

quite spontaneously. The Ayub regime had been presented by the United States as a model of economic success and political stability. This fiction had been taken seriously by the regime itself and it was celebrating its 'decade of development' in great style when the students hurled a dagger at its heart. The weapon was deflected, but the audacity infected the entire country.

I suppose I should have had an inkling of this a few years beforehand, when I had been rung up by the then Pakistan Ambassador to France, the late J. A. Rahim and invited to lunch at a Parisian restaurant. He also sent a plane ticket and it was an offer I could not refuse. Over an unbelievably *ancienne cuisine* lunch and the most exquisitely full-bodied clarets, His Excellency asked me for my views on Pakistan. I was cautious since I had never met the man before, but straightforward. I think I lectured him for half an hour on the iniquities of the military dictators. Then I waited to be rebuked. He did nothing of the sort. Instead he lambasted the government which he represented in France and provided me with information which should be used to expose the regime. Rahim was a close friend of the former Cabinet Minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and he told me that day that a new party was needed to bring socialism to Pakistan. Towards the end of the lunch he had leaned forward conspiratorially and asked me, 'Don't you think the time has come to get rid of this bastard?' This was a reference to Ayub Khan. I assumed, naively as it turned out, that he meant removing him by political methods, but he made a gesture which left no doubt in my mind that what he was proposing was something far more serious and permanent. I thought that this was the appropriate time to return to London and on the plane back I replayed the conversation to myself a number of times. No, it had not been my imagination or the claret playing tricks. The Ambassador to France had actually suggested assassinating his President. When regimes begin to crack up at the top it is usually the case that the more farsighted among them have realized that trouble from below is not far away. So it was with Pakistan in 1966-68.

Chapter Ten

Much Maligned Movements

1969-75

The call to abandon their illusions about their conditions is a call to abandon a condition which requires illusions.

Karl Marx

The birth of the civil rights movement in the United States had raised black consciousness everywhere, albeit, unevenly. The birth of the modern women's movement also took place in the North American continent. The women who had been radicalized by the anti-war movement and SDS began to question their own subordinate position within these groupings. The first manifestos and novels of the women's liberation movement were produced by SDS activists, and American women visiting Western Europe were constantly expressing their amazement at the backwardness of their sisters on this continent.

The ideas had, like everything else in those days, begun to cross frontiers and at a time when all the traditional values of bourgeois society were being questioned by a new generation it would have been very strange if questions related to gender and sexuality had remained unmentionables. The editorial board of *The Black Dwarf* was constantly changing in those days and everyone was delighted when Sheila Rowbotham joined us and in this way doubled the representation of women. I had known Sheila at Oxford where she had been a member of the Communist Club and subsequently she had worked as an activist in VSC. She was primarily a socialist historian, always interested in history from below.

I cannot now remember what triggered the discussion we had on the oppression of women. It may well have been Christopher Logue whose zany ideas for our covers tended to be conversation-stoppers. In 1969 it had become clear that the Labour Government was

preparing to impose a new set of wage restrictions, but the entire Labour Movement had been taken aback by Barbara Castle's proposals to restrict the right to strike via the statute book. Logue had rushed in to an editorial board meeting and declared: 'I've got it. The next cover of *The Black Dwarf* is obvious. We have an ugly fat, naked capitalist standing over Barbara Castle. She's on her knees and is just sucking him off. The caption below should simply state *In Place Of Strife*.' The latter was the title of the draft White Paper proposed by Mrs Castle at the time. Everyone first stared at Logue in silence and then came the laughter. We unanimously decided against the idea for reasons of taste.

Sheila Rowbotham proposed that our first issue for the New Year should be on the theme of women's oppression. The Cubans had begun a tradition of giving every year a political title. They had proclaimed 1968 to be the 'Year of the Heroic Guerrilla', in honour of Che Guevara and the Vietnamese. We decided to make 1969 the 'Year of the Militant Woman' and begin the arduous task of explaining the problems to our readers. There were more problems than we had imagined. The editorial of that issue, 'Women, Sex and the Abolition of the Family' was the first serious attempt by a radical paper in this country to discuss hitherto hidden agendas. We felt that all this talk of an alternative society was flawed without discussion of personal relations and the family, which lay at the heart of women's oppression. Political, juridical and economic inequalities between man and woman could be solved within the existing order, but the transformation of sexual relations was not possible without social revolution. The editorial, written by Fred Halliday, was sharp, but without a trace of demagoguery or self-flagellation. The centre-spread was a manifesto drafted by Sheila and entitled 'Women: The Struggle For Freedom'. It was written with great verve and passion and set out explain to both sexes what self-liberated women were demanding and why they would not give up this time. The appeal was direct and the opening paragraphs self-explanatory:

We want to drive buses, play football, use beer mugs not glasses. We want men to take the pill. We do not want to be brought with bottles [a reference to 'bird and bottle' parties common on the left at the time] or invited as wives. We do not want to be wrapped up in cellophane or sent off to make the tea or shuffled into the social committee.

But these are only little things. Revolutions are made about little things. Little things which happen to you all the time, every day, wherever you go, all your life.

Here the subordinated relates to dominator, here discontent focuses and here the experience is felt, expressed, articulated, resisted — through the particular. The particular pummels you gently into passivity. So we don't know how to find one another or ourselves. We are perhaps the most divided of all oppressed groups. Divided in our real situations and in our understanding and consciousness of our condition. We are in different classes. Thus we devour and use one another. Our 'emancipation' has been often merely the struggle of the privileged to improve and consolidate its superiority. The women of the working class remain the exploited of the exploited, opposed as workers and oppressed as women.

Sheila Rowbotham's socialist-feminist declaration of independence ended with a firm, but moving appeal to the other gender:

Men! You have nothing to lose but your chains. You will no longer have anyone to creep away and peep at with their knickers down, no one to haunt as the emblem of your virility, status, self-importance, no one who will trap you, overwhelm you, no etherealized cloudy being floating unattainable in a plastic blue sky, no great mopping up handkerchief comforters to crawl into from your competitive, ego strutting alienation, who will wrap you up and SMOTHER you.

There will only be thousands of millions of women people to discover, touch and become, who will understand you when you say we must make a new world in which we do not meet each other as exploiters and used objects. Where we love one another and into which a new kind of human being can be born.

We had all been affected by this text, probably the most important and formative ever published by *The Black Dwarf* and it made one think a great deal. Sheila, knowing the abysmal proof-reading standards of the paper, had insisted on checking the final proofs herself since she knew that errors in this particular article would be hard to live down. A few days before publication I received an anguished phone call from her asking me to drop everything and join her at the offices where the paper was being designed. Our political designer, Robin Fior, had left us a long time ago and we

had employed a young hippy, who was a talented designer, but not very political despite his strong support of VSC and the paper. I had told him that Sheila Rowbotham's article was extremely important and he should design it with sensitivity and care. It was, I informed him, on women's liberation and he should find the necessary illustrations. When I arrived I saw why Sheila was outraged. Her manifesto was overprinted on a naked woman with the most enormous pair of breasts imaginable. Our hippy friend had designed it so that the key denunciations of male chauvinism were imprinted on the two breasts. It was obvious that it was neither the dialectic that was at work here or an ultra-subtle deconstruction, but ignorance.

I asked him to scrap the whole design and do it again. Sheila suggested some positive images such as a Mexican woman guerrilla from Zapata's army. Neither of us were nasty to the designer, but I did take him aside and explain why what he had done was unacceptable. He did not take the point and was sullen and sulky for the rest of the day. When the paper finally came out, I noticed that, unbeknown to us all, he had slipped in a last-minute boxed advertisement. This read as follows: 'DWARF DESIGNER SEEKS GIRL: Head girl type to make tea, organize paper, me. Free food, smoke space. Suit American Negress. Phone ...' This was his last fling. The next day we parted company.

1969 did not become the year of the militant woman, but it did see important new beginnings, which grew in the years that followed and ultimately gave birth to a women's movement in this country. Many revolutionary women, like Sheila Rowbotham, were active in it at every level. That the women referred to themselves as the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) indicated their political origins, which lay in the movements of 1968 and especially the struggle of the National Liberation Front in South Vietnam. The importance of this movement for women was manifest, but the very fact that many of its founders were members or sympathizers of left-wing parties or groupuscules meant that male socialists had no choice but to discuss the new ideologies seriously and serious attempts were made by women to change the style and functioning of the groups, with varying degrees of failure. The sub-Victorian characteristics of the men who led such groups were far too ingrained to even consider the problems posed by their own sexuality. Elsewhere the more grotesque internal practices which repro-

duced what happened outside were altered and women were supported when they demanded institutionalization measures to correct the balance of male domination. This required a struggle, but there could be no excuses since everyone was in the same political organization. As a result, the IMG won over a layer of socialist-feminists who played an important role in the development of the broader women's movement, as did an important group of women from the British Communist Party, in particular, Elizabeth Wilson whose literary gifts enabled her to exercise considerable influence. I think it is fair to say, however, that it was Sheila Rowbotham's powerfully argued books, *Women, Resistance and Revolution* and *Hidden from History*, which did more to win a new generation of women and men to understand both socialism and feminism than any other writer of the period. Re-reading them again, almost two decades later, I am surprised and slightly startled to discover that they have lost none of their richness and passion or even the freshness which distinguished them from so much else that was published at the time. That is the sign of a true classic and how well they compare to much of the post-feminist writing that is currently on offer in the bookshops of Europe and America.

I do not wish to suggest that everything about the WLM, not to mention the Black Panthers in the United States or their mimics in Britain, was wonderful. The theoretical and practical contradictions were not easily surmountable and the burning urge to breach the walls of monogamy and storm the palaces of patriarchy created new problems. Many experiences were painful. The one feature which I personally disliked a great deal was the notion that the 'style' and 'ways of relating' of the WLM were qualitatively superior to the hierarchized structures of the Left. That there were grave problems with the latter was undeniable, but the growing clashes between radical feminists and socialist feminists at WLM conferences were not couched in a language that could serve as an example to anyone of sisterly solidarity. In fact it reminded one of the worst excesses of sectarianism. I recall how several socialist-feminists returned from one of these conferences in a state of great emotional and political shock. On that occasion they had been physically assaulted and spat upon by the radical feminist faction. Their crime: working in groups with male socialists. In reality, sections of the WLM produced their own variant of demagoguery whose sole purpose was to crush any attempt to formulate a

national or international political strategy. Others used the cover of the WLM to attack far-left groups. It was much easier to do this as feminists rather than as members of a right-wing caucus within the Communist Party. The experts in this form of polemic were soon taken up by sections of the press which found in them a useful cudgel to batter the rams.

The Women's Movement, alas, did not figure in the big debate between the Old and the New Left in Central Hall, Westminster on 24 January 1969. I had received a letter some months previously from Michael Foot, who had suggested that perhaps the time was approaching when the debate should leave the streets and return to the meeting halls. On behalf of *Tribune* he challenged *The Black Dwarf* to a debate on the theme of Reform or Revolution. We both agreed that Lawrence Daly should chair the debate. On the day, almost two and a half thousand people packed the hall to hear Bob Rowthorne and myself defend the revolution against Foot and Eric Heffer. Even before the meeting commenced, excited *Dwarf* sellers were sending me notes to say that we had sold over a thousand copies, which was *Tribune's* entire print-run for that week. The battle of ideas was, as these things invariably are, perfectly predictable. A large majority of the audience was on our side, as was Lawrence Daly. The outcome was inevitable. We received massive support, whereas Foot and Heffer were consistently, and sometimes unfairly, heckled. Heffer's attempt to utilize his working-class origins to defend his case ('Four years ago I worked at a bench ... I know more about the class struggle than 90 per cent of the people here ...') was drowned in laughter. The main argument was between us and the Labour Left. Not a single speaker from the other side defended the record of the Wilson Government. The reports in the press the following morning were virtually unanimous in awarding the prizes to the Dwarves. The odd person out was Ian Aitken in *The Guardian*, a close personal friend of Foot and a one-time member of the *Tribune* staff, though even his report did not attempt to deny that the Labour Left were hopelessly outnumbered and outflanked that night.

The audience was not confined to the young. Our side, too, had its elderly supporters, veterans of the thirties and forties, who made no secret of their support. It was Kingsley Martin's last public appearance. Michael Foot had introduced me to him before the debate, but he had maintained a diplomatic and uncharacteristic

silence when I asked which side he was backing today. He died a few months later.

During the debate from the floor we were judicious in allocating speakers from both sides and nobody was surprised when the militant brigade made a savage attack on the VSC, something that neither Foot nor Heffer had done. In some ways the most dramatic event was the arrival of a breathless contingent from the London School of Economics, led by a lecturer, Robin Blackburn. He spoke during the floor discussion and told us that there had been a battle at the LSE and that the students had torn the gates down despite a strong police presence. A march to the police station was planned that night and he appealed to the audience to join them after the debate. We cheered him for a long time, but our applause did not help him a great deal. His speech at the Dwarf-Tribune debate was one of the main charges against him when he was sacked by the college authorities a few months later, an event which brought his academic career to a premature conclusion.

Politics in Britain at the time, and even more so in Europe, were very exciting. It was now clear beyond any doubt that there was a massive process of radicalization under way, which had in France and Italy transcended the campuses and entered the factories. A new generation of young workers were deeply affected by the politics and culture of the period, as were the many political activists then in exile from their respective dictatorships in various Western European countries. Spanish, Portuguese, Nicaraguan, Brazilian and Southern African militants, to name only a few, were all apprenticed to the revolutionary process in Western Europe. Chenhamo Chimutengwende, a refugee from Ian Smith in Southern Rhodesia, was a member of *The Black Dwarf* editorial board. He was a partisan of Robert Mugabe in 1969-70 and is now a senior figure in the post-colonial administration in Zimbabwe. A Nicaraguan woman refugee in Switzerland was a member of the Revolutionary Marxist League. She is now a minister in the Sandinista Government and there are many other examples. Despite the amazing shift in Europe, however, the call from Pakistan had become too loud to resist.

The student movement in Pakistan (which then included Bangladesh) was in its fourth month of struggle and the revolt had extended to every town in the country. I was determined to see it all for myself. Letters from afar were totally unsatisfactory. The