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Response: Labour and the Varieties of Feminism

Comments

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Response: Labour and the varieties of Feminism

Monique Charles, Natalie Thomlinson

In our last issue, Charlotte Proudman offered a strongly critical account of the Labour leadership's engagement with the feminist tradition. Here, two scholars of feminism and race offer their reflections on the arguments she raised¹

Race, feminism and intersectionality

Monique Charles

One of the challenges when discussing political ideas and ideologies is that almost all those we commonly talk about are rooted in patriarchal, heteronormative Eurocentrism. As a result, even the most radical attempts at political thinking pushing for equality, even in socialist frameworks, are often imbricated in these longstanding norms and fall short of their full promise. This is the very reason why intersectionality is so important. Dominant feminist narratives often implicitly focus on the issues and concerns of White women, undermining feminism's reach; feminism claims to speak out or push for progress for 'women' but too often leaves some behind or silences them. Feminism has often overlooked the contribution of Black women. Both first and second wave feminism relied on race and racism as a means for White women to seek power for themselves.

Proudman evokes intersectionality, yet almost completely overlooks it when it comes to race. Kimberlé Crenshaw's work on intersectionality from the late 1980s onwards was able to identify, name and articulate the ways in which social structures can impact on a person based on the multiple vectors of intersectionality or compounding identities. Her work assisting Black women to articulate their position of multi-layered oppression was ground-breaking. It enabled Black women to be 'seen'. Their experiences, often hidden from broader narratives, were finally included in the *third* wave of feminism decades later. The concept of intersectionality blossomed alongside the popularisation of womanism and Black feminism in the 1980s and 1990s. It should be noted that these feminisms, often unnamed, existed experientially for centuries, laying the foundations that White feminism has built on.

Proudman's piece makes valid contributions that should be taken on board by the Labour leadership. The relative lack of attention to issues which disproportionately affect women is a matter for serious concern, though it's unsurprising in a society with norms which benefit, above all, rich White men. But when thinking about policy, we need to think about race, as well as gender and class.

Proudman addresses the realms of the private sphere – predominantly, child rearing and sex, specifically prostitution – areas feminism has centred on since second wave feminism (and indeed earlier). But to comprehend the experiences of Black women we need to understand their historically specific economic position and their different relation to the public and private. Black women's vulnerability whilst working, their exposure to enslavement and capitalist relations of power, has been detrimental in both their private and public spheres. Black women have always had little protection in the patriarchal, heteronormative, Eurocentric capitalist frame. Black women have worked and continue to work for comparatively less pay than White women. British law does not acknowledge intersectionality in employment.

Since European expansion, 'othered' women have always been vulnerable to sexual exploitation. I agree with Proudman that the current legal position in Britain – where the (mainly female) people working in prostitution are usually the ones criminalised – is a result of patriarchal norms; but we should also be clear that these norms come down hardest on the extremely vulnerable: those with intersecting oppressed identities, in terms of race, nationality, immigration status, and class. Corbyn needs to do something about this, and urgently. But I must stress that 'women' are not all the same. There are shades of oppression, and some more obvious than others.

I also agree with Proudman that extending paternity leave is a desirable goal. However, it should be pointed out that the discourse around Black women and work has meant they spend less time in the private sphere; or at least in their *own* private sphere. Black men also have higher rates of unemployment than White men, for a variety of reasons, including institutional racism. As a result, this agenda does much less for those racialised as Black or minority ethnic. The people who would benefit *most* from this policy (protecting capital whilst child rearing) would be, as we currently stand, middle and upper-class White families.

Proudman's paper pushes for more women in politics and in positions of leadership, suggesting the use of quotas. But which women will these be? Without attention to *race* as well as class it will tend to be middle-class, White women. The countries Proudman mentions which have successfully utilised quotas – Norway, Iceland, Finland and Sweden – are all countries with lower levels of ethnic diversity than Britain (with its imperial heritage). To use a 'quota' model in Britain would likely have the same outcome as affirmative action in the USA. The primary benefi-

ciaries of the scheme would be White women, rather than Black and ‘othered’ women.

If we really want to think about intersectional feminism, we should be thinking about the experiences and campaigning of Diane Abbott, an MP representing a diverse and largely working-class constituency, in parliament since 1987, who went for the Labour leadership in 2010 and was undermined by her own party. This speaks of intersectional barriers of extreme measure. The abuse she has received, particularly when speaking about issues of race, from the general public is second to none, and far higher than White female MPs. In the run-up to the 2017 general election, Abbott received almost half of all the abusive tweets sent to female MPs, according to one study.² Yet in research on the abuse of female MPs, Abbott’s excessive abuse has been *removed* from the data because her extreme levels of abuse needed to be *controlled* for in order to gain a ‘clearer’ indication of abuse (e.g. when examining abuse by party). Even with Abbott removed, Black and ‘Asian’ women MPs still received the most online abuse.³ Rather than controlling out the experiences of Black women, we should be thinking intersectionally.

And if we’re talking about Weinstein and the #Metoo movement, we should remember that it was a Black woman, Tarana Burke, who started the movement, and that the only person Weinstein denied making sexual advances to was a Black woman, Lupita Nyong’o.

It matters which people we talk about and which voices are heard. Without trivialising the oppression of middle-class or White women, we need to listen to the full spectrum of voices. There is something about the weight associated with intersectional oppression that broadens your view and gives you a deeper understanding of privilege and oppression. Those who feel it, know it; but those who ‘know’ usually have the least say and the least space to share their views. This is what sparks activism.

Munroe Bergdorf is a particularly interesting case study to examine the place of intersectionality in politics. Bergdorf was enlisted as an advisor to MP Dawn Butler, Shadow Minister for Women and Equalities. Butler, a Black woman, used the space she had to give voice to someone with additional vectors of oppression associated with their identity. Corbyn welcomed this. This was a radical move. Opening a space to listen with a view to using your power to assist is how it begins. Corbyn connects to issues around race, gender and class, but also health, education and homelessness, sometimes imperfectly, but in important ways. His openness to meet and engage with people, allowing them to speak from their intersectional position and genuinely engage with Labour, is a vital step towards improving and expanding our politics. This approach is what needs to be built upon.

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Choosing sides in feminist debates

Natalie Thomlinson

Charlotte Proudman is perhaps unduly pessimistic in her article on ‘Feminism and the Labour left’. While the party has a long way to go in many of the areas she describes, Labour has without doubt achieved far more for women than any other major political party over the last 100 years. Feminist historians are right to point to the gendered assumptions of the Beveridge Report, which was predicated on a male breadwinner model, making it difficult for women to access benefits such as unemployment relief and pensions on an equal footing with men. Nevertheless, the famous welfare provisions of Attlee’s government ensured huge gains to working class women’s standard of living. And let us not forget that it was under the aegis of a Labour government that the 1970 Equal Pay Act and the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act were passed; it was a Labour government that allowed the Abortion Act 1967 time in Parliament to pass (though it was sponsored by a Liberal MP); it was Barbara Castle who as Minister for Health ensured that contraception was free in 1974 (‘sex on the rates!’), it was Labour that introduced all-women shortlists, and it was, of course, the last Labour government that saw innovations such as the 2010 Equalities Act and increased early years provision. Finally, while Proudman is right to point to the fact that Labour has a problem with getting women into prominent positions of power, the party’s record on getting women into parliament remains far better than any other.⁴

Nevertheless, Labour finds itself in a difficult moment regarding women and feminism. Many of these problems, I would suggest, are due to divisions with the women’s movement itself. There is no one ‘feminist’ line on the issues that Proudman discusses. Debates on transgender rights, sex work, and the place of class and race in gendered oppression profoundly divide feminists, and have done for some time now. One of the less edifying aspects of contemporary feminist debates is the frequency with which women decry those on the opposing side as ‘faux-feminists’: as women who are in reality working in the interests of patriarchy/capitalism/male supremacy. The passions these debates arouse, and the issues at stake, must be understood if we are to understand the difficult choices that Labour must make when deciding upon policy.

Nowhere is this truer than in the debates surrounding prostitution/sex work. Even which term you use indicates what side you are on, with those who use ‘prostitution’ generally in favour of stricter regulation, and those who favour ‘sex work’ in favour of decriminalisation. Those who support the decriminalisation of sex work often characterise those who oppose it (including advocates of the Nordic model) as moralistic prudes who, in pursuit of ideological purity, don’t much care for practical measures that would improve the working conditions of sex workers themselves.

Sex work is work, they say – and surely all labour movements should be in favour of fighting for workers' rights? Those such as Proudman who support tougher measures characterise those in favour of decriminalisation as naively falling for the claims made by a few exceptional middle-class women for whom sex work really was one choice amongst many, and in the process unwittingly championing the large-scale sexual exploitation and abuse of women. Prostitution, these activists suggest, is not simply work like any other job: rather, the ability of men to literally purchase women's bodies represents the purest expression of male power over women in a patriarchal world. Both sides claim support from sex workers: rarely is it acknowledged that there may be differences of opinion amongst sex workers themselves.

Similar debates are to be found around the regulation of pornography and over sexual practices such as BDSM. I have come to feel, as both a feminist historian and a historian of feminism, that these debates around sex have become proxy debates for something larger – the issue of agency itself, and the extent to which women can exercise it in a patriarchal world. Can women really freely choose sex work in a patriarchal world? Can they ever really enjoy taking part in sexual situations which are predicated on the degradation of women, such as in S+M? Can they reclaim feminist meanings (both as actors and consumers) from a pornography produced for the male gaze? In short, do women freely make these choices or are they simply taught to love their own oppression? And if the latter is the case, how can such a false consciousness ever be sloughed off? (And what, we might ask, would be the political implications of an apparently enlightened feminist vanguard claiming that other women's choices are simply the result of such a false consciousness?) As an historian, I might like to go for an E.P. Thompson-esque (or even marxist) formulation that women make their own histories even if not in circumstances of their own choosing; but even so, how much is circumstance and how much is choice remains open to question.

Given this, Corbyn is damned if he does and damned if he doesn't. There is no one line he could possibly take that would satisfy all feminists. I would suggest Labour's true feminist dilemma at the moment centres on how the movement is to navigate the ideological debates within contemporary feminism without arousing too much ire from activists themselves. There is a real danger, meanwhile, that the party appears overly concerned with abstract intellectual debates that the vast majority of voters are unfamiliar with. These two imperatives must be balanced, while still delivering justice for women. The magnitude of that task should not be underestimated.

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Notes

1. C. Proudman, 'Feminism and the Labour left: a perfect political union?', *Renewal*, 26.1, 2018.
2. 'Diane Abbott more abused than any other MPs during election', *Guardian*, 5.9.17, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/sep/05/diane-abbott-more-abused-than-any-other-mps-during-election>.
3. Amnesty International, 'Black and Asian women MPs abused more online', <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/online-violence-women-mps>.
4. C.L. Riley, 'Gender and the Labour Party in historical perspective', *Renewal*, 24.4, 2016.