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Feminism, Class and Anarchism

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The relationship between class society and capitalism

The defining feature of capitalist society is that it is broadly divided into two fundamental classes: the capitalist class (the bourgeoisie), made up of large business owners, and the working class (the proletariat), consisting more or less of everyone else — the vast majority of people who work for a wage. There are, of course, plenty of grey areas within this definition of class society, and the working class itself is not made up of one homogenous group of people, but includes, for example, unskilled labourers as well as most of what is commonly termed the middle-class and there can, therefore, be very real differences in income and opportunity for different sectors of this broadly defined working class

“Middle class” is a problematic term as, although frequently used, who exactly it refers to is rarely very clear. Usually “middle class” refers to workers such as independent professionals, small business owners and lower and middle management. However, these middle layers are not really an independent class, in that they are not independent of the process of exploitation and capital accumulation which is capitalism. They are generally at the fringes of one of the two main classes, capitalist and working class.¹

The important point about looking at society as consisting of two fundamental classes is the understanding that the economic relationship between these two classes, the big business owners and the people who work for them, is based on exploitation and therefore these two classes have fundamentally opposing material interests.

Capitalism and business are, by nature, profit driven. The work an employee does in the course of their job creates wealth. Some of this wealth is given to the employee in their wage-packet, the rest is kept by the boss, adding to his or her profits (if an employee were not profitable, they would not be employed). In this way, the business owner exploits the employee and accumulates capital. It is in the interests of the business owner to maximise profits and to keep the cost of wages down; it is in the interests of the employee to maximise their pay and conditions. This conflict of interest and the exploitation of one class of people by another minority class, is inherent to capitalist society. Anarchists aim ultimately to abolish the capitalist class system and to create a classless society.

¹ This description of the middle class is borrowed from Wayne Price. See Why the working class? on anarkismo.net www.anarkismo.net

The relationship between sexism and capitalism

Sexism is a source of injustice which differs from the type of class exploitation mentioned above in a few different ways. Most women live and work with men for at least some of their lives; they have close relationships with men such as their father, son, brother, lover, partner, husband or friend. Women and men do not have inherently opposing interests; we do not want to abolish the sexes but instead to abolish the hierarchy of power that exists between the sexes and to create a society where women and men can live freely and equally together.

Capitalist society depends on class exploitation. It does not though *depend* on sexism and could in theory accommodate to a large extent a similar treatment of women and men. This is obvious if we look at what the fight for women's liberation has achieved in many societies around the world over the last, say, 100 years, where there has been radical improvements in the situation of women and the underlying assumptions of what roles are natural and right for women. Capitalism, in the mean time, has adapted to women's changing role and status in society.

An end to sexism therefore won't necessarily lead to an end to capitalism. Likewise, sexism can continue even after capitalism and class society have been abolished. Sexism is possibly the earliest form of oppression ever to exist, it not only pre-dates capitalism; there is evidence that sexism also pre-dates earlier forms of class society². As societies have developed the exact nature of women's oppression, the particular form it takes, has changed. Under capitalism the oppression of women has its own particular character where capitalism has taken advantage of the historical oppression of women to maximise profits.

But how realistic is the end of women's oppression under capitalism? There are many ways in which women are oppressed as a sex in today's society — economically, ideologically, physically, and so on — and it is likely that continuing the feminist struggle will lead to further improvements in the condition of women. However, though it is possible to envisage many aspects of sexism eroded away in time with struggle, there are features of capitalism that make the full economic equality of women and men under capitalism highly unlikely. This is because capitalism is based on the need to maximise profits and in such a system women are at a natural disadvantage.

In capitalist society, the ability to give birth is a liability. Women's biological role means that (if they have children) they will have to take at least some time off paid employment. Their biological role also makes them ultimately responsible for

² See for example the articles in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, edited by Rayna R. Reiter.

any child they bear. In consequence, paid maternity leave, single parent allowance, parental leave, leave to care for sick children, free crèche and childcare facilities etc. will always be especially relevant to women. For this reason women are economically more vulnerable than men under capitalism: attacks on gains such as crèche facilities, single-parent allowance and so on will always affect women disproportionately more than men. And yet without full economic equality it is hard to see an end to the unequal power relations between women and men and the associated ideology of sexism. Thus, although we can say that capitalism could accommodate women's equality with men, the reality is that the full realisation of this equality is very unlikely to be achieved under capitalism. This is simply because there is an economic penalty linked to women's biology which makes profit-driven capitalist society inherently biased against women.

The struggle for women's emancipation in working class movements

One of the best examples of how struggle for change can bring about real and lasting changes in society is the great improvements in women's status, rights and quality of life that the struggle for women's liberation has achieved in many countries around the globe. Without this struggle (which I'll call feminism though not all those fighting against women's subordination would have identified as feminist), women clearly would not have made the huge gains we have made.

Historically, the struggle for women's emancipation was evident within anarchist and other socialist movements. However, as a whole these movements have tended to have a somewhat ambiguous relationship with women's liberation and the broader feminist struggle.

Although central to anarchism has always been an emphasis on the abolition of all hierarchies of power, anarchism has its roots in class struggle, in the struggle to overthrow capitalism, with its defining aim being the creation of a classless society. Because women's oppression is not so intimately tied to capitalism as class struggle, women's liberation has historically been seen, and to a large extent continues to be seen, as a secondary goal to the creation of a classless society, not as important nor as fundamental as class struggle.

But to whom is feminism unimportant? Certainly for most women in socialist movements the assumption that a profound transformation in the power relations between women and men was part of socialism was vital. However, there tended to be more men than women active in socialist circles and the men played a dominant role. Women's demands were marginalised because of the primacy of

class and also because while the issues that affected working men also affected working women in a similar way, the same was not true for the issues particular to the oppression of women as a sex. Women's social and economic equality was sometimes seen to conflict with the material interests and comforts of men. Women's equality required profound changes in the division of labour both in the home and at work as well as changes in the whole social system of male authority. To achieve women's equality a re-evaluation of self-identity would also have to take place where "men's identity" could no longer depend on being seen as stronger or more capable than women.

Women tended to make the connection between personal and political emancipation, hoping that socialism would make new women and new men by democratising all aspects of human relations. However they found it very hard, for example, to convince their comrades that the unequal division of labour within the home was an important political issue. In the words of Hannah Mitchell, active as a socialist and feminist around the early 20th century in England, on her double shift working both outside and inside the home:

"Even my Sunday leisure was gone for I soon found a lot of the socialist talk about freedom was only talk and these socialist young men expected Sunday dinners and huge teas with home-made cakes, potted meats and pies exactly like their reactionary fellows."³

Anarchist women in Spain at the time of the social revolution in 1936 had similar complaints finding that female-male equality did not carry over well to intimate personal relationships. Martha Ackelsberg notes in her book *Free Women of Spain* that although equality for women and men was adopted officially by the Spanish anarchist movement as early as 1872:

"Virtually all of my informants lamented that no matter how militant even the most committed anarchists were in the streets, they expected to be 'masters' in their homes – a complaint echoed in many articles written in movement newspapers and magazines during this period."

Sexism also occurred in the public sphere, where, for example, women militants sometimes found they were not treated seriously nor with respect by their male comrades. Women also faced problems in their struggle for equality within the trade union movement in the 19th and 20th centuries where the unequal situation of men and women in paid employment was an awkward issue. Men in the trade

³ Hannah Mitchell quote taken from *Women in Movement* (page 135) by Sheila Rowbotham.

unions argued that women lowered the wages of organised workers and some believed the solution was to exclude women entirely from the trade and to raise the male wage so that the men could support their families. In the mid-19th century in Britain a tailor summarised the effect of female labour as follows:

“When I first began working at this branch [waistcoat-making], there were but very few females employed in it. A few white waist-coats were given to them under the idea that women would make them cleaner than men . . . But since the increase of the puffing and sweating system, masters and sweaters have sought everywhere for such hands as would do the work below the regular ones. Hence the wife has been made to compete with the husband, and the daughter with the wife . . . If the man will not reduce the price of his labour to that of the female, why he must remain unemployed”.⁴

The policy of excluding women from certain trade unions was often determined by competition depressing wages rather than sexist ideology although ideology had also a role to play. In the tobacco industry in the early 20th century in Tampa in the States, for example, an anarcho-syndicalist union, La Resistencia, made up mostly of Cuban émigrés, sought to organise all workers throughout the city. Over a quarter of their membership was made up of women tobacco strippers. This syndicalist union was denounced both as unmanly and un-American by another trade union, the Cigar Makers’ Industrial Union which pursued exclusionary strategies and “very reluctantly organised women workers into a separate and secondary section of the union”.⁵

Driving force of women’s liberation has been feminism

It is generally well documented that the struggle for women’s emancipation has not always been supported and that historically women have faced sexism within class struggle organisations. The unquestionable gains in women’s freedom that have taken place are thanks to those women and men, within class struggle organisations as well as without, who challenged sexism and fought for improvements in women’s condition. It is the feminist movement in all its variety (middle-class, working-class, socialist, anarchist . . .) that has lead the way

⁴ quote taken from *Women and the Politics of Class* (page 24) by Johanna Brenner.

⁵ *ibid*, page 93

in women's liberation and not movements focused on class struggle. I emphasise the point because though today the anarchist movement as a whole does support an end to the oppression of women, there remains a mistrust of feminism, with anarchists and other socialists sometimes distancing themselves from feminism because it often lacks a class analysis. Yet it is this very feminism that we have to thank for the very real gains women have made.

How relevant is class when it comes to sexism?

What are the common approaches to feminism by class-struggle anarchists today? On the extreme end of reaction against feminism is the complete class-reductionist point of view: Only class matters. This dogmatic viewpoint tends to see feminism as divisive [surely sexism is more divisive than feminism?] and a distraction from class struggle and holds that any sexism that does exist will disappear automatically with the end of capitalism and class society.

However, a more common anarchist approach to feminism is the acceptance that sexism does exist, will not automatically fade away with the end of capitalism and needs to be fought against in the here and now. Nevertheless, as previously mentioned, anarchists are often at pains to distance themselves from "mainstream" feminism because of its lack of class analysis. Instead, it is stressed that the experience of sexism is differentiated by class and that therefore women's oppression is a class issue. It is certainly true that wealth mitigates to some extent the effect of sexism: It is less difficult, for example, to obtain an abortion if you do not have to worry about raising the money for the trip abroad; issues of who does the bulk of the housework and childcare become less important if you can afford to pay someone else to help. Also, depending on your socio-economic background you will have different priorities.

However, in constantly stressing that experience of sexism is differentiated by class, anarchists can seem to gloss over or ignore that which is also true: that experience of class is differentiated by sex. The problem, the injustice, of sexism is that there are unequal relations between women and men within the working class and indeed in the whole of society. Women are always at a disadvantage to men of their respective class.

To a greater or lesser extent sexism affects women of all classes; yet a feminist analysis that does not emphasise class is the often target of criticism. But is class relevant to all aspects of sexism? How is class relevant to sexual violence, for example? Class is certainly not always the most important point in any case. Sometimes there is an insistence on tacking on a class analysis to every feminist position as if this is needed to give feminism credibility, to validate it as a worthy

struggle for class-struggle anarchists. But this stance misses the main point which is, surely, that we are against sexism, whatever its guise, whosoever it is affecting?

If a person is beaten to death in a *racist attack*, do we need to know the class of the victim before expressing outrage? Are we unconcerned about racism if it turns out the victim is a paid-up member of the ruling class? Similarly, if someone is discriminated against in work on the grounds of race, sex or sexuality, whether that person is a cleaner or a university professor, surely in both cases it is wrong and it is wrong for the same reasons? Clearly, women's liberation in its own right is worth fighting for as, in general, oppression and injustice are worth fighting against, regardless of the class of the oppressed.

Women and men of the world unite against sexism?

Given that one thing women have in common across classes and cultures is their oppression, to some degree, as a sex can we then call for women (and men) of the world to unite against sexism? Or are there opposing class interests that would make such a strategy futile?

Conflicts of interest can certainly arise between working-class and wealthy middle-class or ruling-class women. For example, in France at a feminist conference in 1900 the delegates split on the issue of a minimum wage for domestic servants, which would have hurt the pockets of those who could afford servants. Today, calls for paid paternity leave or free crèche facilities will face opposition from business owners who do not want to see profits cut. Feminism is not always good for short-term profit-making. Struggles for economic equality with men in capitalist society will necessarily involve ongoing and continuous struggle for concessions — essentially a class struggle.

Thus, differing class interests can sometimes pose obstacles to feminist unity at a practical level. It is however much more important for anarchists to stress links with the broader feminist movement than to emphasise differences. After all, the ruling class are in a minority and the vast majority of women in society share a common interest in gaining economic equality with men. In addition, many feminist issues are not affected by such class-based conflicts of interest but concern all women to varying degrees. When it comes to reproductive rights, for example, anarchists in Ireland have been and continue to be involved in pro-choice groups alongside capitalist parties without compromising our politics because, when it comes to fighting the sexism that denies women control over their own bodies, this is the best tactic. Finally, it is also worth noting that often the dismissal of “middle-class feminism” comes from the same anarchists/socialists who embrace

the Marxist definition of class (given at the start of this article) which would put most middle-class people firmly with the ranks of the broad working class.

Reforms, not reformism

There are two approaches we can take to feminism: we can distance ourselves from other feminists by focusing on criticising reformist feminism or we can fully support the struggle for feminist reforms while all the while saying we want more!! This is important especially if we want to make anarchism more attractive to women (a recent Irish Times poll showed that feminism is important to over 50% of Irish women). In the anarchist-communist vision of future society with its guiding principle, *to each according to need, from each according to ability*, there is no institutional bias against women as there is in capitalism. As well as the benefits for both women and men anarchism has a lot to offer women in particular, in terms of sexual, economic and personal freedom that goes deeper and offers more than any precarious equality that can be achieved under capitalism.

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