Book Reviews

Eve and the New Jerusalem, Barbara Taylor, Virago London, 1983 ISBN 0-86068-257-9 402pp £5.95

Reflecting on the relations between men and women one Owenite feminist wrote in 1839:

But a woman has been the slave of a slave . . . What is the result of (this)? . . . To create, by such arrangements, individual interest, till brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, look on each other with jealousy . . . to set up one half of the poor people against the other half, to subdue them and make them quiet . . .

But . . . 'changes of no ordinary kind are at hand'. I perceive now that through the circulation of truth we are progressing towards the mansion of happiness, which, when gained, will . . . give emancipation to every human being from one end of the earth to the other . . . my tears flow when I compare this scene of confusion and opposition to that tranquil state of existence . . .

The full story of the development of a feminist and socialist critique of relations between the sexes, of the family and of marriage, and of what happened to that critique in the context of the early socialist movement in Britain is the story which Barbara Taylor tells so well in *Eve and the New Jerusalem* – a book to be welcomed not only by historians but by all those interested in feminism and socialism.

The book documents and analyses the forgotten history of socialist feminism in the 1820s and 1830s and issues a challenge to socialists. That challenge is to the orthodoxy which has dismissed Owenism as utopian and unscientific, even if with a 'stupendously grand' vision as Engels put it, and has judged the scientific socialism of the later nineteenth century with its concentration on the capital/labour relation and its neglect of other forms of domination and subordination, to be the only proper route for revolutionary politics. Marx and Engels both admired the aspirations of the Owenites, particularly their plans for socialized industry, decentralized government and the abolition of marriage and the family. But they saw their strategy as fatally flawed by the Owenite reliance on an optimism of the will rather than a 'scientific' assessment of the historical balance of class forces. They therefore judged their dreams as 'fantastic' and foredoomed. Their admiration has, however, been largely forgotten and, as Barbara Taylor convincingly demonstrates, this has resulted in a significant distortion of the socialist tradition:

The accelerating contest between capital and labour became the central axis on which all socialist strategies (non-Marxist as well as Marxist) turned, with every other struggle subordinated to that 'world-historical' battle. The Owenite call for a multi-faceted offensive against all forms of social hierarchy, including sexual hierarchy, disappeared – to be replaced with a dogmatic insistence on the primacy of class-based issues, a demand for sexual unity in the face of a common class enemy, and a vague promise of improved status for women 'after the revolution'.

Recovering the fractures and breaks in the socialist tradition, and the challenges to dominant definitions and forgotten visions is a vital part of re-discovering the complexities of radical thinking and of class formation. The English working class had been 'made' by 1830 but despite the efforts of Owenite feminists, that fragile unity was being constructed within a class divided on sexual lines. Gender divisions were to prove deeply damaging to the socialist cause. So although one confident Owenite feminist declared in 1841 that 'if women understood the principles and practices of Socialism, there would not be one who would not become a devoted Socialist', it might be argued that women have understood only too well that socialism does not always have much to offer them, and that it is a difficult task to reconstruct it with different priorities and practices.

Barbara Taylor is concerned to explain the conditions which made possible the development of a utopian socialist feminist movement in the early nineteenth century. Feminism had suffered a serious defeat in the wake of the reaction to the French Revolution and to Jacobinism in England. Mary Wollstonecraft, who is defended by Taylor as being more firmly rooted in the radical/egalitarian tradition than in that of bourgeois feminism, was universally abhorred in respectable circles – most of whom were far too horrified to read her books. The link between Jacobinism and feminism ensured that middle class forms of feminism would be extremely peripheral in the early decades of the nineteenth century; the ideas were far too dangerous. Early nineteenth century feminism was, therefore, to flower in the context of Owenism, a movement, primarily of the skilled working class with support from lower middle class women particularly, which aimed to challenge the new forms of organization associated with the development of industrial capitalism and create a society which would celebrate 'perfect equality and perfect freedom'. The Owenite critique of capitalism focused around the rejection of a class based economic order and forefronted the destructive effects of competition, which they saw as creating multiple divisions and antagonisms in society, each of which lived in the hearts and minds of individual men and women as well as in their material circumstances. Relations of domination and subordination between men and women were seen as just as damaging as those between masters and men and the institution of marriage was understood as a central agent in the oppression of women. The legal status of women in marriage, which allowed no separate identity to the married woman but saw her as 'covered' by her husband, reduced a woman, argued one Owenite, to 'an invisible woman – a species of ghost, who haunts her husband, and only becomes half solidified when he is no more . . .'. The elimination of personal dependence was seen as the only way to deal with those habits of dominance and subordination which ideologically underpinned the competitive system. The only proper way to achieve that was through the development of communities which would be built on the detachment of kinship ties from the nuclear family and their extension into a wider and freely chosen network.

Barbara Taylor demonstrates how such a perspective was possible as a radical response to the fundamental changes which were taking place in English society as a result of the development of industrial capitalism. The world was being turned upside down and this forced a variety of reactions — from the utopianism of the Owenites, to the chilly logic of the Utilitarians, or the rigid insistence on the separate spheres of men

and women of the Evangelicals. Taylor's analysis of the specificity of the forms of Owenite feminism rests on two central arguments. The first is concerned with the initial major phase of the movement when the priority for socialists was seen as an economic offensive which would bring about a wholesale reorganisation of work and society through the mass activities of the general union, the Grand National Consolidated Trade Union. From the beginning women were involved in this struggle but this inevitably raised difficult contradictions. The Owenites were fundamentally committed to stemming the tide of industrial capitalism, to putting back the clock. This meant, amongst other things, restoring the rights and privileges of skilled male workers who were being displaced by the cheap labour of women and children. The attack on skill, which Edward Thompson argued in *The Making of the English Working Class* was one of the cornerstones to the development of radical politics, had specific effects on the sexual division of labour. The introduction of the sloop system, of cheap ready made goods which could compete with factory production by virtue of the breakdown in the division of labour and the introduction of unskilled workers, depended in London, as Sally Alexander (1976) and Barbara Taylor have both established, on the existence of a pool of female labour. Sweated outwork, organized by a capitalist, became as typical of the new economic system as the factory. Skilled men were committed to the abolition of this kind of piecework and, therefore, to the exclusion of women workers. But the position of women workers was changing. Forced to enter the sloop system they were subject to a high level of exploitation. Nevertheless they were earning an independent wage and those who were married were less able than they had been to rely on partial economic dependence on their husbands, since the wages of the men were being eroded. This meant that women workers were able to formulate new demands for themselves. The organized working class in the 1830s provided a site for open discussion of the issue of sex-based competition. This happened particularly in the London tailors' strike, which is dealt with in the book. The battle lines here were not drawn entirely along gender divisions. Some Owenite men were sexual egalitarians and believed in women's right to work. But the contrary pressures were extremely strong — as one woman wrote, 'the men are as bad as their masters'. Threatened with a challenge to their dominance and skill at work and to their patriarchal power in the home, many men, socialist or not, responded by trying to put the world back right, that is the male, side up.

Another major line of argument in the book comes from the analysis of the second phase of the Owenite movement, when the defeat of the economic offensive, with its emphasis on cooperative shops, labour exchanges and mass union mobilization had led to a new concentration on communal experimentation. 'Universal enlightenment and cultural reconstruction had replaced economic cooperation as the major route to the New Moral World'. This shift has normally been interpreted by historians as the shift into utopian millenarianism. Barbara Taylor however challenges this orthodoxy too and argues: 'for the majority of early Socialists, the language of prophecy and apocalypse expressed not a literal faith in millenarian change but an intensity of aspiration for which there was simply no secular vocabulary available'. Religious enthusiasm was a language of many meanings in the early nineteenth century and the success of the Owenites can partly be measured in their capacity to appropriate this language and to turn it to new psychological and political purposes. It was Eve who was to organize and build the new Jerusalem — a communist feminist Jerusalem where the Christian concepts of woman's mission and duty would be converted to a mission of love, as against competition, and a duty to find a new basis of social organization in which marriage would play no part and in which women would at the very least share domestic duties amongst themselves.

The debate over the rights and wrongs of marriage became a subject of popular

controversy in the 1840s. Two sides battled it out in public arenas. On one side the Evangelicals supported marriage and the family and denounced the Owenites for everything from atheism to the doctrine of free love; on the other the Owenites, represented by lecturers such as the amazing Emma Martin, defended sexual reform. The battle was waged not only in packed meetings but in a steady stream of pamphlets and tracts. 'For the honour of the sex — for the rights of woman — in the name of all that is dear and lovely — never give your hand or your heart to a Socialist!' a London city missionary implored his female readers. His plea went to the heart of the matter, the sexual fears which were aroused by the questioning of the status quo.

The development of Owenite feminism was marked by internal contradictions which were to play their part in its downfall. English society was increasingly subject to a view of the world which divided men and women between public and private spheres — defining men as concerned with the public world of politics and the market situating women at home with children. The move towards much more rigid boundaries between the sexes was originally articulated by the Evangelicals in the 1790s in response to the fears generated by the French Revolution and the desire to reconstruct the nation on the basis of a new and more responsible set of 'manners and morals'. But the Evangelical campaign had repercussions far beyond its own frontiers and the 1830s and 1840s marked a period when respectable working class culture was becoming more marked by such attitudes and values. Barbara Taylor argues that this must be understood not as a filtering down of middle class values to an aspirant working class but as an active response by working men and women to changes in their own lives. I would be inclined to give more weight to the active construction of bourgeois hegemony in this period by sectors of the middle class. If they had not spoken to real working class experience then their values would not have been taken up and adapted, made anew in working class forms. But as Gramsci stresses, hegemony cannot be constructed without hard work being done by the ruling group and that work was done in the Mechanics Institutes, the Temperance Societies, the Sunday Schools and all the other sites of cooperation between sectors of the middle class and the respectable working class.

The Owenites cannot be understood as outside of these shifts in values. They had adapted and changed the popular notion of woman's mission but the fact that they took up such a concept at all implied an acceptance of the differences between manliness and femininity. 'Woman's mission' might be re-interpreted to carry some feminist meanings as later generations of nineteenth century feminists were to discover anew. Their 'mission' could become influence and even power. But the starting point of such a concept was sexual difference and inequality, not sexual equality. The limits of female influence were set by male power. Similarly the Owenite campaign for self-improvement and re-education relied heavily on educating women to be better partners and wives — albeit of a different cast from their Evangelical sisters. Taylor argues that the tension between egalitarian principles and the tightening claims of respectable femininity which had been present since the 1790s became sharper in the 1830s and 1840s:

... within Owenism it was heightened by an internal emphasis on the moral and cultural 'improvement' of working people which often involved a deliberate re-orientation of plebeian social life around a feminized ideal. Woman's family-centred, nurturing culture came to be seen as a desirable alternative to masculine, work-centred, competitive culture: a development which had important implications for the status of Socialist women.

The collapse of the Owenite communities and the dispersal of Owenite support meant the end of the movement which had tried, within a culture increasingly dominated by the ideology of separate spheres, to treat sex oppression and class

exploitation as two parts of one system. After 1845 they were increasingly viewed, 'not as twin targets of a single strategy, but as separate objects of separate struggles, organized from different — and sometimes opposing — strategies'. Class struggle became something that was primarily to do with men, with the public world, with the point of production, with the capital/labour relation and the organized power of the male working class. Gender relations were something other, something which male socialists did not often turn their attention to, which were seen as detracting from the 'real' struggles.

I would argue that this separation between gender and class had already been constructed within the middle class by the 1830s and 1840s. Working class men and women were in part responding to the existence of an ideology already embodied in organizational forms and material practices. The assumption that class was constituted by men and that it was men who would be active political agents in the public world, was formulated by middle class men in the period from 1789. The power of their assumptions and the institutions with which they embodied that power had important effects on Socialist culture. That culture had to be constructed as 'other', as oppositional, and yet it was underpinned by contradictions about the proper place of women. It could not be free, either of the customary notions, inherited from the early modern period, of woman's subordinate place in the marriage partnership, nor of the re-articulation which was taking place in middle class culture, which was re-interpreting that subordination as dependence. Both rural and urban English society were, by the 1830s and 1840s, covered with a network of new institutions and societies established by the male middle class, which exercised extensive powers over everyday life — whether through the church, the school, the philanthropic society or the employers' associations. Those agencies all worked on sets of assumptions about the relations between men and women — not always exactly the same assumptions but within the same set of discourses. Middle class culture, therefore, established many of the boundaries within which working class culture then had to survive. Culturally it was a richly symbolic gesture for Owenites to insist that in large public occasions men and women should dine together. To their enemies this was a mark of their decadence — and would lead directly to illegitimacy. It broke with the customary patterns of civic life when members of the guilds had dined together. Such customs had been taken up by the middle class and turned into the rituals of civic life in such events as town banquets where the men dined whilst the women watched. But it was the middle class pattern which ruled the day. In a fascinating discussion of the differences between Owenism and Chartism at the end of the book Barbara Taylor looks at the relative absence of feminism in the latter and the collapse into conventional notions of the proper place of men and women. The battle had been lost for a while . . . Perhaps the last word, however, should rest with an Owenite feminist writing in 1834 when hopes were still high of a truly united movement:

If a house is divided against itself, it cannot stand; just so, if women were all in union, I am positive that it would establish a power, that tyranny would never be able to stand against . . . therefore, they that are not for us are against us . . .'

Catherine Hall

Note

ALEXANDER, Sally. 'Women's work in nineteenth-century London; a study of the years 1820-50' in *The Rights and Wrongs of Women* edited MITCHELL, J. & OAKLEY, A. (1976.) Harmondsworth, Penguin.