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Social reproduction - what it is and why it matters

RS21

In summer 2012 *Fifty Shades of Grey* became one of the best-selling books of all time. In August of that year Amazon announced the series had outsold sales of every book in the Harry Potter series combined. The author EL James was interviewed on the BBC's Newsnight programme. Adverts for it were plastered over every inch of London.

The series depicts the relationship between a college student and her partner, who turns out to be a bondage-loving business magnate. The books are notable not only for the abusive relationship at their heart, but also for their portrayal of an entirely commoditised couple. The lead character is bought an Apple Mac, not a computer; given a Rolex, not a watch.

During that summer, I realised that everyone my age (early 20s) was reading it. Then everyone was reading it. It didn't matter if they'd gone to university or not, or were in a relationship or not. Something about the books had caught the mood of the time.

Naturally this provoked lengthy, angry debates on feminist blogs. It rekindled many of questions from the "feminist sex wars" of the 1980s - is BDSM oppressive? is porn ever okay? These debates re-emerged alongside new feminist movements in India, Egypt and Spain.

Fifty Shades was a culmination of what neoliberalism says about women. They had to be like Anastasia Steele; young, sexy, caring, intelligent, working, but also keen to be a mother. If *Fifty Shades* was placed in the "fiction" section of bookshops, it should have been filed under "fantasy".

Yet during this summer something became abundantly clear: Marxists had very little to say about the phenomenon. How could a book about a women's oppression, about her commodification, about domestic work, become the biggest selling of all time and not provoke a response?

There are two possible reasons - one is that Marxism has no useful analysis of women's oppression to offer to the new movements that are emerging across the globe. The other reason is that Marxist analyses of women's oppression have faltered since the feminist debates of the 1980s and struggled to grapple with the impact neoliberalism has wrought upon women's lives.

This article will argue for the latter position. Marxist analyses of women's oppression have, in the recent past, been left wanting, but the framework provided by Marx, Engels, Luxemburg - and later Lise Vogel and others - is still useful for understanding women's oppression today.

The divorce

The rise of the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s raised fundamental questions over the role of women in society and their personal relations with men. It also began to recast the meaning of politics for women. Demonstrations and protests went alongside the rise of "consciousness raising", for example.

Intervening in this terrain was no easy task. Some Marxists offered a kneejerk rejection of all feminist theory. Others were more polite, but similarly non-committal.

But feminists had put their finger on an important issue. Marxists argued that the driver of history was "the production and reproduction of immediate life". But where was their analysis of reproduction? Absolutely Marx had provided detailed studies of labour power, of factories, of the ins and outs of the cotton trade, but where had he talked of life in the home? What was the value of cleaning? What was the labour power used in giving a child a bath?

Even in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, Mrs Jones, the housekeeper, plays a pivotal role in ensuring her ungrateful employer returns to work the following day.

These questions concerning "social reproduction" were addressed in the "domestic labour debate" of the 1970s.

One of the ways that Marxism differentiates itself from "bourgeois" theories of society is in its commitment to materialism - in other words theory grounded in the real world. As one writer put it "to be a Marxist is to muck about in the realm of the concrete".

Those involved in the domestic labour debate were trying to take concepts from Capital and apply them to women's oppression. Needless to say they had varying degrees of success.

The watershed moment was the publication of Margaret Benston's article *The Political Economy Of Women's Liberation* in 1969. Benston's originality lay in her proposal that domestic labour was "productive" in the Marxist sense. She argued that without domestic labour workers cannot reproduce themselves, and without workers capital cannot be reproduced.

Benston laid the groundwork for a series of other authors, most notably Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, to also argue that domestic labour was productive.

In 1972 Dalla Costa and James published their pamphlet arguing that capitalism, in creating family structures, had freed men from reproducing labour power. As a result women were productive in providing a "safety valve" for social tensions.

The pamphlet had huge political complications. It lay the theoretical foundation for a small but aggressive campaign for wages for housework (although Dalla Costa herself never actually agreed with this demand). It was also cited as the inspiration for Silvia Federici's seminal *Caliban And The Witch*.

The problem with their conclusion was that neither of them had understood what Marx meant by "productive". They confused the usefulness of labour with its social form. It doesn't matter to Marx what the type of work being done is: what matters is its relation to capital. As Rosa Luxemburg put it:

As long as capitalism and the wage system rule, only that kind of work is considered productive which produces surplus value, which creates capitalist profit. From this point of view, the music-hall dancer whose legs sweep profit into her employer's pocket is a productive worker, whereas all the toil of the proletarian women and mothers in the four walls of their homes is considered unproductive. This sounds brutal and insane, but corresponds exactly to the brutality and insanity of our present capitalist economy.

This is why Mrs Jones in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, employed by the main character along with other staff, is during the day a "productive worker", but when she returns home to do exactly the same work for her family (perhaps without cleaning the bondage equipment), she is unproductive. This will be examined in more detail later on.

In short, both Dalla Costa and James confuse the conditions necessary for exploitation with the process of exploitation itself.

The debate raged on until 1979, when Heidi Hartmann published her long article *The Unhappy Marriage Of Marxism And Feminism*, condemning Marxism as "sex-blind". In it she develops "dual systems theory", the idea that patriarchy and capitalism are both separate systems to be fought - and both have a material basis.

For Hartmann, and the new radical feminists emerging from the 1970s, the "marriage" between Marxists and feminists was over. If Marxism had been the oppressive husband, feminism had been the long-suffering wife - and now she wanted a divorce.

In the ten years since Margaret Benston's initial article the political landscape had been transformed. In the domestic labour debates many feminists had concluded that there simply wasn't a Marxist framework to understand women's oppression. The election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 and Ronald Reagan in 1980 corresponded to a period of serious retreat for the left. Disoriented many activists turned their gaze inwards. As one writer puts it the demands in the 1960s for "representation" got submerged into identity politics and demands for "recognition".

We are going to consider in more detail two questions that kept emerging - and the solutions offered by those who did develop and apply Marxists categories.

First - what is productive labour? Why do Marxists say domestic labour is "unproductive"? Second - how does the reproductive sphere interact with the productive one? Third - what, if anything, did Marx say about all this?

The special commodity

When my lecturer at university asked us to start reading Capital he began by promising us “a riveting read, a page-turner from chapter one!” Capital is no easy read, but what our lecturer meant was that Marx begins Volume One with his profound insight that labour power or “our capacity to labour” is “the special commodity” that keeps the system running.

He writes: “Capital can spring into life, only when the owner of the means of production and subsistence meets in the market with the free labourer selling his labour power. And this one historical condition comprises a world’s history”.

The fact that labour power is a source of value cannot be underestimated. People doing things makes things happen - and yet this simple insight has eluded even the most acclaimed bourgeois theorists.

What follows from this is crucial. If labour power is the hinge on which the whole system turns, how is that labour power itself produced?

One author that seized on Marx’s insight in Capital and developed it further was Lise Vogel, an American sociologist and former civil rights activist. She proposes three ways that labour power is reproduced.

1. through daily activities that help to restore the worker allowing them to return to work - this includes food and shelter, but also any psychological care for each other that goes on within the home.
2. similar activities directed at non-workers (the elderly, children, the unemployed) who are outside of the production process.
3. (perhaps the most obvious) the literal reproduction of new workers - childbirth.

Viewing reproductive labour in this light allows Vogel to get away from assumptions common in the domestic labour debate - “heterosexuality, biological procreation, family forms or generational replacement”. Instead she focuses on the relation of reproductive labour to the system as a whole.

All three ways are linked to the production process. If workers get paid less, they are less able to provide for themselves and those reliant on them. As a consequence they are less likely to have children. Since the beginning of the recession, birth rates have dropped dramatically in Europe. Many financial magazines refer to the “other crisis” - the demographic one. In Spain predicted death rates will exceed birth rates by 2017.

Public services may once have provided care for the elderly or disabled. But neoliberal policies force this care back into the home - increasing the rate of profit by opening up the public sector to private investment and profit.

It’s not just adults performing this unpaid work. Between 2001 and 2011 the number of children (under 18s) providing care in the home to parents or relatives increased in the UK by 19.5%.

Work in the home is clearly a vital part of the system. Women may be invisible, but they are also indispensable. Does this mean feminists who argue that it produces surplus value are correct? Is the work in the home “productive”?

Marxists would argue not - but to understand this we have to look at what Marx really meant when he said labour power was a commodity.

Use value and exchange value

For Marx a commodity is something that is produced for exchange in the market. All commodities are made up of two aspects: use value and exchange value. Use value is the quality that makes something useful to people - an apple is useful to eat. Exchange value in contrast arises with the market - it represents how much one commodity is worth in relation to others. The exchange value of an apple is whatever other commodities it can be exchanged for.

Use value and exchange value have little direct relationship. Water is useful, yet it’s exchange value is low. Diamonds just look pretty, yet they command an extortionate exchange value.

Marx argued out that the exchange value had nothing to do with “supply and demand” (as most economists today think), but rather was the result of how much labour power had gone into producing the product.

When it comes to the home this distinction is crucial. Labour in the home does not have an exchange value - it is not a commodity bought and sold on the market. It is what Marx calls “concrete labour” - “the specific act of working to produce useful things”.

Only labour in the market place can become “abstract labour” which has exchange value. Labour in the home does not produce surplus value - it is not productive in the Marxist sense. Ultimately Dalla Costa and others are wrong. No exchange takes place between women and capitalists that increases the profits of the latter.

This is not to degrade the work that is done in the home. That such vital work is not considered truly viable is an indictment of the warped system we live under, not of that work.

Transition

That’s “productive work” under capitalism. What about the relation between the productive and reproductive spheres? Let’s recap how the capitalist family came about.

The lead up to the industrial revolution didn’t just transform the work that people did: it also transformed the home. In feudal times the peasant household was a unit of production as well as consumption. It consumed things from the system (food, shelter) and produced things for the system - or for the Lord on whose land it worked. Families today do not produce things in their living rooms and sell them on their doorstep. This is an obvious but critical difference.

The peasant family was not “privatised” or closed off from outside society. As Mark Poster puts it “the basic unit of early modern peasant life was not the conjugal family at all, but the village. The village was the peasant’s ‘family’.”

Enclosure of land and urbanisation preceded the Industrial Revolution, and forms of production began to change. This contributed to the increased isolation of the family. Marx and Engels both thought this would eventually lead to the abolition of the family. They were proven mistaken.

There are many reasons for this. The enthusiasm of women to return to the home as a result of appalling working conditions was certainly one of them. To take just one example, the 1853-4 Preston strike was the longest industrial dispute to date in England. There was a prominent campaign within it by women for the “family wage”.

Moreover, the family became a haven in the face of the threat of absolute misery. Angela Davis is particularly interesting on the defence black slaves in the US made of the family. She writes “the family’s vitality proved stronger than the dehumanising rigours of slavery” - family bonds experienced a revival.

Marx recognised that the indiscriminate employment of men, women and children spread the value of labour power over the whole working class family. This ultimately reduced the overall stock of labour power. In the mid 1800s capitalists realised it was in their own interests to reestablish social reproduction within the home. They rapidly put in policies to ensure this.

Consumption

So the family under capitalism is purely a “unit of consumption”. What does this mean? There are two aspects to Marx’s conception of consumption, both are equally important for maintaining capitalism. Marx explains:

The labourer consumes in a two-fold way. While producing he consumes by his labour the means of production, and converts them into products with a higher value than that of the capital advanced. This is his productive consumption. It is at the same time consumption of his labour-power by the capitalist who bought it.

In other words the worker “consumes” things to make them into a higher value - for example, a ship builder “consumes” steel to make ships. This is consumption in the sense of using up, rather

than eating. Were the ship builder to eat steel, the reproduction of labour power would cease quite quickly.

Marx goes on:

On the other hand, the labourer turns the money paid to him for his labour-power, into means of subsistence: this is his individual consumption. The labourer's productive consumption, and his individual consumption, are therefore totally distinct. In the former, he acts as the motive power of capital, and belongs to the capitalist. In the latter, he belongs to himself and performs his necessary vital functions outside the process of production. The result of the one is, that the capitalist lives; of the other, that the labourer lives.

Marx envisions both sides of consumption - at work (productive) and in the home (individual) - as part of a whole process.

So the image of two separate spheres is misleading. Both systems interlock and have to be functional for the whole system to operate. This is so beautifully summed up in Marx's last sentence: for the capitalist to live, the labourer has to also live.

What happens when the worker goes home? What does this "individual consumption" translate into?

This is the part of Marx's analysis that several authors - notably Lise Vogel and recently Heather Brown - have tried to develop. The means of subsistence involve workers buying food for themselves, but also their "generational replacement" - children.

Sadly food is not magically prepared and children are not magically catered for. Regardless of much student effort, you cannot eat off dirty dishes. A child cannot wear the same clothes every day after jumping in mud. For the worker to be able to "consume" in the home, domestic labour has to happen.

Why then have women been left doing the vast majority of domestic labour? Is this the root of their oppression?

Vogel's insight is important here. She deliberately tries to pull away from biological determinist accounts of women's oppression. Instead she stresses three different forms of social reproduction, as mentioned earlier, only the last one (childbirth) reliant on sexual difference.

But sexual difference has a social context. And it is there that a great contradiction of capitalism comes into play.

working class women during and shortly after pregnancy require at least some reduced employment to look after themselves and their new born. In the short term they cannot participate fully in production, meaning the profits of capitalists suffer. But in the long term capitalism requires a new labour supply.

Vogel identifies the differential roles that men and women acquire in the childbearing months as one of the contributors to women's oppression. She writes "in principle women's and men's differential roles need only last during those childbearing months", but as a result men come to be seen as a provider of "the means of subsistence", where women are seen more as the provider of tasks to do with "necessary labour".

The onset of capitalism created a sharp demarcation between where surplus labour is gained and where domestic labour is performed. In feudal societies this distinction was not so sharp.

Yet Vogel does not identify this as the only contributor to women's oppression - that would indeed open her up to charges of biological determinism. Her emphasis is entirely on "the context of the actual society in which such differences are embedded". She goes on "as the socialist tradition has argued, the issue here is property".

And for social reproduction theory - the issue is capitalism. In no previous society was surplus value extracted from wage labour as it is now. Social reproduction theory aims to be a gendered take on the labour theory of value. If the labour theory of value does not apply to a particular society, then neither does social reproduction theory.

Conclusions

By the end of the 1980s the domestic labour debate had been consigned to academic journals. The so called “feminist sex wars” that debated BDSM and pornography led many to ask if the feminist movement had been a Trojan horse for neoliberalism. The language of “choice” had rapidly been coopted by the system, it seemed.

So what can we take from the debates over social reproduction? And what is their relevance for those fighting today?

The first thing is there remains a huge untapped resource within Marx’s writings concerning the link between production and reproduction. Heather Brown’s incredible study of Marx on gender concludes that his “concept of reproduction is more complex than most accounts allow for. He does not appear to treat production and consumption as completely separate, nor does he appear to treat consumption as a reflex of production. The two are instead dialectically integrated elements of the whole”.

Recent rereadings of Marx are useful; automatic defences of Engels are less so. The republication of Lise Vogel’s seminal work has helped to refocus analysis of oppression on its place within the whole system, and not just within the home. This can at times be a bit abstract, but Vogel’s thoroughgoing studies of Lenin and Clara Zetkin are fascinating. It’s a shame she doesn’t assess the work of Alexandra Kollontai.

The second reason social reproduction is important is because it provides a way of understanding oppression that relies on neither biology, nor the assumption that oppression has always existed. It is a theory rooted in the idea that biological limits are always social. Reproduction involves more than just the creation of human beings - it involves the reproduction of the “capital relation” itself - the worker and the capitalist.

Social reproduction emphasises the type of society where reproduction is taking place. It doesn’t have to take place within the family. Look to the vast Foxconn factories in China today where 230,000 workers receive their food and shelter in huge dormitories, not in families. Likewise consider the millions of slaves throughout history driven to their death and then simply replaced. A system built for profit does not necessarily care about “generational replacement”. But for now at least, it seems that social reproduction is at home, in the home.

The third and final point about social reproduction concerns struggle. Resistance to economic crisis has often been as unpredictable as the system itself. There have been huge strikes against governments have been a feature, but also movements not initially based in the workplace - the indignados, the movements in Turkey and Brazil.

The working class must unite the economic and political spheres by seizing the means of production if it is to lay the foundations for a truly democratic society. But struggle will not necessarily first break out in the productive sphere first. We need to understand reproductive and productive spheres as part of a whole process. Otherwise we are condemned to make the same mistakes (albeit in a different way) as the dual systems theorists.

The recent resurgence of the women’s movement has often focused on issues of rape and sexual assault. This is partly because of an actual increase in reported crimes since the crisis, but also because of the very literal way exhibit the violence of the system. We must not dismiss these movements as single issue campaigns or render ourselves unable to participate in them.

Let’s end by returning to *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Gender is used as an ideological tool to hide the reality of class. Neoliberalism does not want to push women back into the home, but it does want them to feel guilty and responsible.

Raunch culture, victim blaming and attacking reproductive rights are all ways of doing that, all ways of reordering femininity. But reordering brings with it instability. When women (and men) start to question the system, the whole ideological edifice can come crashing down.

Fifty Shades of Grey with its self-made millionaire and his perfect partner is the story of neoliberalism. Christian Grey declares in book one “Oh, I exercise control in all things, Miss Steele, I employ over 40,000 people.”

We have actually all been conned. Fifty Shades was not just a book about sex, it was a book about the American dream. Anastasia Steele had not only been sucked into an abusive relationship, she had been ushered into the 1 percent. But the solution will have to come from the 99 percent.

We will not end women's oppression by wearing different clothes, by becoming CEOs, or by having more and better sex. Ending women's oppression means sending the likes of Anastasia the same way as her Russian namesake - and smashing the world of Fifty Shades of Grey.

Fighting oppression is at the heart of socialism

RS21

Socialism has always been about human liberation, not just economic justice. Marx condemned oppressions such as racism and sexism, writing that "labour in the white skin cannot emancipate itself where in the black skin it is branded." He made substantial notes about women in different cultures, from which his collaborator Engels wrote *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* as part of the struggle against women's oppression.

Marxist authors have traced how oppression is rooted in capitalism. Previous cultures had no concept of "race" based on features like skin colour. The concept developed in the contexts of slavery and colonial empire. The growth of Islamophobia in the last ten years in the context of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars shows something similar today. LGBT oppression also developed under capitalism. The idea that only a minority of "homosexuals" experienced desire for the same sex first emerged in the Victorian era as part of defending the respectable family.

The oppression of women had existed for thousand of years before capitalism, but was reshaped to meet the needs of the new society. Women's lives were to centre on the family, on nurturing and support the current and next generations of workers - who were key to capitalism's ongoing profitability. Under neo-liberalism, as publicly provided care services are cut, the importance of the family to capitalism and to women's oppression remains.

Marx wrote comparatively little about oppression, and three large volumes of *Capital* about political economy and class. This wasn't because he thought it was unimportant, but because he believed that understanding and destroying capitalism made possible a society without oppression. Capitalism was hugely productive - for the first time, an equal society was possible without everyone living in equal misery. It also created the working class, which could only take power collectively - there is no point controlling my desk and computer in isolation, for example. Workers must take power through revolution, because the ruling class would not give up power, but also because only in a revolution could most workers be won from long-standing beliefs like racism and sexism - what Marx called "all the muck of ages."

Since then, workers have united to reject oppression in many revolutionary and near-revolutionary situations. The best example is the October 1917 Revolution in Russia. Despite centuries of anti-semitism, one of the main revolutionary leaders, Trotsky, was Jewish. Laws against sex between men were abolished. The new government began to take over the burden of childcare from women: 150,000 children were fed in Moscow schools every day.

Seeing the fight against oppression in this way, as part of the anti-capitalist struggle, is vital. It gives us a strong argument - that workers should reject ideas like sexism and racism, not because it makes them morally better, but because oppression divides the working class and the movement. It is in the self-interest of men, white and straight workers to reject sexism, racism and homophobia.

The huge struggles of the 1960s led to the modern anti-racist, women's and LGBT movements. But it also gave rise to a different approach to fighting oppression, based on the assumption that each oppressed group should lead the fight against its own oppression. This approach is now reflected in the structures of many unions and NUS. Those structures reflect the fact that oppression is taken seriously, and were a step forwards. But there are also serious problems with the ideas behind them.

The first problem is the idea that protection for oppressed groups must be guaranteed by structures, because non-oppressed people don't know how to fight oppression at best - and at worst, are the cause of it. In reality, while many white people accept some racist ideas, for example, many white people have also been part of anti-racist and anti-fascist campaigns.

Also, the idea that each group fights its own oppression has often involved the assumption - until black feminists in the 1980s began to stress what's now called intersectionality - that oppressed groups were more or less separate. Finally, such ideas exaggerated how much oppressed groups have in common - terms like "the LGBT community" overlook important differences, such as those of class. The American anti-racist struggles of the 60s and 70s made possible the growth of a "black bourgeoisie" of elected officials and professionals which has little in common with black workers. Barack Obama is part of that trend. It was good to see a black person elected president, but his presidency has seen the gap in wealth between white and black people increase, not lessen.

The fight against oppression needs to be fully integrated into the fight against capitalism and for socialism. Opposing sexism, racism and homophobia is something everyone should do, not just those most affected. That's the only way to make the vision of Marx, and millions of socialists since, into reality.

What is the nature of the period? A key question

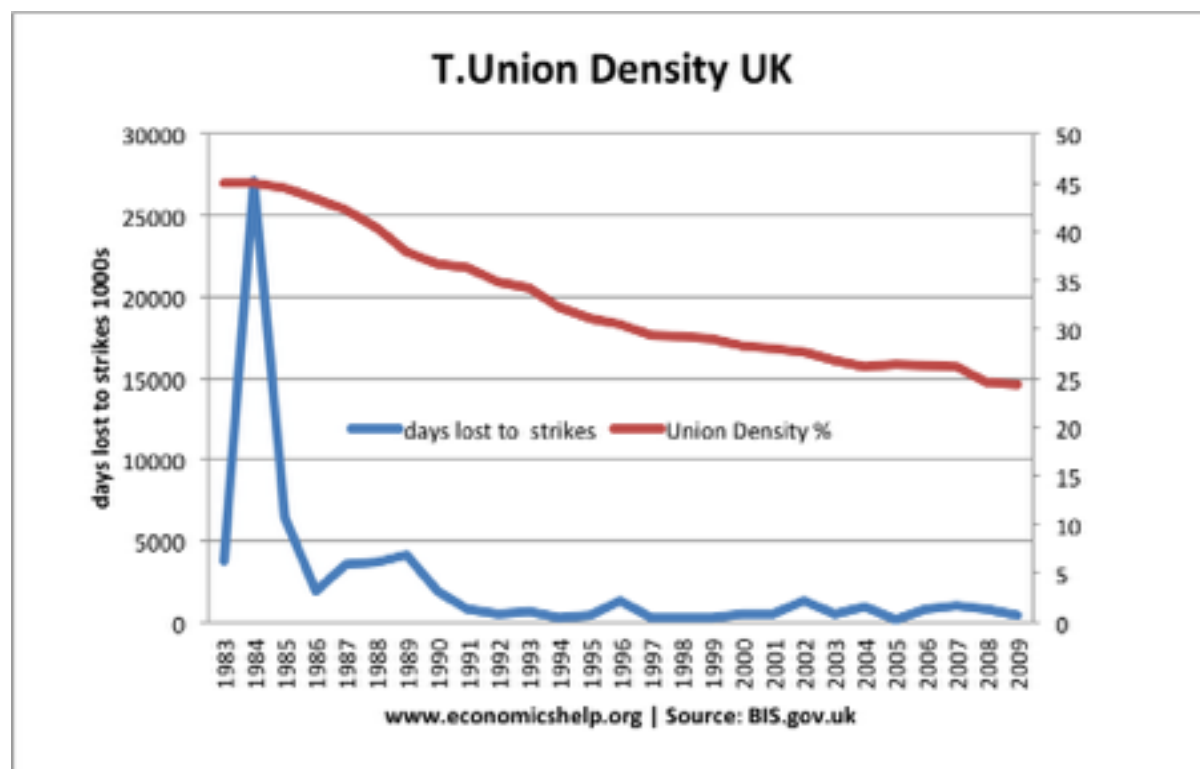
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This article, originally published as part of an rs21 internal discussion, argues that our understanding of the period has been badly wrong for decades, and that improving that understanding is our key task.

Our understanding of the period has been badly wrong for decades.

Black Monday, 19 October 1987, heralded an economic downturn that lasted through the early 1990s. We thought this would force bosses into major confrontation with workers. This could restore our side's confidence following the terrible defeats of the 1980s. This picture was given credence by urban riots and important strikes, such as the "drive for 35" in engineering, ambulance workers and signal workers.

But in the event the government and employers did not need to take on workers' big battalions or inflict any decisive defeats. They pushed through much of their desired economic restructuring and privatisation with only piecemeal industrial resistance. This resistance did not turn the tide:



We talked in the early 1990s about the anger and bitterness felt by millions, and their lack of confidence to fight without a lead from Labour or the union leaders. This was correct. But we always insisted this combination was unstable and temporary, that the next spark could catch and spark a bigger fire.

This perspective did not fundamentally change over the next 20 years. All that happened was our conclusions shifted from the need to build modestly at workplace level in preparation for an upturn to an increasingly desperate search for shortcuts that relied upon the union bureaucracy.

We can draw one of three possible conclusions from this:

- We were right - and if we just hold on a bit longer, a spark will catch, possibly fanned by our close work with the union bureaucracy.
- Our analysis of the period was wrong.
- Our theory was wrong in a more fundamental way.

I simply don't think (a) is credible. If we were discussing the errors of another organisation in another period or country, we would struggle to understand how they had clung to perspectives despite their expectations not being met for two decades. Consider the question in reverse - what would have had to happen to disprove this perspective or make us reconsider? What use is a perspective framed so broadly that it can never be proved wrong?

We can never rule out (c), but I'd prefer to try the easy options before going down that road. We simply have not attempted a serious analysis. This makes me think (b) is the road we should explore.

Improving that understanding of the period is our key task today

It's tempting to carry on with our heads in the sand, ignoring questions posed by the period we live in. I'm too busy. It's clear what I need to do in work this week. We should be building the next demo. It's too hard. I haven't got time to do lots of reading and I find it difficult. I don't really know about that stuff. I haven't got much to contribute.

If revolutionaries are to grow - in numbers, in rootedness, in influence on the class - we must work out our strategies and tactics and an effective relationship is between our organisation, other organisations, the working class and other social forces.

None of this is possible without an implicit or explicit understanding of the nature of the period, the terrain on which we find ourselves fighting. We need a map of the terrain and the compass of sound theory. Otherwise we stumble around, lost and confused, with supplies running low, squabbling in the ranks, with numbers dwindling.

Rs21 are a tiny group with limited resources. To have any impact we will have to prioritise ruthlessly. And we cannot answer questions like the following without a shared and coherent worldview:

- Who is the audience for our political message?
- What are the key things should we be saying to them?
- What is the relation between immediate issues (pay, bedroom tax, housing etc) and the big picture political ideas?
- What takes priority, industrial roots or community work?
- How do we relate to movements against oppression?
- What should our electoral strategy be?
- How do we work with Keynesians to fight cuts while not sharing their analyses and strategy?
- What's our attitude to the People's Assembly or Unite the Resistance?
- What positions should I run for in my union?
- What role do we play in movements, from Scottish independence to anti-fascism?
- What sort of publications do we need?

Improving our understanding of the period will take significant resources. We need to be scouting out the battlefield and reporting back what we find to the whole group. We need to study maps that others are working on. We need to centralise all this and reconcile conflicting information. We need to test and make corrections. We need every rs21 member (and as many as possible beyond that) contributing to this process.

Ukraine: Ilya Budraitskis interview

RS21

Ilya Budraitskis, the Moscow-based socialist, was interviewed in February about the protests in Ukraine. Events have moved on since then. Ilya's interview nevertheless includes an important political analysis of the situation - but readers should be warned that it is not an up-to-date report.

Tens of thousands of Ukrainians are defending the Maidan from the police, risking their lives in the process. Socialist Ilya Budraitskis visited the Maidan in early January - and thinks that the left must do more to get involved the protests.

Ilya, you're active in Moscow in the Russian Socialist Movement, and you were in Kiev to observe the Ukrainian movement against president Viktor Yanukovich. Why?

We've had contacts with the left in Kiev for a while. I went there two weeks ago when the situation reached crisis point and the anti-protest laws were passed, which would have made a police state possible.

How did the movement respond?

It became more radical. First there were huge clashes with the police, with the aim of storming parliament. The protesters put up the well-known huge barricades at the edges of the parliamentary quarter, and there were several deaths.

Was the movement successful?

Yanukovich realised that he wasn't going to make any progress against the movement by strengthening repression, so he tried bribing them with government jobs. The president even asked the opposition parties to appoint the prime minister. But they had to refuse this because the offer of power was on the condition that protesters leave the streets of Kiev. They weren't able to persuade the protesters. Opposition leaders were booed on the Maidan after their negotiations with Yanukovich.

What are your impressions of the movement?

People are incredibly determined. They've been in Kiev's central square for two months and they're still holding it against the police, using four metre high barricades for example.

Many buildings in the area are occupied, including the mayor's office, the central trade union building and a large exhibition centre. Everywhere there's self-organised infrastructure for hot food, heating equipment, medical care, information centres, allocation of warm clothing and more. The level of self-organisation is impressive. All this has been set up by ordinary people themselves - not by the political parties.

Are the protesters intimidated?

Not so far. They go through the streets in helmets and with batons, and when they see an isolated police officer, they beat him up. As a result there are no more police in the area. The regime can let the situation turn into civil war, or it can retreat.

What political forces are active?

There is a huge amount of political agitation, almost all of it from right wing and far right groups. They range from the neoliberal opposition parties to the extraparliamentary ultranationalists of the [Right Sector](#).

What is the Right Sector?

It's an alliance of different extreme right groups setting up military structures. Among them are battle-hardened "ultra" fans of the Dynamo Kiev football team.

How do the protesters react to the extreme right?

For the most part in a positive way. Not because they support their ideology, but because the extreme right - to look at it objectively - are the most courageous part of the movement, they are literally the best fighters. No one goes on the offensive against the police like the extreme right does. However others see them as extremists who put the movement in a bad light.

One of the three opposition parties is Svoboda...

... which is the strongest far right party in the Ukraine, polling 10% at the last elections. Apart from anything else, its rise became possible because Victor Yuschchenko, the previous president,

backed nationalism strongly until 2010.

How do you mean?

Well, for example, Yushchenko said that Ukrainians members of the SS during the Second World War were patriots fighting against foreign domination by the Soviet Union.

What?!

You can only understand this in the context of Ukrainian nationalism. In the Ukraine there are about 20 statues of Stepan Bandera, the best known SS leader. This far right version of nationalism is part of the mainstream in Ukraine. It's the basis for the success of parties like Svoboda, which now plays a key role in the Maidan.

So is this a fascist movement?

I think that German socialists, at least, who throw the word "fascist" around, should learn a bit about the history of fascism.

What do you mean by that?

Fascism arose after the First World War as a counter-movement to strong revolutionary communist workers' movements across large parts of Europe. Fascists had the explicit aim of smashing these workers' movements and securing the dominance of capital, something the liberal state could not guarantee. They were able to seize power in Italy and Germany, but not in other countries.

And today?

In Ukraine in 2014 there is neither a strong workers' movement, nor a fascist movement that aims to destroy it, nor a state which capital doesn't trust. The situation is neither about bringing the working class to power, nor about physically destroying the workers' movement.

So what sort of a movement is this?

The people fighting on the Maidan come from various oppressed classes: workers, the unemployed, the impoverished self-employed, students who won't be able to get jobs and so on. Their opponent is the state and the political elites. It's a mistake to call the movement fascist, because the class composition of parties in conflict is quite different.

But there are fascists in the Maidan.

Absolutely. The ideology of the Right Sector is unambiguously fascist. And they are trying to establish their dominance over the mass movement. But so far, fortunately, they haven't succeeded - because the core of the movement doesn't have anything to do with fascism.

So what is its core?

I don't have a name for it. It comes from a post-Soviet society which has been robbed of class consciousness and has no tradition of protest. So movements can take on very different forms - and change their character particularly quickly, moving to the left or to the right.

How did the political character of the movement arise?

Now it has a nationalistic, partly anti-Communist character. This is partly because right wing groups were the best prepared for the situation. But it is also because of the catastrophic role played by Ukraine's Communist Party.

The Communist Party polled 13% at the last elections.

Yes - and then they found nothing better to do than become a key source of support for Yanukovich's government. Most Ukrainians associate the left mainly with the Communist Party. And, of all people, Communists in parliament voted *for* Yanukovich's anti-protest laws. Without their votes, the laws would have been defeated.

How is that possible?

The Communist Party has been bought by oligarchs from East Ukraine in just the same way as they bought Yanukovich. It openly supports Russian nationalism. Communist politicians speak openly about their good relationship with Kyril I, Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church.

What position do they take towards the Maidan movement?

They criticise the Ukrainian nationalism, but not from a position of internationalism. Rather they put forward Russian chauvinist arguments - and so replace one nationalism with another. I recommend that all left parties in Europe break off contact with the Ukrainian Communist Party. Politics like theirs should not be tolerated.

What are genuine Ukrainian leftists doing?

People on the left hold various opinions about the movement and have done from the start. Some saw it as a far right movement, alien to them, something they shouldn't take part in. Others have got involved and are trying to influence the political direction of the movement.

That must be hard to do.

There are lots of well-organised far right activists on the Maidan ready to attack socialists. Left activists have had their leaflets and flags seized, and some have been beaten up.

So this is no place for the left?

Yes there is, precisely because of that! Of course we have to take care of our physical safety. But as long as that is guaranteed, we cannot stand by and do nothing while the extreme right establishes political dominance. We cannot hand the movement over to them. We cannot let the right monopolise extraparliamentary politics.

Are you willing to debate with Nazis?

Perhaps with some of them. The main thing is that a large majority of protesters are politically active for the first time - and they are now holding the Maidan against brutal battalions of police. Some 300,000 people took part in the biggest demonstrations in Kiev. The vast majority of them don't have anything to do with the extreme right.

Why are the ultranationalists such a strong force?

Do you know when a lasting, independent Ukrainian state was established for the first time?

No, why?

In 1991 - when the Soviet Union collapsed. That's why patriotic slogans get so much support in Ukraine. That's why so many Ukrainians think like the inhabitants of a colony 20 years after independence: "The most important thing is that we aren't controlled by a great power."

But the movement is strongest in West Ukraine...

... because there's not just a class divide in Ukraine, but also a strong division on economic and cultural levels. In the eastern half of Ukraine most people speak Russian as a mother tongue, at work, in school. Even Vitali Klitschko's mother tongue is Russian - he speaks Ukrainian with a strong accent.

And in the western half?

People there speak mainly Ukrainian. This is one of the poorest countries in Europe, and more people are clearly poor or unemployed in the western part than in eastern industrial areas around Kharkiv and Dnipropetrovsk. West Ukrainians migrate to the Czech Republic and Poland because pay there is significantly higher than at home.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church is led by the Kiev patriarchate in the West. It split from the main church in 1991 and its priests now speak from the stage at the Maidan. In the east, by

contrast, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church led by the Moscow patriarchate has most support - and its priests are normally on the side of Yanukovich.

What significance does this have for the movement?

In the West, 99 percent of people support the protests. People have come to Kiev in buses to live in the Maidan for weeks. They are afraid of being dominated by Russia. Above all else they are against Yanukovich, who in their eyes wants to make Ukraine into a Russian colony again.

Are they wrong to be afraid?

Not entirely, no. The Russian state is always trying to make Ukraine more dependent upon it, by turning off the natural gas pipeline during winter for example. You can't blame the Ukrainians for having no trust in Vladimir Putin.

Is the EU the alternative for the movement?

The movement is primarily directed against the Yanukovich government. The EU question is less important. But of course, it's the only tangible alternative to an orientation towards Russia. And apart from that, many are under the illusion that rapprochement with the EU will bring to the Ukraine the prosperity, freedom and democracy of many EU countries.

Who benefits from a rapprochement between Ukraine and the EU?

Some oligarchs, the ones who control the opposition parties, think it would be a good deal. But negotiations would do nothing to address problems ordinary people face - the struggle against corruption, political and social reform. It's mainly about access to the Ukrainian market for big EU companies.

Couldn't an alliance with the EU ease Ukraine's economic crisis?

The fate of our East European neighbours suggests otherwise. In Romania and Bulgaria, for instance, prices have risen but incomes have not. More and more young people have to migrate to work for very low wages in Western Europe - where they are used to push down the pay locals can earn. Joy over EU membership disappeared very quickly in these countries. Officially, all EU citizens are equal - but some are more equal than others.

So why are illusions in the EU so strong?

What set off the protests in November last year was Yanukovich's last minute failure to sign an agreement with the EU. Until that point then both the government and the opposition parties campaigned for integration of Ukraine into the EU.

An unsigned agreement led to a mass movement?

Yanukovich had prepared no propaganda for his change in strategy. Literally overnight, members of the government said that the agreement stood in fundamental contradiction to the national interests of their beloved homeland, when those same people had explained 24 hours before that only the agreement could save the Ukraine from decline.

A real PR disaster...

... which played a decisive role in the spontaneous outbreak of protests. People felt Yanukovich was leading the Ukraine towards the EU, when suddenly Putin pulls out his credit card and makes him an offer he can't refuse. That's what it looked like.

... which the opposition parties made clever use of.

The oligarchs who controlled them thought it would mean more profits for them. But the key point is that oligarchs and their parties have found it difficult to direct the movement. It has become an autonomous centre of political power, and it is worth the left struggling around it.

Are all the East Ukrainians on Yanukovich's side?

If there was a referendum over unification of Ukraine with Russia, even in the East most people would vote no. They don't trust the Russian government. But Yanukovych does still have support in the East.

Does that mean the government is stable?

No. What weakens Yanukovych - as well as the mass movement in the west - is the oligarch system itself. Several "sponsors" of Yanukovych's Party of the Regions are now privately demanding his resignation. If the oligarchs make this position public, the president would quickly lose his remaining support among the people. According to a recent opinion poll, Klitschko would win in a run-off for president against Yanukovych with a big majority. That means many Russian-speaking East Ukrainians would vote for Klitschko.

So is Klitschko the star of the movement?

What the media hides is the fact that the movement is, fundamentally, extremely critical of politicians and other self-proclaimed leaders. Klitschko is one of the few who hardly gets booed when they speak in the Maidan - but that doesn't in any way make him a star.

Where does this critical attitude to politicians come from?

Many of the opposition politicians - Yulia Tymoshenko, for example - have already proved they are corrupt. So far Klitschko hasn't - but he depends on the same business leaders as the others.

You keep mentioning oligarchs. What makes them so special compared with billionaires elsewhere?

An oligarch doesn't just have influence over the economy and society, but also direct control over one or more political parties. So an oligarch can transform his finance capital directly into political power.

Which parties are controlled by oligarchs?

All the parties in parliament are financed to a great extent by oligarchs. Only Svoboda came out of ideologically formed activists - and in a favourable situation it has used the opportunity to get a lot of money. But without oligarchs even Svoboda would not have become so influential.

What do the media say about this?

The oligarchs own all the big TV companies and control directly what they broadcast. Svoboda politicians were already being invited onto important talk shows when the party was only getting 0.8% in elections. Meanwhile it's unthinkable that anyone from the left would be allowed to speak.

Is this conflict just a conflict between different blocs of capital?

Elites always try to use mass movements for their own ends. If we were to wait for a movement free from capital's influence of capital and led entirely by workers, we'd wait for ever - particularly in Eastern Europe. We'd need a very different society from the one we currently have for such movements to exist.

A different society would make such a movement possible?

Exactly. Every protest movement mirrors the contradictions of the society in which it fights. In Ukraine you have strong nationalism and extremely powerful oligarchs on the one side, with no tradition of self organisation, class consciousness, or big unions on the other. What sort of protest can you expect?

Is there no way forward?

Yes there is. But those of us on the left first have to discuss how we act in these circumstances. Should we condemn these movements because it's too difficult for us to work in them? Should we decide we'd rather go home because the protesters in the Maidan wave the Ukrainian flag, sing the national anthem and shout "long live Ukraine"?

What do you suggest?

It's tough. When you tell them in the Maidan that you're a Marxist, you can get attacked. But the politics and character of the movement are still developing. People change their politics enormously quickly - and they are very open to political ideas.

What signs of that do you see?

As late as December, a lot more people trusted Klitschko. No one could have imagined then the kind of struggles they were capable of in January.

Can the left organise in this situation?

There are almost always possibilities there for the left. There are many problems for which the left can offer a solution - and in a way no one else can.

How do we get involved?

Most people in the Maidan want to organise themselves. They want direct democracy, not negotiations behind closed doors. These are the ideas people in the Maidan are fighting the police over, despite the fact that one of their comrades was murdered. And this is the place where leftists have to bring their ideas.

How can the left in Kiev improve?

We must learn to take notice of the situation. An attitude of "I'm going to spread my own slogans or nobody's" doesn't go down well in Kiev. I think it's inexcusable if socialists deliberately don't go to the Maidan - which has unfortunately happened.

Inexcusable?

Yes. If we stay away, we leave the people to the Right Sector, whom we hate so much. No one will thank us for not going where the far right goes - except the far right themselves.

Is that possible in practice?

Of course. It might mean I have to leave my beloved red flag at home, because it goes down badly. So what? I want to get into political contact with people. Something is radical if it leads to success. It's not our fault that a red flag is unpopular - it's down to the Communist Party. But we have to respond intelligently to that fact.

Can the movement win?

It depends on what "winning" means. The movement can bring down Yanukovich - he'll lose power sooner or later. But many protesters want to change society, to change the political system. This movement won't be able to win that.

So is it all pointless?

Absolutely not. Many people will be disappointed, but they will also gain experience on which they can build. Some will realise that a social struggle is also necessary if their lives are to be improved. If that happens in the near future, it will be an enormous step forwards.

Ilya, thank you for the conversation.

[Interview by Anton Thun, translation by Colin Wilson, Mona Dohle and Ben Neal. Ilya Budraitskis is a member of the [Russian Socialist Movement](#) (Rossiiskoye Sotsialisticheskoye Dvizheniya). The organisation emerged at the start of 2011 from a restructuring on the left and a fusion of different groups. It sees itself as a pluralistic, anti-capitalist, radical left coalition movement that advocates a new and democratic socialism. It is active in many of Russia's large cities and across various social and democratic movements. RSD participated in the mass movement against Putin during 2011 and 2012.]

Feminist waves – challenges for the radical left

Socialist Resistance

The student demos of 2011 revealed very clearly the confidence of young women fighting for their rights to free education and against student fees. Many young women school students were at the front of these demos and occupations in a completely new way and showed a new sense of equality between young men and women. Many of them walked out of their schools despite attempts by staff to stop them. In similar ways most campaigns and demonstrations in the past few years for example against fracking, or in support of contracted-out labour in universities show as many women as men taking part.

What these changes show is that, despite the demise of the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s and 1980s, many of the gains from that period have not been lost. At the same time the situation for most women in Britain today is very difficult. The imposition of austerity has hit women more than men, more women than men have lost their jobs, partly because the public sector has been hardest hit, and employs more women than men. And the assumed role of women as carers means that cuts in provision for the young, the disabled, the elderly, the sick have led to women taking up the role that the welfare state should be fulfilling. So it is a contradictory situation, but there is without doubt a resurgence of feminist consciousness and campaigning around feminist demands.

A framework

The question of a women's place in society has always been taken up by revolutionaries including in *The Communist Manifesto*. Engels laid the basis for understanding the relationship between women's oppression, the family and the maintenance of class society in *Origin of the family, private property and the state*. It is outside the scope of this document to rehearse those discussions, or explore in detail the work done on these debates since. It is however worth noting that the fundamentals set out by Engels and others still stand us in good stead today and are probably agreed between the organisations participating in this conference.

The women's liberation movement (WLM) which burst onto the political scene as part of massive international upheavals in the late 1960s gave the self-organisation of women as women new prominence. If we consider the demands which the women's liberation movement organised around in Britain - equal pay, equal educational and job opportunities, free contraception and abortion on demand, free 24-hour nurseries, legal and financial independence for all women, the right to a self-defined sexuality, an end to discrimination against lesbians, freedom for all women from intimidation by the threat or use of violence or sexual coercion regardless of marital status; and an end to the laws, assumptions and institutions which perpetuate male dominance and aggression to women - we can see that all these decades latter none of these demands has been met.

The tradition of the Fourth International of which Socialist Resistance is a part defines the WLM in terms of organisations fighting against women's oppression which are women inspired and led, rather than necessarily women only. For example in Britain in the 1970s when we were central to launching the National Abortion Campaign we successfully argued that it should be an organisation that men could join.

We have always agreed with those that argue that men often experience the negative effects of patriarchal capitalism and rigid gender roles. We see a strong relationship between the oppression of LGBTQ people and that of women. The question of whether men benefit from women's oppression was contentious in our organisation in the 1980s but we think would be largely taken for granted today.

However what lay behind that discussion was the crucial question that sexism, along with racism and homophobia are tools that the ruling class use to keep working class people divided from each other and therefore less able to effectively organise to defend or extend their right let alone create a different society. In that sense we all suffer from sexism whatever our gender.

We have fought and continue to fight for an autonomous women's movement ie one that is not subordinate to any political party or other interest. The-WLM of the 1970s and 1980s brought together women of different political parties and none fighting for common demands. That didn't mean there weren't sharp political differences especially between socialist feminists and radical feminists - but despite these differences we were usually stronger together.

We support the creation of women only organisations and women's caucuses within mixed organisations when women want them. We don't think that the dynamic of such organisations is separatist or 'anti-men'. Indeed the absence of women only space is more likely to lead to women finding it impossible to continue to operate in mixed organisations and to either draw separatist conclusions or to leave political activity all together.

As well as supporting the right to caucus, mixed organisations need to take other measures to support women's involvement including the provision of childcare, considering quotas for women in leadership positions and providing training specifically for women. In *The feminist challenge to traditional political organising* (<http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3186>) Penelope Duggan talks about some of the other attitudes and measures that organisations could and should take on board.

What is new?

The need to organise for women's liberation remains as strong today as in the late 60s. That's not to say that nothing about women's position in society has changed but rather that there are real contradictions in those developments. Women are more integrated into waged labour than 40 or 50 years ago but remain in general segregated within the labour market because of our role in the family. While more women have access to contraception, free abortion on demand is not available anywhere.

Violence against women remains an international issue - indeed Tithi Bhattacharya in [Explaining gender violence in the neoliberal era](http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3212) (<http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3212>) explains many of the ways in which this is not just an accidental feature of today's capitalist crisis but an important instrument of class rule in the age of neoliberalism. Similarly women in Mexico but also Latin America more generally have been organizing against femicide over the last decade and more.

Women did win some important if partial victories in the so-called second wave, which young women today take for granted, in Britain for example on the right to equal pay or abortion but also on the place of women in the labour movement. And why not? They should expect these things as a right and when they realize that there are reactionary social forces who dispute these rights and organize against them, it can become a point of radicalization.

At the same time access to the history of previous struggles is at best partial. (see <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3190> and <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3185> for articles on Britain and France that attempt to redress some of this) The WLM predates the internet so much of what was discussed or even written is not available on line. Books on the history are available, but more diverse collections of writings reflecting the practice of organizing around workplace and community struggle or the discussions on making parties organisations and campaigns more habitable for women are less well known. And with a few exceptions the books are by white women - the history of the rich contribution made by black women often refusing to choose between the struggle against sexism or that against racism, their analysis of the specific role the family plays in a racist society and much more are even more hidden from history.

And within all this the specific role that socialist feminists - the dominant political current in second wave feminism in Britain - is particularly hidden. The role that was played by campaigns like the Working Women's Charter campaign or by the strength of the National Abortion Campaign in pushing the TUC to call the biggest ever demonstration on a non-industrial matter in defence of the 1967 Abortion Act is less well established.

This all came home in a particularly distorted way when Margaret Thatcher died last year. Virtually no one that was active in the WLM had seen Thatcher's election as a victory for feminism. Thatcher's assault on the trade union movement and in particular her defeat of the Miners' strike was a massive turning point in British politics. Women against Pit Closures was a product not only of the strength of a particular brand of militant trade unionism but of the impact of the ideas of the WLM on working class women. The defeat of the Miners' strike was a defeat for the women's movement (as well as a huge turning point for the labour movement) and the movement in Britain fragmented and declined.

Third Wave Feminism

The resurgence of feminist politics internationally since the 1990s usually referred to as third wave feminism has in fact many things in common with second wave feminism. Like most social movements it largely involves and is led by young people.

In both second and third wave feminism black women have organised - sometimes as part of general women's groups and sometimes through specifically black women's groups. Women such as Angela Davis, bell hooks Dorothy Hill and Patricia Hill Collins have written extensively about sexism and racism and how they interrelate. Questions of forced sterilisation have been an important point of mobilisation especially in the US. The fact that third wave feminism as a whole seems to take more account questions of the specific oppression of black women is a positive development.

Black feminism, the feminism of indigenous communities and the feminism that has developed in most of the world outside Europe and North America is almost always more closely tied to grass roots community organising where women have often been primary organisers of mixed campaigns - reflecting the sexual division of labour within both the family and the labour market. The resolution of the Fourth International on Women's Liberation in Latin America, Dynamics of mass movements and feminist currents (<http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article142>) is a crucial contribution to this discussion.

Similarly the fact that third wave feminism allows more space within the movement for lesbians, bisexual and queer women and perhaps most critically trans women is a positive step in itself. It recognises in practice that 'woman' should be a self-defined rather than a biologically defined category and that while in both role models and legal protection and rights the position of LBTQ women today is a vastly improved one from that of the late 60s that does not by any means mean that the battle for liberation has been won.

Also while the question of opposing violence against women was a demand of second wave feminism it is true that it tended to be radical or separatist feminists that prioritised organising on these questions rather than socialist feminists. The left as a whole including socialist feminists needs to understand the reality of violence against women historically and today and to be full participants in campaigns on these vital issues. So it is a strength of third wave feminism that it takes up those issues.

Some critiques of the notion of feminist 'waves' such as [Shira Tarrant](#) -argue that there have been important developments between waves, and more importantly that this can be a way of ignoring or marginalising the development of women's movements in other parts of the globe than in North America or Western Europe. The rhythms of development of feminism in India, in Tunisia in Brazil for example are different from those which are normally considered.

Like other social movements over the last 15 years or so, third wave feminism has used social media to its advantage. This means that meetings and actions can be called at short notice and publicised to large numbers of people, that it is easier to follow developments and build relationships with people and movements in other parts of the globe and that we tend to have a fuller record of the activities of and discussions in the movements than in previous ages.

However it tends to have the disadvantages of many other contemporary movements such as the relative exclusion of people without instant access to the internet, but more importantly to downplay the importance of face to face meetings and to see mass petitioning as of equal importance to strikes, occupations or mass demonstrations. It is this, how to most effectively organise for progressive social change, that the defeats of the period on the 1980s in Britain and internationally take their greatest toll on contemporary feminism as on the movement as a whole. It is not surprising that these weaknesses exist. For atomised young people in precarious employment where trade union organisation is marginal if it is present at all, where those in marketised education are also working in McJobs to pay fees and keep out of even greater debt, where unions and campaigns have suffered defeat after defeat and there is little if any memory of what collective action can achieve-

And there is a theoretical context for this too. The 1980's - the period of hiatus between second and third wave feminism was also the decade of the increasing influence of the profoundly reactionary and anti-materialist theory of postmodernism - which in essence challenged the notion of working class consciousness central to revolutionary ideas and practice.

This theory had its impact within the-WLM, both in theoretical work and in practice, an impact that was strengthened in the context of the defeats of the movement mentioned earlier. (Jane Kelly examines these questions in her 1992 article Postmodernism and Feminism which can be read here: <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article2737>)

This whole process has had an impact on third wave feminism. Intersectionality is not something we have debated extensively in Socialist Resistance. Some of us agree with Sharon Smith's argument in Black Feminism and intersectionality (<http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3221>) where she asserts that much about the theory and practice of intersectionality is an attempt to overcome the race blindness - and therefore de facto racism - of previous feminist approaches.

Other comrades draw more attention to the fact that in many explanations of intersectionality class is dealt with as just another 'identity' rather than a material reality determined by your relationship to the means of production and with consequences for people's consciousness. Certainly those of us who do think the theory is useful don't at all stint our criticism on this question - rather we want to deepen a materialist analysis of social reproduction to that of production as well as to develop a more rounded understanding of the material benefits of the racial division of labour for capitalism.

We do have differences with some tendencies within third wave feminism. While as we have previously said we welcome the fact that trans women are more likely to be welcomed to feminist events than previously, though this remains a contested question, that LBQ women are more explicitly included than before and that there are strong analytical links between LGBTQ oppression and women's oppression that does not mean that either can be folded into the other.

We note for example that the Third Wave foundation in the US launched by Rebecca Walker states that its purpose is to '*support the vision and voices of young women, transgender and gender nonconforming youth ages 15-30. Our purpose is to support and strengthen these young activists and their allies who work for gender, racial social and economic justice*'. It's not that we have anything in principle against the creation of such an organisation - but we are not convinced that to tie it so closely to third wave feminism supports the need for young women to organise on their own and prioritise their own demands.

UK Feminista's mission statement (<http://ukfeminista.org.uk/>) shows the reformist nature of that organisation. There is no discussion as to where women's oppression comes from, nor on the need for women's self-organisation. Rather it assumes the existence of capitalism and simply wants to: *campaign for a world where women and men are equal*.

Some conclusions

The resurgence of feminist activity since the low point of the 1980s in Britain and other parts of the advanced capitalist world is something that is extremely welcome. The fight for women's liberation is as much part of the programme of the revolutionary left as any of our other positions - and often has had less attention.

Revolutionary Marxists have much to contribute to this struggle. The analysis of classical Marxism - strengthened, corrected and developed by more recent writings - on questions of the origins of women's oppression and the role of social reproduction are important contributions.

The experiences of the WLM of the 1970s and 80s are also rich in lessons for today. In particular the importance of mass action as a method of organising and struggle as well as the need for alliances between the women's liberation movement and other progressive movements is something that is not necessarily apparent to those coming into activity for the first time.

Older comrades have much to learn from the new developments while at the same time have experiences from the second wave of feminism to add to current debate.

At the same time the left as a whole needs to reassert the gains that were made in the 1970s and 80s such as why quotas should be defended and why crèches should be provided as a matter of course, gains from which there has been slippage since in parts of the labour movement.

Note: The links in this article all come from the section on the International Viewpoint website on sexual politics - which also contains various other articles of interest: <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?rubrique156>

The origins of Socialist Resistance

Socialist Resistance

Socialist Resistance (SR) has its origins in a successful revolutionary regroupment in 1987 between the International Group, which had come out of the IMG, and the Socialist Group which was formed from a large group of comrades expelled from the WRP in 1974 for forming a faction against Healy. The new organisation, International Socialist Group (ISG), became the British section of the Fourth International (FI) and oriented to the unions and the Labour left through Labour Left Briefing.

We ended our orientation towards Labour/the Labour left in the mid-1990s, with the rise of Blairism, new Labour, and the abolition of clause 4, and increasingly focused on the need for a new party to the left of Labour to address the growing crisis of working class representation. We had already been involved in the Socialist Movement that came out of Tony Benn's Chesterfield conferences.

We were convinced that such a new party was entirely possible, if the left was prepared to grasp the nettle and do it. A space had opened to the left of new Labour that could not be filled by the revolutionary organisations alone. What was needed was a new and genuinely broad and pluralist organisation of the left, such as those emerging at the European level, that could embrace both those who had reached revolutionary conclusions and those who had not—i.e. the revolutionary groups and individuals as well as people from the Labour and trade union left and the activists from the campaigns. Such an organisation could make a material impact on the course of events at both the electoral and campaigning level.

As a result of this conviction we became fully involved in the London Socialist Alliance, the Socialist Alliance (nationally), and of Respect from the outset of those organisations. After we had left Respect, after George Galloway took complete personal control, we continued to argue for and campaign for a new broad party (and published a book about it) and became involved as soon as the initiative was launched that resulted in the foundation of Left Unity.

As a revolutionary organisation we have always held our affiliation to the FI in high regard, since it gives us an ideological and organisational reference point. The FI organises in around 40 countries. It has been growing in recent years, particularly in the Asia Pacific region. We are represented on its leadership bodies and we participate in the events organised at its education centre in Amsterdam (the IIRE). The FI also has education centres in Manila and Islamabad.

The FI puts our work in an international revolutionary framework and puts us in direct contact with other organisations around the world, both FI sections and the broad parties the FI is involved in building. The main joint activity the FI organises each year is its international youth camp that rotates between different European countries. It produces an on-line English language magazine International Viewpoint (www.internationalviewpoint.org) and comrades from SR play a leading part in its Editorial Board.

We have defended the traditions of the FI in regards to feminism and socialist democracy and a non-dogmatic approach to revolutionary organisation. The commitment of the FI to feminism goes back to the 1970s when comrades in different parts of the globe became involved in the women's liberation movement. An important text was adopted by the FI at its World Congress as a whole in 1979 <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?rubrique133> and <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article1589>. What distinguished this approach from that of the majority of the rest of the far left at the time was its support for the autonomous women's liberation movement. This did not at all mean that FI comrades didn't have criticisms of other currents within the movement, but we saw and see ourselves as part of the movement not standing outside it with our programme fully fledged.

This is the tradition in which SR stands today. We welcome the fact that there has been increasing attention to both the theoretical and practical issues raised by feminism over the last year on the British far left and to questions of intersectionality. We also think the fact that the FI has a history of fighting for women's liberation in Latin America, Asia and North Africa has something particular to contribute to these discussions.

Eight years ago we made a major turn towards ecology and the climate crisis and redefined ourselves as ecosocialist. We see defining ourselves ecosocialist as a symbolic declaration that the

designation 'socialist' is no longer adequate. That the ecological issues cannot be an add-on but are central to everything we do—a fundamental component of our programmatic identity. It is a signal that we reject the capitalist logic of insatiable growth, which is built into the nature of the system and fuels the requirements of capitalist production. It means striving for a society based on ecological rationality, democratic control, social equality, and the predominance of use-value over exchange-value. The FI placed itself in an ecosocialist framework at its last world congress.

SR in its current form was launched in 2009 and brought together the ISG and other supporters of the FI in Britain into a single organisation. Today we are an ecosocialist, feminist and internationalist organisation with a central project of fighting for the founding of a broad party of the radical left to address the ongoing crisis of working class representation.

We urge our comrades to be fully involved in their trade unions including through standing for positions if they have the level of political support to make this useful. Some of our comrades have a long-term involvement in campaigning in defence of the NHS, and in different parts of the country our comrades are involved in various anti-cuts campaigns.

At a national level we were involved with CoR from the outset and are now involved in the Peoples Assembly and regard it as the key campaign in the struggle against the cuts. (We are involved in a number of trade unions where we encourage our comrades to play as full a role as possible including standing for positions where appropriate).

We have around a hundred members, which is an increase from 70 two or three years ago. We have comrades in London, Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds, Lancaster, Oxford, Brighton, and Cambridge. We also have a small number of comrades in Scotland, who are in the SSP—that we have had a close relationship for a long time.

Our main publications are our website and our magazine. We also have a book publishing project along with Merlin and the IIRE, and we have published around a dozen titles in recent years.

The main campaigns we are involved in are as follows:

The Peoples Assembly

Keep our NHS Public

The Campaign Against Climate Change and its Trade Union Committee.

Stop the War, though our relationship to it is strained at the moment.

Syria Solidarity

Palestine Solidarity

We have just affiliated to No to NATO Newport

IS Network profile

In the 13 months that have passed since its creation, the International Socialist Network has focused its work around three key areas: a renewed and reinforced commitment to issues of women's liberation as well as identity and oppression more generally; revolutionary unity and the realignment of the revolutionary left; and the concept of socialism from below.

Naturally the organisation's split from the Socialist Workers Party played a key role in the development of these perspectives. In leaving the SWP, members of the IS Network recognised two systemic flaws in the party. First the refusal to engage properly with and subsequently extremely poor analysis of women's oppression that culminated in the abhorrent handling of the Delta case. Alongside this (and connected to it) was a deeply corrupt system of organisation within the party that facilitated such failings. From there we sought above all to work towards a more inclusive and effective analysis of women's oppression and to engage and learn from the previously forbidden ideas of the feminist movement in this.

The project of revolutionary left realignment has always been key to the IS Network - since our creation we have received support from across the left and have sought to build stronger relationships with our comrades in other or no organisations. The issue of organisation has also been important within the IS Network as we work to cast off the top-down bureaucracy of the past, endeavouring to develop a more bottom-up, horizontal and participatory way of working.

This has direct implications in how we view areas of work like the trade unions, which are at the heart of the labour movement. Through discussions about this and the SWP's rotten united front style of working, the IS Network has reaffirmed a commitment to a strategy of rank and file trade unionism. We believe that the analysis of the role and social functioning of the trade union bureaucracy is central to a strategy for helping to create a more healthy workers' movement - one that can only be built from below with genuine democratic control over our struggles.

The IS Network membership, spread across England and Wales with a network of information contacts around the world, is concentrated in particular in London, Sheffield, Manchester, Bradford/Leeds and Bristol. IS Network members are active in a range of local and national campaigns and initiatives including; Left Unity, Anti-Fascist Network, Social Work Action Network, Palestine Solidarity Campaign, Campaign Against Arms Trade as well as local trades councils, anti-cuts groups and on campuses.

We have begun to engage with and bring people into the Network who are not ex-SWP members, including supporters of the Anti-Capitalist Initiative (ACI) as well as people from libertarian Marxist backgrounds. We genuinely believe that a more plural network model is an effective way of bringing socialists together from different traditions to exchange ideas

and collaborate on political projects together whilst working towards building an organisation that can take a more active part in the class struggle and social movements.

In terms of publications our primary outlet is our website. We have also produced a number of freesheets on a range of topics. In addition to this we have been involved in The Exchange and were instrumental in launching the 'We Want a Women's Mag' project. Members of the IS Network are also looking into producing pamphlets and magazines as a further way to articulate our arguments.

The past year has been a journey of exploration, re-evaluation and re-affirmation for the IS Network and this is a journey that will need to continue both in our own organisation as well as with those with whom we are working within the revolutionary realignment project.

An open proposal: An Alliance

James Non (IS Network) P/C

Where now for the revolutionary unity project on and after the 26th of April? This date has been coming for a long time in advance and what we currently have planned will no doubt result in a great deal of important cross-group debate and discussion on the day. RS21's recently announced attendance is a deeply positive and welcome step in the process.

But what concretely should we hope to come out of the conference itself? What dangers does the unity process, now roughly a year old, face?

The wider period we are in is defined by a socialist Left in Britain which is no less fractured than it was in the 20th century, but with far less new activists joining its ranks and far less retention of those who do so. No one reading this article will need to be reminded of the brutality of austerity that we are increasingly becoming ill-equipped to tackle. A great many number of socialists in the current period face (like those who left the SWP) a wider situation of crisis and risk as well as opportunity. Differing priorities, theories, ideas and meta-cultures tend to cause much of the Left to express a kind of 'cultural cringe' at one another. The unity process that began in 2013 was an attempt to move past arbitrary divisions based on a commitment to revising how the far-left approaches internal democracy, liberation politics and the rest of the Left.

The clearest danger to this project is one familiar to many small groups, campaigns, organisations or branches that try to move forward and become actualised. Moving at a speed which unites the greatest number of activists with a variety of views, or an uneven confidence in themselves and the process is both entirely necessary but also runs the risk of slowing the pace to such a crawl that concrete developments do not emerge.

After the total political bankruptcy of the SWP, it would seem apt to say that there is a sufficient groundswell toward a new sort of politics, but there is neither a clear block of activists or organisational model that can be easily slotted into this place. There should be no attempt by anyone to therefore say that the idea of a new and unified organisation is a simple process. What we have at the moment is a series of new questions: 'Why is the Left so split, ineffectual, sectarian, white, sexist? etc' Those of us who remain committed to the process should be arguing that answers we produce will be of higher quality in unison than what we will be able to produce by ourselves and that isolation from one another as we go through similar questions is not only undesirable but unsustainable.

Those of us in favour of the unity process believe that put simply we are not only stronger together but that our differences can become a strength in and of themselves. What is now perhaps a minority within that process believe we could have a common organisation to help argue for this new approach in the short term i.e. those who favour 'mergers' as it has come to be known (which has unfortunate corporate connotations and is unsurprisingly a frequently critiqued and little understood position). One common point of agreement though is that no one expects a new organisation to be launched on the 26th. rs21 have expressed a willingness to be involved as a full partner but are explicitly against the idea of mergers. Yet as also stressed there is a danger that by continuing at our current pace people could lose confidence that the process is moving forward. To return to the title of this piece: If not for mergers what direction should the process head toward?

An alternative to maintaining the status quo of talks and aiming to creating a new organisation in the short term is the concept of an alliance. What an alliance would mean is a formal commitment and recognition of our a mutual interest and respect of one another as individuals and our organisations.

What could an alliance do in practice? Put very simply at most an alliance could host public meetings on political subjects or internal meetings and conferences (open to memberships as well as leadership bodies) and at least would be a way of coordinating actions and networking via Email and social media. An alliance would be about providing a greater space for involvement of the memberships of the four organisations, discussion for people who have a variety of views and a way of actualising the process.

This would be neither a step backward, nor forwards towards a common organisation. Nor would it be a re-shuffling of the existing forces or a re-spin of the same project. If successful it would be a step diagonally. A way to bring our organisations closer in practice in a way that both those strongly in favour of and those against mergers could fully participate.

This would also be a way for the unity process to gain some momentum, to concretize itself without any organisation being required to lose or share any of its independence, personnel structures or apparatus. The idea of an alliance is simply that an idea. What we actually do with it if it were adopted would could down to practice. Some of those (restricted to no specific organisation) who have been skeptical about a common organisation argue that unity needs to come out of the organic grass-root action. These people are essentially correct and this process with the ISN and rs21 has been put into practice in Walthamstow, North London, Portsmouth, Tower Hamlets College and beyond. The commitment of a formal alliance would allow this process to become officially supported by all organisations and to encourage these developments across as a wide a sphere as possible.

Proposal from the IS Network on future joint work

Future unity work:

To build on this conference, the IS Network proposes that those who want to continue work towards a united, multi-tendency revolutionary organisation agree to:

- * continue and extend joint activity, locally and nationally, wherever appropriate
- * arrange a second one-day conference during the summer, taking into account the political and organisation lessons from today
- * establish a joint publication, under the democratic control of the participants, to continue and develop the work done by The Exchange
- * organise a joint political festival during 2014

