

Up in arms

If the success of a movement is to be judged by the amount of popular misconception about it, then Women's Liberation Movement have almost won. Discontented women have traditionally been a target for lewd contempt from gentlemen, and any dissatisfaction with their social conditions is often treated as a projection of sexual frustrations. Thus any woman who has ambitions above being a shorthand typist at work, a housewife at home, or a sexual vehicle in bed, is liable to be dismissed as a shrivelled spinster, or a hairy lesbian, or at any rate someone in need of a good, cleansing orgasm.

It was this sort of contempt which gave such licence for the maltreatment of the Suffragettes, who could be kicked and punched and mauled by the police and subjected, by the gentlemen of London, to such indignation as would under other circumstances have earned a court appearance for indecent assault. When the last Miss World contest was disrupted by a few Women's Lib members Bob Hope, who is not a famous anthropologist or psychiatrist or sociologist, but who was earning a few bucks as compere to the flesh parade, could attribute the incident to the only possible cause that the demonstrators were junkies. Of course, Hope was in trouble; his gag writers had not supplied him with material for such an eventuality.

So how frightening are Women's Lib? Trembling, the SOCIALIST STANDARD went along to one of their meetings—apart from one very old man the only unaccompanied male in the room. We looked around but found none of the obvious lesbians we had been promised. There were very few unmarried girls there and one of them was in any case a schoolgirl. What there were at the meeting were plenty of trendy young wives and mothers—articulate, angry and, since they think they are suppressed, underprivileged and exploited (as indeed they are, but more of that later) rather obsessive.

It was an amateurish affair—conspicuously so, with the projector not working and when it did the picture went far enough off the screen to make it difficult to follow. The speakers were stuck on their inferior status as wage slaves and what was billed as an open forum soon dissolved into several shy discussion groups. The girls served tea and biscuits. The one professional touch was a table flogging contraception—pamphlets, models, devices, posters—which was what the meeting was supposed to be about.

This amateurishness contrasted with the movement's professional techniques in other activities. They have, for example, shown how to get quick, plentiful publicity; their protests are thoughtfully aimed (the Miss World rumpus, and the project to rewrite fairy stories, were little short of strokes of genius) and the posters and handbills advertising their national demonstration last month were good professional jobs.

Whatever criticism we may have of them, Women's Lib represents an impetus to the glacial movement of ideas. It is impossible not to agree with some of their attitudes. We must all feel sick at the commercial exploitation of sexual appeal and it says a lot about capitalist society and women's position in it that this exploitation is so often a women's sexuality and not a man's. Who can say that they were wrong about Miss

World? One of the demonstrators there later wrote in their magazine *Shrew* of what she had said, amid the uproar, to three of the beauty queens:

I managed to say we weren't against them we were for them, but against Mecca and their exploitation. "Come on, Miss Venezuela, we're on" and the trio disappeared down the corridor.

The relevance of Women's Lib is that, although their ideas are by no means original, one of the prejudices which must disappear as property society is ended is the one which says that some human beings are by virtue of their sex doomed to a lower, less privileged social position. In spite of all the changes since the New Women were pilloried as mannish ogres, that prejudice is still in existence in one form or another. At present most women are as ready to accept their lower standing as most men are to impose it upon them. Perhaps, if they begin to question their position, they will become that much readier for the idea that privilege based upon property rights is even more noxious—and more fundamental.

Women's Lib can produce a forest of statistics to support their case that women are deprived and suppressed. In October 1969 the average earnings of women in full time employment were 47 per cent those of men—and the gap is widening. Women get the worst, most boring and repetitive jobs. If they have children they are doomed to spend years with their heads in the nappy pail while their husbands are out in the big, exciting world of wage slavery. Ask them why they are so worked up about getting onto the same level of employee exploitation as their husbands and they point out that their economic standing conditions their social position.

But here they do not adequately meet the point. The present arrangement exists not because of any prejudice against women; rather it is the other way round. The priorities of capitalism have made the prejudices which, once they exist, are themselves a priority; little girls are given dolls and frilly clothes to condition them to accept the prejudices and the whole thing soon becomes a profitable field in its own right. When they grow up, the little girls are excluded from some jobs not because of their sex but because from the employers' point of view it is a better prospect to employ men. Recently, for example, British European Airways stated that it is not their policy to take on women pilots, no matter how qualified or experienced they are. A Tory MP complained about this discrimination but got the point of it:

. . . a girl may get married and pregnant—or the other way round—and the airline would lose an investment of £10,000.

Although most of the jobs which are closed, or restricted, for women are not that costly, the MP was making a fair statement of the sound, solid, sensible reasons which capitalism has for its discrimination in employment, whether against women or mental defectives or cripples—or even against wholesome men who have simply tended to change their employer more than average. We—men and women—are here up against the fact that workers are not employed as a favour to them or as an act of natural justice. They are employed with the idea of producing surplus value for their masters. There is a distinct risk that a woman who has had an expensive training will fail to produce the surplus value and will produce babies instead.

Women's Lib's answer is to make the training and the employment profitable; they campaign for free abortion and contraception on demand, and for free 24 hour nurseries so that a woman who has a baby will not be out of work for too long. Like all other reformers, they accept the cause of a problem while rejecting its effects. And what does this mean for their dignity? What does it mean, that a woman should have an abortion to keep a well paid job?

Again, why do Women's Lib go for problems which are experienced only by working class women and say that these are women's problems rather than working class ones? No female member of the capitalist class has to worry about the effect of childbirth on her earning capacity. She can have as many children as she likes and, since she can afford a 24 hour nursery all to herself, she can also carry on an interesting, rewarding occupation. Such women do not have to wait for the Pill for their sexual freedom; expensive medical attention took care of that along with everything else. Women's Lib are tackling problems which will end only when the working class end, when class society is finished.

In the meantime, they do their cause no service by obscuring the facts about their place in capitalism. It is not surprising that this leads them into mysticism of the most confusing kind. One old American Suffragist, Alice Paul, recently said:

It's hard to find a woman who's not for peace. The most fundamental way to work for peace is to work for power for women. (*Life* magazine).

Perhaps she has never heard of Golda Meir. Or perhaps never read Women's Lib declarations that they support the ". . . national liberation struggles in Palestine or Vietnam", partly because ". . . all women are sisters and wherever they're fighting we're behind them" and partly because of ". . . an analogy between our own oppression as women and that of peoples oppressed as nations."

It does not need a very practised political eye to discern here the signs of some busy boring from within. It shows through even the mysticism. Women's Lib say they stand for the "transformation of society" although confessing to be ". . . essentially heterogeneous, incorporating . . . a wide range of opinions and plans for action". It seems that some monotonously familiar opinions and plans are at work within the movement and it is not difficult to guess what these elements mean when they talk about transforming society.

The aims of the women's Liberation Movement—a free association between men and women, pure of the contaminations of capitalist society—can be attained only when capitalism is no more. Conditioned as we are to capitalism's degradations, it is difficult to imagine what the freedom of socialism will be like. How it will feel, for a woman and a man to associate only because they like and respect each other. How it will be when sexual activity is not a matter of conquest and possession, not a suppressive neurosis too easily exploited to sell cars, hair sprays, washing machines, suitcases, toothpaste, politicians—but a pleasure. To reach that we need all of us to be conscious of our role in society and the reasons for it. From there we will not be far from the will to change our roles by changing society.

(April 1971)