promising or not compromising our principles becomes such a central issue, an aim in itself, then transforming our lives and those of other women (including women who may not necessarily agree with us), can become secondary. What happens then, in practice, is what I observed at an Asian women's meeting last summer, where a speaker from SBS discussed religion. She presented her position and, when questioned and challenged, simply restated it. There was no attempt to explain this position, to discuss strategy or to learn from other Asian women who disagreed.

The result of this attitude is alienation from many struggling Asian women who, while aware of the sexist nature of religious institutions, still see their religion as an essential element in their defences against Britain's racist society; women whose everyday experience tells them that in Britain now, thanks to the Rushdie Affair, all Asians are seen as Muslims and therefore as fundamentalists and that, in view of this, new strategies are needed to combat Asian women's oppression.

What you will find in *Against the Grain* is a reflection of both the positive and negative aspects of SBS's attitude. It is a feminism full of dynamism and courage, but laced with intolerance and arrogance – a politics which is about crusading, not convincing.

Amrit Wilson

Note

This review was written in November 1990, before the Gulf War, and was held over to this issue so that it could appear together with the contrasting review by Julia Bard.

Against the Grain

Orthodoxies are, by their nature, both coercive and exclusive since they claim not only the privilege of unique understanding, but also an institutional right to speak on behalf of others. Although many orthodox groups, whether political, religious, cultural or social, on the left or the right, appear to recruit or even to proselytize, their power rests on their ability to limit the boundaries of debate, thereby defining dissenters as outsiders.

Southall Black Sisters are not just a thorn in the side of the establishments of the Asian communities from which most of them come, but are an important challenge to conventional wisdom on the left and in the women's movement. They have insisted on the right to break ranks with leaders of the Asian community, secular and religious, over issues like arranged marriage and calls to extend the blasphemy laws. But they have also insisted on the right to break ranks with orthodox antiracism when it creates new myths to avoid extending its analysis to incorporate uncomfortable realities.

Against the Grain is a collection of accounts of the life and work of Southall Black Sisters – a history 'fractured' by conflicts, both within and outside the group, but a history also of resolving those conflicts, of creating alliances and pushing forward the boundaries of political debate.

Since its formation in 1979 the central tension in SBS has been between whether to concentrate on casework or on political campaigning. They have managed to do both and, uncomfortable though that tension has been, it is precisely the impact of their own and other black women's real and immediate concerns on their general analysis which has enabled them to look and move outwards, to develop politically

and face the challenge of power and oppression within their community as well as the racism outside it.

Gita Sahgal says in her chapter, 'Fundamentalism and the multiculturalist fallacy': 'Very early on, women in SBS protested at the death of Mrs Dhillon and her children who had been killed by her husband who set their house alight. They broke the silence of the community on the issue of domestic violence. They challenged also, perhaps inadvertently, the "heroic tradition" of anti-racism . . . Black women were to be celebrated when they came out in their thousands to oppose the presence of fascists in their streets, but not when they tried to create a new movement and consciousness and challenged the notion of a unified community.' (p. 17)

By taking up the issue of domestic violence in the Asian community, SBS were accused of provoking a racist backlash and encouraging the press to pathologize the Asian family. In my view Gita Sahgal treads too gently when she replies that a racist backlash is unlikely in a huge black community like Southall and that domestic violence is a universal problem which needs to be challenged by all women. An old Jewish socialist friend of mine who has fought anti-Semitism since his youth in pre-War Poland says: 'If you want to beat a dog, you can always find a stick.' Racism is not caused by the activities of its victims so it is, at best, pointless to keep your criticisms of institutions such as arranged marriage, confined within the community; at worst it means sacrificing women's lives, in some cases literally, to what turns out to be spurious unity against racism from outside the community.

This collection of essays and interviews reflecting on the experiences and development of SBS, whose first ten years coincided with Thatcher's regime, describes the bleak political landscape in which they were operating and the destructive sectarian battles fought out across the Left. The Parliamentary Labour Party spent those years elbowing its way on to Conservative territory, while municipal anti-racism co-opted activists and blunted dissent. Radical feminists split into increasingly minute groups with increasingly long lists of credentials, and 'networked' with other minute groups, while many socialist feminists despairingly moved into increasingly narrow campaigns or created a breathing space by writing books about the history of the women's movement. But ironically, or rather, dialectically, this period has also revealed a resilience, sophistication and profundity in a few groups whose integrity, authenticity and commitment to developing an analysis grew stronger in response to difficulties while all around them were retreating into old familiar orthodoxies or bowing down to the proliferation of false gods of the eighties such as new wave, new times and born-again religion.

Southall Black Sisters is an example to the Left of how to open debate; of how respect for people's humanity and intelligence encourages them to act politically on their own behalf. Above all, SBS are an example of how necessary it is to reject other people's ready-made theories even if they seem much more comfortable than the truth as you know it to be. If one chapter in *Against the Grain* illustrates how hard this is, it is Pragna Patel's essay on the gangs of boys on the streets of Southall. She breaks with feminist tradition in writing about the problems and dilemmas facing young, poor men, but she also contradicts socialist received wisdoms in insisting that, their oppression notwithstanding, they must be stopped from terrorizing other people, usually women, in the community. None of this prevents Pragna Patel from addressing the issue of police harassment of young black men which has the approval of the community leaders.

She will not allow the gang

phenomenon to pass as 'media hype' as some of the Left would like, nor as the cutting edge of the antiracist movement as others would prefer. But nor will she allow it to be portrayed as a kind of a vicious mafia, indigenous to the Asian community, a picture which would suit the racist police response. Her understanding of the gang phenomenon is based on many, often conflicting, elements, and on a respect for the boys themselves who she sees neither as helpless victims of 'the system', nor as romantic defenders of their community.

Unlike most other analysts, Pragna Patel looks at how the established leadership of the Asian community views the gangs and at the relationship between the police and that leadership. 'The police,' she says, 'are too busy "liaising" with the power brokers within our communities who are more interested in playing off some sections of the community against others.

'There are no easy solutions. When we raise the demands of women, we are only too aware of the implications both for women and other sections of our society. If we raise difficult and complex issues it is not because we regard the interests of women as a sectional interest to set against everyone else. We believe that by illuminating the problems women face we will shed light on all of society in general. We have no easy answers, but only with absolute honesty and compassion can we begin to grope towards a solution.' (p. 54)

Southall Black Sisters have discovered over ten hard years that 'absolute honesty and compassion', as well as being the prerequisite for a genuine understanding of the political world, is also the only workable basis for making alliances. This has been most obvious in the wake of the controversy over *The Satanic Verses* when SBS's clear position in defence of Rushdie led to the formation of Women Against Fundamentalism. This group is a broad and fruitful alliance of women from a wide range of communities – Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Catholic, Protestant – many with a long history of dissent within those communities, but they have been characterized by a number of well-known, more 'orthodox' anti-racists as 'anti-Muslim'. They are accused of pandering to the wave of anti-Muslim racism which erupted in the wake of the *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie. Socialists and feminists with excellent credentials emerged on this issue as preferring to stay silent on the subject of death threats made by patriarchal tyrants than to find themselves, as they saw it, on the side of the racists. Which takes me back to the dog and the stick.

Hannana Siddiqui's short essay, 'A woman's banner for doubt and dissent', describing the picket against the Muslim Fundamentalist march against Rushdie in May 1989 encapsulates the need to extrapolate our politics from our own experience and the need to make authentic alliances on that basis. It also addresses the crucial question of how the state relates to religious leaders. By accepting fundamentalist leaders as spokespeople for the whole community, the state is able to work on the assumption that either the community is homogeneous or that rebels will be kept under control. This takes its most pervasive form as multiculturalism. Hannana Siddiqui says: 'The fundamentalists are supported by the state, the multiculturalist and the liberal anti-racist lobby. The multi-culturalists see the community as a unified whole. The only demands they listen to are those defined by conservative, religious, male leaders. They refuse to recognise the demands of women within our communities. At SBS Asian women come in on a daily basis experiencing violence, rape and sexual abuse. Women are being forced into arranged marriages, homelessness and denial of education. The multi-culturalists fail to intervene and support these women.

For them it is all part of a culture and religion which must be tolerated. And the anti-racists allow this to continue because they see the fight against racism as the central struggle.' (p. 62)

The courage of Hannana and the other fifty or so women on that picket came partly from their long practice at being dissenters within their community. It also came from the solid basis for their mutual support: an alliance was being forged between the women on that demonstration that is alive and flourishing two years later in the form of Women Against Fundamentalism.

Hannana Siddiqui concludes: 'I do not want men and mullahs to build my future. I want to create my own future in a world where women can choose to live as they please. I want a secular state without blasphemy laws which impose religious censorship. I support Salman Rushdie's right to write *The Satanic Verses* because his right to doubt and dissent is also my right to doubt and dissent.' (p. 62)

The leaders of the Southall Asian communities probably wouldn't mind that doubt and dissent if Southall Black Sisters had done what many other feminists and socialists have done: taken it outside the community. But as Pragna Patel writes: 'We needed to grasp the layered, multi-faceted nature of our existence in which racism plays only a part. If we need to be proud and confident of our histories and cultures, we also need to be critical and honest about its content and development. We cannot keep silent about the daily experiences of degradation and humiliation suffered by women in order to perpetuate a fantasy. Instead we have to challenge the self-appointed community leaders and question their legitimacy to speak on our behalf.' (p. 44)

The challenge posed by Southall Black Sisters is that they insist on working as Asian women, with Asian women *within* the Asian community, and as socialists, feminists and anti-racists *within* the Left. They do not claim to have a perfect analysis on every issue, but they strive for an understanding derived from honest communication and open debate and for strategies derived from alliances which recognize difference as well as joint interests. These are far more dangerous to the powerful than the most well-honed theory whose coherence depends on its excluding uncomfortable and contradictory facts.

Julia Bard

Promissory Notes: Women in the Transition to Socialism

Edited by Sonia Kruks, Rayna Rapp and Marilyn B. Young

New York: Monthly Review Press 1989, £12.95 Pbk, ISBN 0 85345 771 9

Promissory Notes is an 'American production' in the grand style, bringing together discrete, dispersed writings on the connexions and contradictions between the position of women in socialist thought, their role in the transition to socialism and the reality of women's lives in various 'socialist' regimes.[1]

Although the authors propose that the book is essentially a number of case studies it seems that precisely the cohabitation of practical historical analysis of women's situation in certain socialist states *and* the more explicitly theoretical debates by Eisenstein, White, Aguilar, Beneria and others gives an active, critical impetus to the whole.

Essentially this book is sectioned into 'The European heritage' where Joan Landes assesses how the