

# Socialist Men and Socialist Feminism

by J. Richard Marra

One thread winding through feminist literature traces a controversy surrounding versions of the question, "How can a man be a feminist?" This version offers a fallacy of accent that reveals some central claims concerning the likelihood and feasibility of male appreciation of feminist ideology and solidarity with feminist politics.

The query admits four familiar interpretations. One suggests that men can be feminists and asks how that might occur. It suggests that non-feminist men can become "authentic" feminists, although they must first overcome constraints of nature, nurture and enculturation. A second version, admits men as feminist cohorts, however wanting. Under this interpretation, men might become feminist "sympathizers", but not authentic and unmitigated feminists. A third parsing presupposes that no male can be a feminist, rendering the question self-contradictory. This is the "un-feminist" man, ideologically and physiologically isolated from the political concerns of women. It presupposes necessary restrictions upon men's understanding of the feminist conceptual framework and recognizes no personal or social motivation for male participation in the feminist political program. Inhibiting conditions include intrinsic sexual differences and political patriarchic advantages. A final rendering admonishes men against being feminists at all. It claims that any alliance with feminists will compromise men's rights. It would limit social discourse concerning male grievances against female oppression of men and attenuate male social superiority. Rush Limbaugh warns men of a socio-physiological hazard involving an inverse relationship between penis size and the extent to which men attempt establishing rapport with female feminists.<sup>1</sup>

Some may recognize among these interpretations Michael Kimmel's tripartite taxonomy of masculine perspectives into antifeminist, masculinist, or pro-feminist categories.<sup>2</sup> However, this inquiry focuses upon a narrower version of the question, "How can socialist men be socialist feminists." One might allege fraudulence regarding the introduction of ideological synergies. However, a change in focus does not entail duplicity. The reformulation will reveal difficulties with the original and demonstrate how the semantics

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1 David Edwards, "Limbaugh: Penises now '10 Percent Smaller' and shrinking because of 'feminazis'," *The RawStory*, September 20, 2012, <http://www.rawstory.com/rs/2012/09/20/limbaugh-penises-now-10-percent-smaller-and-shrinking-because-of-feminazis>. Of course, "Limbaugh's Law" fails on physiological causal grounds and its dependence on discredited Neo-Lamarckism and Mythopoetics.

2 Michael S. Kimmel, "The Poetics of Manhood" (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995).

of the capitalist ideology constrain the range of potential interpretations. The reformulation provides an opportunity to examine how the socialist attitude can resolve significant putative impediments to male participation in the feminist project.

Consider the ideologically imprecise term "Feminism." It carries the weight many feminist doctrines whose details affect the semantics of the debate. We eliminate vagueness by limiting the range of potential interpretations to socialist feminism. Although the doctrine itself admits many contending interpretations, the reformulation does at least constrain ideological ambiguity. It also limits the sociological problem space. For example, the question of whether socialist men can support nondiscrimination in women's career advancement in the CIA is absurd. This is because the socialism in itself is morally inconsistent with service to the imperial designs of capitalism. Hence, any feminism that advocates gender equality in workplace advancement within an enabling bureaucracy of oppression misses the ideological Archimedean point and would be morally discordant. The original question remains unproductive, unless it includes further moral specification.

The existential "be" raises logical and empirical concerns. Logically, we need to avoid drawing the conclusion "Men cannot not be feminists" from any definition of manhood that prohibits inherent features of the feminist man. Furthermore, any claim that a specific man is un-feminist or not requires empirical corroboration. Ostensible evidence that Howard Zinn was not a feminist would likely be striking, controversial and counterintuitive. It might require proof that Zinn was ideologically delusional or merely misinformed. It might allege Zinn's miming of pro-feminist talk and political behavior, or accusing him of existential "Bad Faith." Occam's Razor easily cuts this stubble from the face of these propositions. "Be" can also evoke its cognate "become." This casts men's feminist political existence as a process, in contrast to a state. However, this diachronic reorientation does nothing to clarify the question, or resolve empirical and logical problems.

The nagging fact remains that some men appear to genuinely self-identify with the ideology and politics of feminism, and feminists and others, including women, recognize such. Some feminist organizations acknowledge and celebrate male cohorts, and invite other men to participate in the struggle for women's rights.<sup>3</sup> Men have actively

3 The Radical Women organization is affiliated with The Freedom Socialist Party which advocates for "revolutionary feminist men and women [collaborating] on building a better world..." See <http://www.radicalwomen.org/whySocialism.shtml>.

advocated for women's rights within each feminist "wave." Mid-nineteenth-century men and women recognized synergies between women's rights and Abolitionist politics. During the early 20th century, George R. Lunn, the socialist Mayor of Schenectady, New York was an outspoken suffragist<sup>4</sup> and the Socialist Party's Eugene V. Debs worked ceaselessly for women's equal pay in the workplace and the decriminalization of prostitution.<sup>5</sup> More recently, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Howard Zinn were strong champions of women's reproductive rights and other revolutionary feminist concerns.

It is insidious to claim that men cannot be feminists because their physiological gender and their patriarchic social status prohibit their understanding of women's issues. Of course, direct experience of oppression, and how the oppressed conceptualize their political situation can enrich the political consciousness of the non-oppressed. Anyone concerned with gaining experience regarding poverty, for example, might choose to live in destitute circumstances, in order to better understand the oppressive conditions of want.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, such situations remain temporally limited. No actual social remedies are required to

by virtue of physiological uniqueness or attendant institutional oppression. The neo-conservative impulses of Sarah Palin and Anne Coulter, and the advocacy for economic austerity and the restriction of female access to reproductive healthcare by such conservative PACs the "Voices of Conservative Women"<sup>7</sup> inveigh against this claim. One might argue that ideological bias concerning how feminism is conceived artificially constrains which women are admitted into putative feminist political programs. That is true. However, attempts to cast neo-conservatism as sympathetically "feminist" are as muddled as characterizing drone-pilots in Nevada, who kill children at a protected distance and with impunity, as "heroes."<sup>8</sup>

Our analysis indicates that the original query remains ambiguous and admits the extrapolation of unacceptable political implications. It does not provide a basis for sufficient empirical corroboration or explanatory force, and is historically counterfactual. Rather than pursuing an unprofitable question, let us turn to our socialistic reformulation, which is intended to reveal how an inter-gender socialist orientation might at least partially remedy these concerns.

### **"Socialist feminists reject the assertion that men cannot be feminists of any ilk."**

assuage temporary personal vicissitudes. However, those trapped by oppression must endure without any certainty of relief. Some feminists conclude that men can never authentically appreciate female oppression, in any sense or to any degree, because of men are not so confined. This conclusion remains invalid unless additional premises are provided that offer reasons why experiential limitations deny political alliance. Even if reasons are provided, questions linger concerning whether such reasons are sound. We should also expose a potential "reduction to absurdity." If the absence of a "complete" (or even "minimally sufficient") experiential identification with an oppressed group denies membership into such political communities, then there is little hope that alliances can form among disparate individuals or groups, or that sufficiently liberating political momentum can arise.

The doctrine of man-less feminism does not imply that women are by default feminists solely

Let us further constrain ambiguity by specifying a working doctrine of socialist feminism. We will settle upon the Socialist Party - USA's statement concerning "Socialist Feminism and Women's Liberation."

"Socialist feminism confronts the common root of sexism, racism and classism: the determination of a life of oppression or privilege based on accidents of birth or circumstances. Socialist feminism is an inclusive way of creating social change. We value synthesis and cooperation rather than conflict and competition. We work against the exploitation and oppression of women....Women's independent organizations and caucuses are essential to full liberation, both before and after the transformation to socialism. Women will define their own liberation."<sup>9</sup>

"Socialist" feminism is democratic, and therefore "inclusive," "synthetic" and "cooperative." Socialist feminists reject the assertion that men cannot be feminists of any ilk. Physiology and any of its experiential consequences do not determine potential membership into the feminist ingroup.

4 Michael Cooney, "George R. Lunn and The Socialists of Schenectady," Upstate Earth, January 14, 2012, <http://upstateearth.blogspot.com/2012/01/george-r-lunn-and-socialists-of.html>.

5 "Women's Rights: Debs and Women's Rights - A Lifetime Commitment," <http://debsfoundation.org/womensrights.html>.

6 During 1981, Former Chicago Mayor Jane Byrne moved into the Cabrini-Green housing project in order to dramatize gang violence plaguing the community. The posting of armed guards outside her apartment diminished the authenticity of the Mayor's experience.

7 <http://voicesofconservativewomen.org>.

8 See "Drone Pilot To Receive First Air Force Medal of Honor Since Vietnam," December 4, 2012, <http://www.duffelblog.com/2012/12/drone-pilot-to-receive-first-air-force-medal-of-honor-since-vietnam>.

9 <http://socialistparty-usa.net/principles.html>.

bell hooks provides the compatible ideological attitude.

"Feminism is not simply a struggle to end male chauvinism or a movement to ensure that women have equal rights with men; It is a commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels- sex, race, class, to name a few – and a commitment to reorganizing U.S. society so that the *self- development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion and material desires.*"<sup>10</sup> [My italics]

Patriarchy and capitalism represent ideological sources of the oppression of both genders. Hook's socialistic attitude inherits the Marxian critique of social domination. It provides a reorientation that frees the debate from the semantics of the patriarchic gender binary. Claims that men might be "feminist sympathizers" suffer from the same semantic disease. It remains unclear how a socialist man might "sympathize" with the female political struggle but not "be" a socialist feminist, given Hook's overarching Marxian non-binaristic critique. Capitalism "existentially" and mutually oppresses men and women by virtue of the same social structures. The "gender binary" represents a social division that empowers and justifies the political interests of the bourgeoisie. Capitalism exploits this doctrine, which is compatible with its complicit neo-conservative patriarchic Christian theology, to structure, promulgate and maintain oppressive regimes. The Marxian critique reveals antifeminist, masculist and "semi-feminist" responses to our original query as misconceptions raised upon the stilts of the gender binary.

Let us conclude our analysis by inquiring after what evidence might count as corroboration for the claim that some man is a feminist. Consider the following of three propositions that might provide a basis for empirical corroboration. The three conditions require that prospective socialist feminists can 1) display linguistic competency with feminism's underlying conceptual-semantic network, 2) employ that network to correctly recognize and understand oppressive social situations and 3) display interpersonal, social and political behavior that is compatible with that understanding. Cognitive and social psychologists possess the empirical tools to construct behavioral tests to verify linguistic and analytical competency. Such tests would include experimental and statistical measures to account for error and to minimize the statistical impact of data introduced through deception, delusion or conceptual misunderstanding. We have already noted that women feminists are accomplished in identifying men who are politically amenable.

In addition, inclusive, synthetic and cooperative socialist feminism provides practical measures for correcting residual binarism, and male and

female misconceptions of socialist feminist semantics, analysis and practice. The free and honest inter-gender discourse is required and encouraged, as is the maintenance of an empathetic and nurturing socialist political environment. Sharing unbiased information and insightful feminist theories supports the development of increasingly coherent non-binaristic conceptual frameworks, which augur effective socialist analysis and political action.

One might argue, incorrectly, that the terms "socialist" and "feminist" are redundant. On the contrary, our analysis in part places feminism as a subdomain of the socialist political program. Socialism provides a guiding and corrective critique that characterizes a synthetic and collective "feminism" that is politically radical, and sociologically and historically comprehensive. Correspondingly, socialist men understand that "women...define their own liberation." They appreciate that the unique experiences of women provide that critical prism through which the light of the searing flame of oppression is decomposed into a spectrum of the debilitating social structures of capitalism and patriarchy. We should not interpret these complementary perspectives as a mistaken reintroduction of binarism. Rather, socialist feminists reject those merely casual binaristic truisms concerning physiological and experiential gender differences central to the bourgeois social mentality.

The principles of the Socialist Party - USA, resonate with the struggles of those oppressed by capitalist social structures. The collectivist, anti-capitalist and non-binarist character of party's multi-tendency principles, organization<sup>11</sup> and political activities provide a diverse and nurturing political environment that invites socialist men to effectively participate in feminist politics. Pursuing their goal of developing "feminist practice within the party," socialist feminists within the SPUSA, both men and women, continue to reap practical benefits within the struggle "to establish a radical democracy that places people's lives under their own control - a non-racist, classless, feminist socialist society."

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<sup>11</sup> The SPUSA declares itself a "multi-tendency" party because it encourages a common democratic socialist political program that appreciates different underlying socialistic orientations. Under this rubric, socialist feminism encourages political discourse, between men and women, and the accommodation of divergent viewpoints.