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**Feminism**

# **Dangerous Liaisons: Revolutionary Theory and Practice**

- Reviews section -

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**Cinzia Arruzza's *Dangerous Liaisons: The Marriages and Divorces of Marxism and Feminism*** (published in English edition by Merlin Press, available from Resistance Books)

Women's liberation has always been at the heart of authentic revolutionary politics. Marxists have long insisted that there can be no socialist revolution worth the name without women's liberation, and that women's liberation itself will only be possible with the overthrow of capitalism. Revolutionaries have at times forgotten this, however, and the consequence has been not only that women have suffered as women, that they have been betrayed and their oppression intensified instead of ended, but also that working class organisations have themselves undergone a process of bureaucratization in which everyone suffers. Cinzia Arruzza's review of the history of women's struggle in and alongside the socialist movement draws attention to a repeated problem that we must learn from today; the heat of the struggle against the rule of capital opens up immense possibilities for the liberation of all the oppressed, but it can also, at the very same time, increase the pressure on the organisations of the working class to close ranks and so shut out the voices of women.

When women are active participants and leaders in historical struggles, those possibilities are already put on the agenda in the everyday practice of the worker's movement. We can see that the forms of organisation that women develop are often not only far in advance of the traditional stereotypically male ways of organising, but that there is, in the process of the struggle, an anticipation, what is sometimes called a "prefiguring" of what kind of society we are aiming to build. Social relations of solidarity and respect are created that energise people to believe that with socialist revolution another kind of world is indeed possible. Arruzza reminds us why we are revolutionaries, with inspiring accounts of the necessary leap made from individual strategies, of the demands for equality of the sexes in the French Revolution in 1789, to collective activity when thousands of women participated in the Paris Commune of 1871. The popular image of the *pétroleuses* – women with paraffin supporting the rebellion – was part of the demonization of the Communards, for example, and drew attention to the hatred of women's self-organisation on the part of the regime.

## The hope of liberation

At times when the prospects of change seem so remote, when radical political life is so grim, Arruzza shows us that the sparks of hope and the development of strategies to break the bourgeois ideological consensus – the fiction that everyone is united in defence of the way things are now – often come from women. The attempts by Marx, and particularly Engels, at the time of the First International in the late nineteenth century to make sense of the power of the family in relation to private property and the state now become ever-more burning questions, and so Engels' work is returned to at different points in the book. The first chapter of the book, which ranges from the French Revolution through to the Spanish and Chinese Revolutions, includes detailed discussion of the way that the Russian October Revolution of 1917 was itself begun by women in Petrograd striking in celebration of International Women's Day on 8 March. It becomes clear through those events in the months leading to the revolution that the promise of socialist revolution is that the diversity of ways of being human are at last to be given an opportunity to flower, but the trap that revolutionary Marxists have too often fallen into is to enforce 'unity' which then sabotages, even before the event, that promise.

It also becomes clear through those events and the debates that were made possible by them that just as the name for the theory and practice of the revolution against capitalism for many would be "Marxism", so the name for the theory and practice of women's liberation would be "feminism". Feminism is a distinctive contribution to the politics of

liberation, our politics, and operates as a diverse constellation of positions coming into connection with each other and then with Marxism, operating not as one fixed truth but, we might say, “dialectically” – in a process of contradictory movement and change – as strategies that are usually today referred to in the plural as “feminisms”. This pluralisation of a key element of revolutionary politics, a pluralisation from which Marxists have to learn, is not either reduced to “leaders” (though the appendix to the English edition of this book does give very useful little descriptions of key figures referred to in the text which marks their contributions to feminism).

## Feminism in the world

Onto the world stage steps a political movement that is able to grasp how and why Marxism must also be concerned with women’s liberation, and from that there is the opening up of questions about the “intersectional” (as some feminists would now say) nature of the link between the exploitation of workers under capitalism and the many other forms of oppression – of gender, sexuality, “race”, to name but three – that capitalism requires to function. And this feminist movement, Arruzza shows, can only develop if it is autonomous, not only working with the worker’s organisations and revolutionary Marxists but able to step back and reveal the limitations of a simple orthodox male-defined way of understanding Marxist politics. The “first wave” of feminism which we see at work around the Russian Revolution, in the social democratic parties of the Second International in continental Europe and among the suffragettes in Manchester, for example, radicalised the “bourgeois” or “liberal” women’s movement. The “rights” of women to vote and then, for socialists, to participate in trades union struggle had a dynamic which led to debates about separate organisation but also about what “patriarchy” – the rule of men over women – as a system of oppression was in relation to capitalism.

The second chapter of the book traces through the way that these debates over the nature of patriarchy were not abstract disputes over terminology but were embedded in the practice of the workers’ movement in power. It is here that we see the rise of Stalinism as not only a betrayal of the working class but as a systematic turning back of the gains made by women during the revolution. The crimes of the bureaucracy were an indictment not only of a regime that made compromises with international capitalism – justified in the phrase “socialism in one country” and then finding expression in the claim that there should be “peaceful coexistence” between the Soviet Union and the rest of the world – but of a patriarchal regime happy to agree with its capitalist allies that a woman’s place is in the home under the thumb of their man. In this way the bureaucracy was guaranteed the power that the bourgeois family has always enabled, millions of little points of authority that would reproduce and strengthen the power of the state. It is against that background that Arruzza is able to explain how the Communist Parties of the Third International faithfully relayed the worst of the reactionary justification of power from Moscow, but also how in Italy, for example, there were revolts in and against the Party, and how in Italy, Britain and the United States there were emerging women’s liberation and socialist feminist movements that connected with a new revolutionary new left. These were to become known as the “second wave” feminists, and they also set the scene for a serious rethinking of the role of feminism in the Fourth International.

## Queer unions

The motif the book signalled in the title, “marriages and divorces”, also frames much of the debate around the role of the family as the linchpin of power under capitalism, and it allows us to appreciate how this capitalism is always already necessarily patriarchal. The third chapter then goes in some detail into the anthropological debates arising from Engels’ work and the attempts to make sense of the relationship between “class” and “gender”. The question whether “gender” oppression should itself be understood as class oppression is raised, and the theoretical arguments of the “wages for housework” forms of feminism are teased out. Here we have something quite unusual for a book even in our revolutionary Marxist tradition, which is that complex feminist debates over the role of

language and psychoanalysis are taken seriously, explored, explained and weighed up rather than quickly summed up and dismissed. The book tackles important issues about “recognition” of difference and “redistribution” of resources, and raises the stakes of these ideas bringing them out of academic forums into the real world.

This book is not only a review of debates, something that takes forward the self-characterisation of our politics as “feminist” but it is also an intervention, including in our own organisations. And it is here that the “performative” nature of sexual difference is described, the strand of theory and practice that is known as “queer theory”. This queer theory taken from the work of Judith Butler is key to the development of what is sometimes known as “third wave” feminism. This work is then taken up explicitly by way of a discussion of different versions of “dual systems” theories – that is, theories which articulate class and gender oppression as two different orders of power – asking the question in the title of the fourth and final chapter as to whether it is possible to construct a “queer union” between Marxism and feminism.

The book draws on the experiences of generations of activists, feminist and Marxist, and the debates in this book now, of course, resonate with the experience of activists faced with the bitter betrayal of feminist and Marxist politics inside more than one revolutionary organisation today. Those particular experiences inform the way the book will be read. I read the book as part of a reading group in Manchester (which included supporters of Socialist Resistance, Anti Capitalist Initiative, International Socialist Network and Plan C), and many critical points were made in the course of our meetings. We puzzled over whether the book was too focussed on Europe (with the sections on China, for example, still framed by the way Western Marxists have debated the impact of Maoism). We wanted to know more about the impact of Black feminism, and about the intersection between feminism, Marxism and questions of disability and mental health. Well, we acknowledged that in a relatively short and concise book you cannot have everything, not yet anyway. (In a recent television interview the Labour Party leader wanted to appear reasonable and said we did not want the earth; that is not true, we do!)

An intriguing absence from the book as one produced within the tradition of the Fourth International today is the question of “nature” and ecological thought. The stereotypical representation of women as being closer to nature would, we felt, be worth exploring further, and the masculine domination of the earth that intensifies alienation of people from their own bodies and from nature as such (as Marx himself points out) could have been addressed. In its English translation, at least, the terms “advanced” and “backward” were occasionally used in relation to the participation of women in cities and the predicament of their sisters in the countryside. This privileging of the industrial working class over the peasantry is something that is being questioned, of course, as we integrate ecology into our politics and as our organisations takes root in what is sometimes still treated, in colonialist and imperialist discourse, as the less “developed” parts of the world.

## Endings and beginnings

The crux of the final chapter appeared to lie in the optimistic claim that “Queer theory seeks to deconstruct gender, as socialism seeks to deconstruct class” But if that were true, and it is a claim that is not really followed through in the chapter which is actually, despite the title, quite light on “queer theory”, then we need at least to ask: whether this once again consigns queer theory to a treatment of gender, leaving the socialists to “deconstruct” class (a division of labour that is questioned throughout the rest of the book); whether it means that the socialist deconstruction of class should not itself also be queer (that is, throwing into question categories of identity and showing how these categories are “performed” in the service of power by those who adopt them); and why the relationship between “class” and “gender” should not itself be “queered” (so that feminist analysis of political economy, for example, might throw into question standard Marxist categories and assumptions about what counts as “growth”). The queer movement, a radical questioning of categories of gender identity and then of all forms of identity has much more wide-ranging political consequences (as we can see in Judith Butler’s recent refusal to map her own tactical adoption

of the identity of “Jew” onto the identity of ‘Zionist’ in her critique of Israel).

Working-class politics would look and feel very different, for example, if the second wave feminist slogan “the personal is political” (a slogan that actually reactivated concerns of many “first wave” activists) was really taken up inside trade union and party organisations. Routine brain-numbing and morale-sapping meetings feed the needs of those who want to be “leaders”, and feminism shows us why these leaders are so often men. And our politics would look very different, for example, if we really had “queer unions” that were devoted not so much to defence of the “family wage” but were working to dismantle family structures that enforce the power of little leaders in every household. We work so much of the time with the assumption that there are certain kinds of identity that need to be defended, and given the ideological assault by the state and media on our own history of attempts to build a better world that is understandable.

However, the idea that “queer” theory might be brought into some relationship with Marxism would disturb the identities we take for granted, perhaps usefully so. Queer feminism gives a vital extra twist to an argument made by revolutionary Marxists against nationalism and bureaucratic rule that the main enemy is at home. It would certainly disturb the idea that there is one united theory, one way of understanding the world and one way of doing politics that is true, and that the others are false. This is a path-breaking contribution, opening up many paths. It becomes clear by the end of this great book that a “comprehensive liberation project”, as Arruzza puts it, cannot be forged through mashing the two realities of class and gender together. This is open feminism working alongside open Marxism, open to each other.

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