movement on the oppressive aspects of family life presents difficulties for Asian feminists in Britain resisting the ruthless separation imposed by immigration laws,¹¹ or for South African women who point to the destruction of 'normal family life' as one of the most grievous issues of apartheid.¹²

Once when I was speaking at a trade union college in the United States about why we had argued for an autonomous women's movement in the late 1960's and early 1970's, I mentioned the struggle we had felt around our dependence on men. A young black American woman in the audience observed dryly that she would like to have some of this dependence for a change—then she could reject it.

Women also experience other forms of subordination in society. There are many instances when these override sex oppression. Selina Cooper was a working class socialist and eloquent speaker for women's suffrage in the North of England. She resisted all blandishments to leave the labour movement for a purely suffrage platform. Her daughter used to write letters for her and remembers her answering one such request from a middle-class feminist: "I may have a good voice, and I may be a good orator, but my power would finish if I came over."¹³ The oppression of women cannot be artificially abstracted from the web of social relationships.

Nor is it only a matter of divergent predicaments but of specific political traditions. Feminism, with its strong radical-liberal heritage, tends to emphasise individual autonomy. It has greater difficulty with the other side of the coin, the human need for close association. The terms in which arguments for the liberation of women are conceived and expressed are not hermetically sealed from contemporary social and political thought. If feminism carries the radical impulse for personal freedom it has also drawn in certain periods on communitarian dreams of harmonious, open connection. 'Woman-centred values' might be argued for with quite differing political emphasis among different classes and in diverse historical situations.

The origin of the modern women's liberation movement, for instance, owed a great deal to the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left in the United States.¹⁴ The impetus to form an autonomous movement was in opposition to the male-domination in a movement which preached no leaders, equality, self-expression, participatory democracy and community but did not live up to its own ideals. The women's liberation groups transposed these values believing with the optimism of new social movements that sisterhood could avoid the inadequacies of organisations controlled by men. Arguments for the liberation of women will thus be influenced by and influence shifts in thought.

Before the Civil War many nineteenth century American feminists emphasised self-reliance, self-development, self-culture. By the 1870's they, like other exponents of radical-liberal thought, were troubled by urban crowding, sanitation, crime and labour unrest. They were more likely to seek social order and harmony.¹⁵ This could lead to both

conservative and reforming politics. For an organisation like the Women's Co-operative Guild, founded in Britain in the 1890's, a new co-operative society was to be brought about by basket-power. The woman with the basket, the working class housewife, symbolised the values of caring and sharing which were to replace competition, private selfishness and greed. Both freedom and community can be presented in terms of women-centred values.

Changes in historical context can alter the social meanings of ideas about women's role regardless of the ground chosen in which to define it. Among the utopian socialists in the early nineteenth century, the theme of the woman messiah who was to redeem humanity and inaugurate a new era of co-operation and harmony was persistent. Among the Owenites in Britain, Goodwyn and Catherine Barmby wrote of the mission of women. Goodwyn argued that the woman-power of gentleness was to prepare the way for the equilibrium harmony of community.¹⁶ This was not literally to be the rule of women but the release of new ascendent principles, gentleness, harmony, co-operation. These were active in women and dormant in men. In their assertion a new balance was to be attained. The desire to create a new culture of everyday life made these opposing alternative values an important element in early socialism.

Ironically the virtues of womanly gentleness, of love versus power, were to become the characteristics of the Victorian 'Angel at the Hearth'. In this context they served to consolidate rather than transform the male-dominated bourgeois world. As Barbara Taylor says:

Love, which the Communists wished to see "socialise our planet" was rhetorically roped back into the bedroom and the kitchen. . . .¹⁷

Ideas of a specific role or vision for women as representing alternative values are double-edged. They can attract women to political movements and give them a place. But they can also contain aspirations which might be antagonistic to the terms in which the role is set.

One of Gandhi's maxims was 'if non-violence is the law of our being, the future is with women'. Women from the middle-classes, peasant and low caste women participated in Gandhi's programme of non-cooperation and boycotts against the British. Parita Trevedi points out that Gandhi made it possible for women to have a place in the anti-colonial movement though his own ideal of Indian womanhood was restricted. The connection between women and non-violence may have been politic and established a form of action for large numbers of women. But the inherent non-violence of women was another matter as Trevedi observes. In Calcutta in 1928 a revolutionary women's

student group was busy recruiting and training women in study circles. They gave lessons in cycling, driving and armed combat.¹⁸

Strategic focus

There is a real dilemma of strategic focus for feminists. For where you begin to concentrate your efforts to make changes necessarily shapes what you want to preserve and what you desire to change. Here again in practice it is extremely difficult to give weight to what particular groups of women value in the existing society and allow it a wider radical potential. Are we to emphasise making an alternative from those areas of experience traditionally associated with women? Do we emphasise organisation on the same terms as men or claim special recognition and protections for our differences? Charlotte Perkins Gilman's novel *Herland* published in 1915 presents an imaginary woman-centred society as a means of criticising male domination. Motherhood is the central feature of this society and the values of nurturing are extended as an alternative culture.¹⁹ Gilman thus shifts the existing assumptions of woman-centred values beyond a separate sphere into the wider context of society. She is in fact suggesting how to move from existing needs to the desire for a new culture.

But these radical implications are checked because in elevating motherhood into a general social principle, this interpretation of alternative values devalues the aspirations of women who do not want to be mothers, and restricts possibilities for women who are mothers but do not believe mothering is the sole determinant in identity and destiny.

In 1918, Rebecca West argued that before women had the vote they had been compelled to prove their equality with men on men's terms.

Just as, if we had been considered inferior to monkeys, it would have been our duty to dance on barrel organs and hold out cups to passers-by for pennies But we want women to represent something quite different; a love of life that will let no child starve, no sick person suffer for lack of any help that human hands can bring, no old man die except in ease, and that we will fight for conditions that make health and security the common lot.²⁰

This radical and generous interpretation of woman-centred values was important in bringing a wider purpose and opening a public sphere for women in labour politics. It transcended sectional interest. It recognized and broadened the skills of working-class housewives into social concerns. But it did not question the inequalities which remained between men and women, in the labour force and indeed in the organised politics of labour.

Attempts by feminists in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century to raise the status of the women as home-makers by applying scientific management to domestic life were similarly ambivalent. The craft of orderly, household management was a means of recognising the value of women's domestic contribution. But in making housework and mothercraft scientific, the means of seeking alternatives by improvements in paid work were not necessarily opened up. Feminists in Germany and elsewhere who tried to improve the conditions of motherhood became entangled also in eugenic argument of racial superiority.²¹

It is not easy to assert the importance of those aspects of women's material and social circumstances which differ from those of men and extend their implications as a basis for liberation and social transformation. Marx and Engels put the emphasis on proletarian emancipation. They minimised the structural conflict between men and women as workers. For late nineteenth century marxists these became superstructural problems of 'prejudice'. By arguing that all culture and values would change after proletarian emancipation it became less imperative to try and tackle these on the spot. Marx and Engels avoided fixed utopias of abstract alternatives. Equality with a man who is himself exploited has obvious limitations. However, their approach tended to collide all forms of oppression into class exploitation. Aware that notions of abstract equality did not tackle existing inequalities, marxists supported protective legislation as a means of preventing women workers from being exposed to the harsher aspects of exploitation.²² But this attempt to use the state to reduce the economic power of the employer, could also institutionalise inequalities between men and women at work. And it took the existing division of labour between men and women in the home as given.

The difficulty of strategic focus continues to arise whenever women seek not simply to describe what is wrong but to make tangible improvements. For example in Britain early this century labour movement women pursued a range of different priorities. While there were shifts within the organisations and overlapping of ideas and membership, after World War I these amounted to three strategic approaches. All had their strengths and all had their blind spots. Communist Party women emphasised pay, access to skills and rank and file organisation. Their perspective tended to disregard working-class housewives. The women's organisations of the Labour Party stressed the specific values women brought to socialism as a result of their experiences as wives and mothers. This gave a place for the housewife in the Party but tended to duck the issue of equality at work. The Women's Co-operative Guild also stressed improvements in

women's domestic lives through co-operative forms of housework and distribution. But they argued these should be a means of extending women's opportunities for involvement in broader political issues and the improvement of wages and conditions in employment.²³ It was to prove a long haul.

The problem of strategic focus has arisen around the issue of self-organisation—which has been difficult for women workers—and negotiation with the existing powers of the state for protection. In the United States the Women's Trade Union League shifted from the emphasis on organisation to campaigning for an eight hour day and a minimum wage.

Extending women-centred values

Is the answer then to attempt an all-embracing analysis which takes every element into account? Is this possible, or will we always fail to see some crucial link? Socialist feminists in Britain in the 1970's were excruciatingly conscious of the dangers of focusing on particular aspects of women's lives while ignoring others. This resulted in such long and complex accounts of the interconnecting nature of the oppression of women that it was hard to see the wood for trees. Theoretical subtlety has its own trap. It can produce a paralysis. We can be so anxious not to make mistakes that we fail to exert and concentrate our power for particular changes—because no specific change contains the ultimate solution. You can know all and do nothing. As circumstances grew harder the need to come up with a more explicit strategic direction became more urgent.

This has led to a reassessment of the terms in which waged work and the family are conceptualised. In the early 1970's, in opposition to the emphasis argued for by Engels, on the entry of women into paid employment, socialist feminists in Britain argued that women's inequality and subordination were part of material life as a whole. Changes in paid employment had to be accompanied by changes in how work was divided at home.* Well this still needs to be said and we are still saying it.

But in making these obvious connections, feminists tended to succumb to dominant versions of marxism in which material life narrowed into struggle at the point of production. Even in opposition, the equivalent blinkered regard focused on the family. It either became a factory in which the products happened to be human or even more oppressively a kind of Hobbesian sweat-shop based entirely on coercion and violence. Or for the more Leninist inclined there were labor-

*This debate was international. Two Canadian women, Margaret Benston and Peggy Martin were influential in Britain in the early 1970's.

ious attempts to insert domestic activity into the existing body of marxist thought with the ponderous arithmetic of surplus value.

Analysis moved away from descriptions of how relationships were experienced by particular women in specific families. These were predominant in the early women's liberation newsletters and pamphlets and they presented oppressive social relationships and a rebellious consciousness in much more complex terms. They spoke more of Paserini's 'problematic potential' in fact.

It is worth noting that an attempt to probe family relationships more deeply is appearing in some of the new feminist autobiographical writing. It is popular perhaps because of a sensed discord between experiences and conceptual frameworks. In re-working personal reminiscence women are exploring memory as a source for re-creating the politics of women-centred values yet again. Sue Himmelweit in a collection of feminist writing *What is to be done about the family* argues that the perspective needs to shift from what is similar in domestic and waged work to what is different. There are benefits as well as disadvantages in both. Why not aim for the best from both worlds?

... that is not to say that we should be arguing that the relations of domestic labour, anymore than those of wage labour, should be the relations of labour under socialism... Rather we should be attempting to create new relations for all work, in which those of domestic labour and those of wage labour which are the most humanizing are blended, perhaps together with new elements as yet unknown, to the exclusion of those which we know to be exploitative and oppressive.²⁴

In the debate on what kind of alternative economic strategy the Labour Party should adopt against the devastation of monetarism, Anna Coote wrote that it was necessary to take unpaid as well as paid work into account, relations in the family and community as well as between labour and capital. She asked why not start economic strategy with the question "How shall we care for and support our children?" in terms of a collective responsibility for the next generation.²⁵ I think myself that we have to take the question of caring for dependents and producing and distributing the goods we need equitably, together.

The new political role of local government in Britain in the 1980's and the development of local economic strategies have meant that feminists have been part of a practical move to put these ideas into effect. Women's employment and childcare for example are seen as linked in the GLC's London Industrial Strategy.²⁶ The links are also made to changing shopping, transport, the design of the city. (A Canadian example of concern to change the organisation of daily life is Meg Luxton's book *More Than A Labour of Love* about Flin Flon

miners' wives.) The changes in emphasis have been partly pragmatic responses to the possibilities of action in a period of social disintegration, political defeats for labour and economic recession. But they also indicate a determined resolve to change male-defined terms of reference.

In 1948 women made up less than 1/5th of trade union members. Now one in three trade unionists in Britain are female. Women have been arguing that men in trade unions need to change both their attitudes to women members and the structure and purposes of trades unionism. In *Getting it Together* Jenny Beale looks at what equality in trade unions means.

Trade unions are numerically dominated by men, especially the higher levels. This has meant that traditional ways of organising and bargaining have been shaped by men rather than women. Given this background, what is equality for women? Does it mean giving women the opportunity to learn to behave, think and act like men, to do their jobs, adopt their style of leadership and learn their committee rules. This is surely a false equality. It requires only that women change. Men carry on the same, while women lose some of their femaleness. It results in the situation that Pam, a shop-steward in a brewery describes. 'I'm not a woman here. I'm just one of the lads'.²⁷

There has been an insistence from socialist feminists, especially in the last few years in Britain that women's values are not just for women. Men should change too. The changes women want affect men too. In this sense 'woman-centred values' are moving beyond difference. But there is considerable confusion among women and men about what form these changes should take and considerable conflict between conscious political intent and less conscious private desire. Nor is there agreement among women about what we want to hang on to and what we want to change. Celia, a member of the office workers union APEX summed it up when she told Jenny Beale:

'I like frilly nighties the same as everyone else, but it does not mean you have got to sit there like a tin of prunes. Not that I could sit there like a tin of prunes anyway.'²⁸

Despite confusion there has been a persistent tendency in the contemporary women's liberation movement to start off with a women's demand and then pursue its general political implications. In this context too, 'woman-centered values' are being taken beyond difference into many areas of social existence. Audrey Wise, an active trade unionist who became a Labour Party M.P., summed this up as the need both to 'generalise feminism and feminise the general'.

The concerns of women bear on the lives of men. Their conceptualising also shifts the bearings of what is assumed to be the general concerns of politics. For instance abortion and the idea of woman's right to control her own body arose in the Women's Liberation Movement as women's demands as women. But in many countries the abortion campaigns have also raised a whole range of questions about health, fertility, environment, law and the state. Ros Petchesky's essay on "Reproductive Freedom" probes further behind the slogans. She suggests how the concept of control over the person, rooted in the radical tradition of thought and the marxist approach to the social relationships of reproduction could combine. She also touches on a problem which transcends the existing relation of individual and society. Can we imagine a society in which we felt such intimate association one with another that we would freely balance the individual desire to bear a child with the needs of other people in the society? Could this be possible in a non-oppressive situation? Or will there always be a certain tension between individual needs and social needs?²⁹ Here is difference and connection again in a wider context. 'The personal is political' like all slogans has its snags and limits but it has contributed to a creative impulse for change in political structures and concepts.

In the 1970's women's liberation developed a politics which starts from questioning the given in what is seen as female destiny in the dominant culture and then moves outwards to look at the social structures and relationships in which women learn to be women. This led many of us to argue that creating the conditions for women to organise and defend their interests as women meant not simply making links and forming alliances with other subordinated groups. It meant defining and recreating the way in which the overall strategy of how people can combine against inequality, privilege, power and injustice is conceived. I think *Beyond the Fragments* which Hilary Wainwright, Lynne Segal and I wrote in the late 1970's can be seen as a 'fragment' of a wider impetus among socialist feminists. As often happens, it crystallised an understanding which was about to be overtaken by events.

Another source of radicalisation appears when women find they are prevented by external forces from doing what they feel they should be doing as women. In Britain these have become more marked in the 1980's because of the recession and monetarist policies. Outbreaks of rebellion among the young unemployed in the inner cities and subsequent arrests brought many black mothers into organised defence groups. The peace movement has swept many women into politics,³⁰ and women both black and white have been especially active against

cuts in public services. It is noticeable that in defending their jobs many women explain the caring skills they bring to low paid jobs like cleaning in hospitals and schools. They are defending a principle of responsibility to others and to the future. The convergence of these two, the move away from established notions of feminine destiny, and the need to defend valued elements within what is assumed to be women's sphere indicate how alternative values can be asserted and transformed.

Members of the National Union of Public Employees in Belfast, school and hospital cleaners and 'dinner ladies' decided that as part of their campaign to defend the National Health Service they would find out about the history of working class women's health in Belfast. They felt critical of existing provision. They wanted to defend it but also to make it better. Speaking at the Irish Labour History Society meeting in September, 1984, Anne McGonnagel said: "We want to advance. You cannot really do that unless you know where you have been." So they all turned into historians and began interviewing one another, interviewing friends, grannies. As well as uncovering a devastating record of women's experiences of pregnancy, menstruation, illness, they have begun to see one another with new insight. They are working over these personal experiences, reinterpreting them and making connections. And the existence of a feminist movement makes the connection explicit. The concepts become a new common sense. Anne McGonnagel states firmly, "we are never going to be invisible again. We have settled for too little in the past. We working women are part of history. History is us."

A similar process is at work among thousands and thousands of women in mining communities who have organised and cooked food, spoken, picketed and demonstrated in the current miners' strike against pit closures in Britain. There is the same sense of responsibility for the future, for safeguarding the needs of a community, which has emerged among public service workers. The caring, domestic, concerns of women are being reinterpreted and extended beyond the immediate home. The context is at once an extremely political strike about the control of energy resources and the fact that feminist ideas are at hand. At their first demonstration in May 1984 in Barnsley, Yorkshire, Lorraine Bowler told ten thousand women from the mining areas all over Britain:

We cannot allow this Government to decimate our industry and our communities. Is this what we want for our kids?

In this country we are not just separated as a class. We are separated as men and women. We, as women have not often been encouraged to be involved in trade unions and organising.

Organisation has always been seen as an area belonging to men. We are seen to be the domesticated element of a family. This for too many years has been the role expected of us. I have seen change coming for years and the last few years have seen it at its best.³¹

She said in her home now, "there are arguments now as to whose turn it is to go on a demonstration or a picket, and whose turn it is to babysit. Talk about job sharing."

The women also note that the increasing involvement of some of the men with children make them readier to argue not only in terms of the industry but for a worthwhile future. Extending 'woman-centred values' thus has meant in the last few years a re-assessment of what we want to retain and what we want to change in existing social relationships, in the economic strategies we develop, in political structures and in how we perceive demands. It is possible to see too their active transformation in forms of resistance which converge from divergent sources. This active process of transformation is the key.

'Woman-centred values' are not sitting around in neat bundles for feminists to pick up and carry into political consciousness. There are no fixed images. Instead we inherit many images, and some are fractured, hesitant, others more confident, casting an eye over any spare space, assembling, moving forwards, looking backwards, taking over.

These many faceted images are perceived, carried and passed on by innumerable women. Their meanings are ambivalent. They are constantly being referred back to experience. They take from and influence prevailing social and political ideas. Their possibilities of realisation are greatly affected by the structure of overall assumptions of radical change. Certain historical shifts and openings enable women to recast the images as more explicit values. They begin to alter the terms in which radical protest is expressed. They acquire new political meanings, are forgotten, and are radically reinterpreted by new generations of women. Their significance is not that they delineate fixed utopias but because in opposing the dominant culture the subordinate must seek forms, images, visions. For these reveal and embody needs, aspirations and desires we are not able to realise in the world as it is. The process of finding for ourselves such means of expression and seeking for ourselves an identify which can transcend subordination, draws both on what we have been told we are and what we seek to become. The point of becoming aware that our opposing values are contradictory, shaped as well as shaping history, is to enable us to assess in specific situations of conflict, what we want, how we can act effectively and what kind of relationships and society we would like to see replace inequality and subordination. The 'woman-centred values' that groups of women will bring to bear on these strategic questions

are not ultimate truths. There will not be a total overthrow of absolute evil by its opposite, innocence. Just human beings, acting upon the world as best they can.

The vision behind such a process is well expressed by two Indian feminists, analysing the contradictory values in the movement against rape in India in 1980 and discussing the strategic implications. They argue that by detailing how contradictions are expressed in particular historical situations feminists can deepen understanding and devise new modes of resistance. 'We shall thereby begin to shape our own struggles and our own future as conscious beings.' It is a radical vision which relates not only to the question what do women want but to all people throughout the world who lack power to decide their fate. It could be a pretty big alliance.

NOTES

1. Hester Eisentein, *Contemporary Feminist Thought*, London 1984, p. 144.
2. Judy Kimble and Elaine Unterhalter, "We opened the road for you, you must go forward", *Feminist Review* No. 12, 1982, p. 15.
3. Luisa Paserini, "World Ideology and Working Class Attitudes to Fascism", ed. Paul Thompson, *Our Common History: The Transformation of Europe*, 1982, p. 75.
4. Anna Pollert, *Girls, Wives, Factory Lines: A study of women in a Bristol Tobacco Factory*, London 1981, p. 232.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 233.
6. See for example, Kitty Kish Sklar, *Catherine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity*, Yale University 1973, p. 97. Catherine Beecher argues women's place was in the home. Yet by 1830 she advocates a public role for women as teachers:

"the mind is to be guided chiefly by the affections . . . is not woman best fitted to accomplish these important objects."
7. Janet Sayers, *Biological Politics: Feminist and Anti-feminist Perspectives*, London 1982, p. 171.
8. M.A. Simons and J. Benjamin, "Simone de Beauvoir: An Interview," *Feminist Studies* 5(2) 1979, pp. 330-45.
9. Joan Kelly, "The Doubled Vision of Feminist Theory," *Feminist Studies* 5 (1) 1979, pp. 216-27.
10. Stephanie Urdang, *Fighting Two Colonialisms: Women in Guinea - Bissau*, New York, 1979, pp. 134-135.
11. Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar, "Challenging Imperial Feminism," *Feminist Review*, No. 17, July 1984, p. 15.
12. Kimble and Unterhalter, "We opened the road for you."
13. Jill Liddington, Jill Norris, *Over Hand Tied Behind Us*, London, 1978, p. 235. See also Liddington, *The Life and Times of a Respectable Rebel: Selima Cooper, 1864-1946*, London 1984.
14. See Sara Evans *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left*. New York, 1979.
15. William Leach, *True Love and Perfect Union: The Feminist Reform of Sex and Society*, London 1981 pp. 133-134.
16. Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century*, London 1983, p. 178.
17. Barbara Taylor, "The Women-Power, Religious here by and feminist in early English socialism," in ed. Susan Lipshitz, *Tearing the View*, London 1978, p. 138.
18. Parita Trevedi, "To Deny our Fullness, Asian Women in the Making of History," *Feminist Review* 17, Autumn 1984, pp. 42-43. See also Kumari Jayawardera, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, The Hague, 1982, pp. 77-102.
19. See Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Herland*, 1915 introduction by Ann J. Lane, New York, 1979.

20. Rebecca West, "Women as Brain-workers," in ed. Marion Phillips, *Women and the Labour Party, 1918* quoted in Caroline Rowan, "Women in the Labour party 1906-1920", *Feminist Review* No. 12, 198, p. 76.
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22. See Angela Coyle, "The Protection Racket?" *Feminist Review* 4, 1980, pp. 3-5.
23. Rowan, *Women in the Labour Party*. The problem of strategic focus has arisen around the issue of self-organisation—which has been difficult for women workers, and negotiation with the existing powers of the state for protection. In the United States the Womens Trade Union League shifted from emphasis on organisation to campaigning for an Eight Hour Day and a minimum wage. See Nancy Schrom Dye, *As Equals and as Sisters*. University of Missouri, 1980.
24. Susan Himmelweit, "Production Rules O.K. Waged work in the Family," in ed. Lynne Segal, *What is to be done about the family?* London 1983.
25. Anna Coote, "A New Starting Point," in Ed. James Curran *The Future of the Left*. London 1984, pp. 317-318. See also Anne Philips *Hidden Hands: Women and Economic Policies*, London 1983.
26. See *There is an Alternative: How the GLC is Backing Londoners in the Struggle Around Jobs*. London 1984, and *The London Industrial Strategy* (forthcoming).
27. Jenny Beale, *Getting it Together: Women as Trade Unionists*, London 1982, p. 18. See also Joanna de Groot, *Women and Unions. Beyond the Fragments*. Bulletin, No. 4 Winter 1982-83. She argues trade union women want power to be re-distributed and redefined so the scope of political activity becomes more relevant and unions give more recognition to women's skills and abilities.
28. Beale, *Getting it Together*, op. cit. p. 19.
29. Rosalind Pollack Petchesky, "Reproductive Freedom: Beyond "A Womens Right to Choose" in ed Catherine R. Stimpson and Ethel Spector Person, *Women Sex and Sexuality*, Chicago, 1980.
30. See ed. Dorothy Thompson, *Over Our Dead Bodies: Women Against the Bomb*, London 1983, pp. 92-116.
31. Barnsley Women, *Women Against Pit Closures*, Barnsley 1984, pp. 22-23. Compare Nicholas Frendenberg and Ellen Zalzburg "From Grass Roots Activism to Political Power: Women Organising Against Environmental Hazards" in ed. Wendy Charkin, *Double Exposure*, New York, 1984.