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TOWARD
A
POLITICAL
MORALITY

BARBARA EHRENREICH

I think I first began to worry about the question of a political *morality* over lunch one day in the spring of 1974. I was with two graduate students, call them Beth and Ellen, and the conversation turned to left politics. "I'm a *feminisi*," said Beth, as if to dissociate herself from the Left. "What exactly do you mean by that?" Ellen asked. "I mean I'm not financially dependent on any man; I have my own credit cards and my own career," Beth answered. "And what exactly do you mean by saying that you're a Marxist?" "Well," said Ellen, "I believe in Marxist theory, that's what."

I was certainly relieved, after this exchange, that no one got around to asking me what I meant by identifying myself as a socialist feminist; but the conversation left me with a sinking feeling. I'd participated in a lot of discussions before about what Marxism (or socialism) was, or what feminism was, but I'd never been in a discussion about what it meant to *be* a Marxist or a feminist. And these were the answers we ended up with: being a feminist meant having a certain kind of lifestyle (and a pretty fancy one in this case). Being a Marxist turned out to be a state of grace—all you had to do was "believe" the "theory."

I decided that if this was what it meant to be a feminist or a Marxist—or something along these lines—then feminism and the Left must seem pretty unappealing to people; as I analyzed this conclusion, I kept coming up with the vague sense that the problem was that they were *morally* unappealing.

I say "vague" sense because the word "morally"—along with the words "moral" and "morality"—was a word which I had pretty thoroughly repressed for some years. At the very beginning of the anti-war movement people used to declare, without any visible sign of embarrassment, that they were opposed to the war for "moral" reasons. Then—I'm not exactly sure when or how—styles changed, and the idea of doing something for "moral" reasons became about as repulsive as doing it for reasons of greed or megalomania. Arguments against the war were supposed to be made along lines of straightforward self-interest: you could be drafted, you would have to pay higher taxes, etc. The fact that a great many of us had become anti-war activists for what were essentially moral reasons (as opposed to reasons of self-interest) in the first place, was hushed up. Just as some "old leftists" tried to cover up the fact that they'd ever been communists, we

tried to pretend that we'd never been moralists.

So when the word "morally" began to re-surface in my mind after that conversation with the feminist and the Marxist, I was a little unprepared for it. I knew that it meant something, and I suspected that its meaning must be connected to the most basic definition of our politics as radicals. But what? What would a *political* morality look like?

I could start by saying what it would *not* look like. It would not look like patriarchal morality, as laid down, for example, in the Old Testament, which defines the property rights of males on the one hand and the obligations of women and children on the other. And it would not look like capitalist morality, by which I mean a set of principles—usually Christian or patriarchal in content—*which are confined to private life*. This is, in fact, what "morality" has come to mean to us—a set of "principles" or "ethics" which originate in and are exercised within the sphere of personal life: how you raise your children, whether you believe in preserving monogamy or smashing it, how much honesty you require in your personal relationships, etc. Because it is so privatized, capitalist morality is inevitably rather trivial; we think of a person's "morals" as being something idiosyncratic: like what they like in clothes or music. It all becomes a matter of taste.

It was in reaction to this capitalist notion of morality that the Left began to think of itself as amoral sometime in the 60s. Capitalist morals had been confined to such a small space (personal life) that they had gotten all soft and rotten and, I suspect, to the sexist imagination—effeminate. Radicals wanted to be *tough*. Feminists wanted to be tough. So no more "morals."

But now I think this was a mistake. It's true that a kind of morality which gets disconnected from politics and actions in the world—what I have called "capitalist morality"—quickly becomes corrupt. But it's also true that a kind of politics which gets disconnected from morality becomes sterile and finally irrelevant to people.

Let's think what it means, in the broadest sense, to be a moral person or to have a moral outlook. A moral outlook has to go beyond "personal" matters, because the essence of morality—the reason for judging some actions as "good" and others as "bad"—is the belief that there is a connection between our individual actions and the entire human community. A moral outlook presumes to judge what an individual does as a choice affecting world history; and conversely, it judges historical events as forces ultimately affecting actual, feeling individuals. A moral position says that what we each do matters because we are each connected—through an enormous network of human interdependency—to all people and all history.

There's one more step to get to what we could call a *political* morality. A political morality not only recognizes individual will and the human collectivity in which this will operates, it also insists that there be some consistency between these two things. For example, a moral person does not throw Coke cans out of her car window

because she understands that this action, small as it is, has a social and historical significance. A person who is moral in a political sense, though, not only does not litter, but works to bring the social order into line with her own moral sense: she neatly recycles the Coke cans *and* joins a community organization which is fighting to stop corporate pollution.

A few years back there was reason to hope that the interaction between feminism and the Left would lead to such a political morality on a movement-wide scale. On the one hand, feminists were challenging leftists to translate their world-historical principles into a little individual action. If you were going to orate about the sufferings of the proletariat you ought to learn to do your own mimeographing and pick up your own socks. The slogan "the personal is political" did not yet have the degraded meaning that whatever you happen to be doing is a form of political action. It meant that your personal choices better have something to do with your lofty political principles: for example, don't throw the Coke can out the window—or else no one was going to listen to you.

On the other hand, the Left was challenging feminists to think in less individualistic terms about the goals of feminism. Feminists who had defined their politics in terms of equal rights, legal abortion, egalitarian personal relationships between the sexes, shared childcare, etc. were challenged to figure out what their politics had to offer to the single mother on welfare, a woman guerrilla fighter in Latin America or Asia, a Puerto Rican woman threatened with involuntary sterilization. When the politics of individual rights and choices were projected onto a global scale, they had to change, they had to deepen.

Within the challenging, dialectical interaction between feminism and the Left there were—and *there still are*—the germs of a political morality: a kind of politics which really could forge the links between individual action and global history.

To a limited extent, this does happen. I still see tremendous promise in the socialist-leaning parts of the women's movement (and not only those who call themselves "socialist feminists") and in the more feminist-oriented parts of the Left (New American Movement, for example). But by and large, feminism and the Left went their separate ways and ceased to confront each other in a healthy, dialectical fashion. I think the results are discouraging on both sides.

Feminism—and I'm confining my criticisms here to the mainstream feminism we find in the media—has touched the lives of millions of women. But not, in most cases, as a political movement. It has become, in line with the woman I quoted at the beginning of this article, a *lifestyle*. Today, if you introduce yourself as a feminist, no one expects that you might be about to chain yourself to the White House fence or whip out a pile of angry leaflets. On the contrary, they will expect that you open doors for yourself, pay for your own drink, demand clitoral orgasms, and (if you are the countercultural type) repair your own car.

It's commendable to do all these things, even exem-

plary. But they do not amount to an expression of a political morality in the sense that I have been talking about. A political morality can never be expressed as a lifestyle—whether that lifestyle is mainstream feminist, or vegetarian, or lesbian separatist, or whatever. A political morality demands *consistency* between the spheres of individual choice and the world order. It requires actions which go beyond being exemplary forms of behavior—actions which are calculated interventions in human history.

I also have some problems with the specific kind of lifestyle being proposed by mainstream feminism today. Patriarchal morality demands constant sacrifice from women: a degree of altruism which psychoanalysts in the 40s and 50s correctly identified as masochism (only the psychoanalysts thought it was a healthy and natural masochism). Naturally, feminism reacted against this. But the reaction seems to have gone to an equally repellent extreme—glorifying individualism, even selfishness. The feminism of magazines like *New Woman*, *Viva*, and often even *Ms.* is careerist, uncritical of the most impersonal and commoditized sexual relationships, and too often contemptuous of women who are “only housewives.”

This is one of the reasons, I think, why so many women, mostly housewives, have been drawn into anti-feminist causes (opposing abortion or the ERA, etc.) in the last few years. Mainstream, media-promoted feminism hints at a kind of anti-utopia where all the bonds of mutual responsibility between people will have been dissolved, and everyone will be “free” to compete for success in the capitalist order, unburdened by any kind of human dependencies. There are no housewives in this version of utopia, and there is no room for children, the aged, the disabled, or anyone else who suffers from embarrassing dependencies on other people.

An individualistic, lifestyle-oriented kind of feminism implicitly accepts the (male-dominated) capitalist order. Well-known feminists like Letty Pogrebin write books for women on how to “make it.” *Ms.* magazine presents welfare mothers and woman bank presidents as if the difference between them were just a matter of personal inclination. Betty Friedan goes to Iran and comes back overjoyed that the Shah’s wife is a “feminist”—which suggests that mainstream feminism may have evolved to the point where it can live in harmony not only with capitalism, but with dictatorship and torture.

Leftists have criticized mainstream (or “bourgeois”) feminism along these lines before, often with the intent of discrediting all feminists—radical feminists, socialist feminists, etc. But the Left today has its own shortcomings of a political-moral nature, and they are related to those which can be found in feminism.

If feminism has tended to exalt the individual and the personal, the Left has tended to go the other way—to discount the possibility or significance of individual, willed action and particularly to discount individual moral choice. Too often, what people mean by Marxism these days is a theory in which history is explained in

terms of impersonal forces, as if no conscious human agency were involved. Strictly speaking though, Marxism is not a *theory* at all, but a method; it is not something to “believe in,” as the woman I quoted in the beginning put it, but something to *act on*.

It’s much harder to generalize about the Left than about feminism because there’s not even a “mainstream.” But I think if you go from the “Marxist-Leninist” groups on the one hand to the “neo-populists” on the other hand (see Harry Boyte’s article on the “New Populism” in *Socialist Revolution*, no. 32), there tends to be a common assumption: that people (*the* people, that is) cannot make moral choices. They are totally governed by self-interest. The only way to approach them is by making an appeal to this self-interest. The only way to organize is basically along interest group lines. (Parenthetically, we should note the elitism implicit in this line of argument: the “masses” are supposed to be the objects of historical forces, with no will of their own, while the organizers, or cadre, presumably act out of free choice.)

Now I would not for a moment argue that people should not organize around their own self-interest, or that people cannot move from an identification with an interest group to an identification with their entire class. But there has gotten to be a tremendous diffidence about making an appeal to people on any grounds other than self-interest.

The first casualty of this approach is internationalism. It is certainly possible to make internationalist arguments—for example, against U.S. aid to South Korea or Chile—on grounds of economic self-interest. And this gets easier every day as capitalism becomes more integrated as a *world* system, so that the repression of workers in one country is a threat to the wages and security of workers in every other capitalist country. But it is also possible to involve people in internationalist causes on directly moral grounds. Because what is happening in Chile, or South Korea, or Iran, or wherever, is, to use an old-fashioned phrase, an affront to human dignity.

But we have a Left that has largely lost faith in this possibility. The neo-populists stay away from internationalism because it just doesn’t fit into an interest group approach. Even those groups which do international solidarity work spend too much time figuring out tortuous arguments about why someone in New Jersey ought to care about what is happening in Seoul or Capetown—as if caring could not be a natural and human impulse.

So, in the end, the moral failure of much of today’s Left and the moral failure of mainstream feminism boil down to the same thing: a failure to insist on, and to demonstrate concretely, the connection between individual choice and the social order, between individual action and history. Which is to say that on some level we have come to accept the atomized condition of our society, and the mood of alienation and helplessness that goes with it: everybody’s out for themselves; you can’t change anything; might as well get yours, etc.

The result is that feminism and left politics, for the most part, no longer speak to the real *terror* which people experience in late capitalist culture—the sense of utter loneliness and purposelessness. In fact, the Rev. Moon does a better job. Evangelical Protestantism does a better job. Even within radical circles there is a constant attrition as people drop out to join religious or mystical mini-movements which offer an instant sense of solidarity and self-importance—from fanatical neo-Stalinist sects to feminist-spiritualist covens. We should be critical of these tendencies insofar as they represent, like Christian mysticism long ago, the fantasies of a movement which has given up on flesh-and-blood struggle and is looking for a shortcut to the promised land. But we should also be humble enough to see that the growth of mystical and anti-rational “movements” is a response, in part, to the moral aridity of much of our own politics.

Even if we do bring our politics and our morality together, of course, there's no guarantee that we'd be able to compete successfully with all the other movements—from pop psychology to “born-again” Protestantism—which tug at people's desires for purposefulness and collectivity. Because radical politics—and by that I mean really socialist feminist politics—doesn't offer any short-

cuts. We can't promise that becoming “political” will make anyone feel good, or even that it will help them figure out exactly what to do tomorrow. But I do know that if we could integrate our politics and morality, we would at least be able to offer people what political movements have always offered as long as they were vital and growing: that is, the sense of social connectedness *and* individual significance which is at the heart of a political morality.

A radical political movement can't tell people that they'll win—at least not quickly or painlessly. But it can tell them that they *matter*, that they are worth something, that their actions and choices today are linked to a long tradition of working-class and feminist struggle in the past, to the aspirations of a Korean garment worker or a Chilean miner today, and to the life chances of our grandchildren 40 years from now. It can invite them to step into history. □

Barbara Ehrenreich is the co-author, with Deirdre English, of Witches, Midwives and Nurses: A History of Women Healers. She writes frequently on subjects related to socialism and feminism.

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