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Interview

In women's liberation the first step is self-consciousness

- Features - Sexual politics -

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Description:

Nadia De Mond is a feminist writer and militant living in Italy. Nadia was, until its recent dissolution, a member of the radical left party, Sinistra Critica. She remains a militant of the Fourth International (FI) and member of its International Women's Commission. At the international youth camp organised by the FI in Greece in August 2013, Luke Cooper spoke to her about the role of feminist theory and practice in the renewal of Marxism.

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LC: What does feminism bring to the classical Marxist account of women's oppression?

NDM: First of all, feminism means consciousness about the place of women in patriarchal society. Patriarchy must always exist in combination with different modes of economic and social reproduction. In this era, in this century, it means a recognition that patriarchy continues to exist in combination with neoliberal capitalism.

Secondly, feminism means the liberation of women, the liberation of half of human kind - and half of the working class. This makes it an indispensable tool for the struggle to liberate humanity itself. Indeed, contrary to how it is normally perceived in mainstream ideology, feminism is a tool to unite and to reinforce liberation struggles in general.

Capitalism, after all, uses women's oppression to divide the working class. It takes advantage of patriarchy - as an underlying, pre-existing structure of domination - to capitalise on the unpaid labour that women contribute through domestic work. If this were to be paid it would represent a huge economic burden. Capitalism, in this sense, uses patriarchy to maintain profit levels for capital.

The intersection of capital with patriarchy is also used to divide the working class ideologically. Women tend to be paid less in the workplace - and so half the workforce is subject to increased exploitation. Their oppression and the ideology of sexism also creates a political division between men and women beneficial to capital.

Feminism, it should be emphasised, also has to be an objective in itself. Patriarchy, male domination, male chauvinism, etc., is much older than capitalism.

Since we have had written history, i.e. since for almost 10,000 years, there have been patriarchal relationships between men and women; in the family, in society, in the public space, and it is a long and hard historical struggle to abolish this oppression, domination, and devaluation of women that make up half of human society.

LC: Since the wave of feminism that began in the 1960s there has arguably been a divorce between the feminist and Marxist movements. What do you think are the implications of the divorce, and are you arguing for a 'reuniting' of these movements?

NDM: Yes, I am, in a sense, but that doesn't mean there is no need for an autonomist feminist movement. There is. But there needs to be an alliance - that's for certain. There is not just one feminism; there are different forms of feminist theory and feminist practice. But, generally speaking, feminism in the second wave of the 1960s and 1970s has grown in the context of a general revolt against the society we are living in. The second wave of feminism was born in a channel of political radicalisation and so it was very closely linked to 'the left', say, in general.

There was a separation because very often it was seen by the class movements as a division from what they held to

be the main contradiction in capitalist society, which was, of course, a class contradiction. Only the socialist feminists were able to make the link between class oppression and sexual oppression. There was a part of the feminist movement that were so fed up of being relegated to a secondary issue that they broke with the left, and said, 'ok, the left and the right are all the same' and 'patriarchy is everywhere' - which is not completely wrong but its not the same everywhere [i.e., on the radical left, on the right, etc.] - and this part of the feminist movement chose to break its alliance with the left and go there own way.

So this happened but its important to recognise that there has always been a part of the feminist movement, which have tried to actualise Marxism and integrate it into the theoretical assumptions of the feminist movement, and vice versa. This is not impossible because Marx and Engels have had great intuitions about women's role in society. Of course they weren't feminists avant la lettre - that would have been very difficult. But they were not so blind to the question of women's oppression in the manner that some people say. So we can build on a few Marxist concepts, such as treating social oppression as a materialist question, recognising the existence of an unjust division of labour, and what the economic space is for women in society and the family, and so on. These are some concepts that are very much still valid.

We have to build on these insights to develop a more intimate, and more internalised or subjective understanding of women's oppression; what we now call issues of gender politics; how people are socialised into different gender roles; and the question of heteronormativity. These are all elaborations that came in the twentieth century and could not form part of the work of Marx and Engels.

LC: You mentioned Engels and maybe we could discuss his famous pamphlet *The Origins of the Family Private Property and the State*. Where do you stand intellectually and theoretically in relation to this work? And do you consider the incorporation of feminist thinking into Marxism to represent a deeper rejection of economistic or vulgar articulations of the historical materialist worldview?

NDM: Exactly, I think it has such implications. Firstly, on Engels' pamphlet, its important to say that he had been discussing it with Marx and, even though he wrote it after Marx died, it can arguably be considered an elaboration of both their worldviews. They based themselves on the anthropological work of the time, of the nineteenth century, and drew the conclusion that their had been initial phase of matriarchy in what they called 'primitive communist societies'. Afterwards this has been proven to be wrong - if understood in the sense that political and social power was in the hands of women, i.e. matriarchal in the strict sense of the term. But, it was not totally wrong because - although it is still in discussion - many anthropologists now believe that although there was not a matriarchy as such, generally speaking the power relations between men and women were much less hierarchical than they were to be in later societies.

So the method of analysis, which was to see how the material conditions of life were essential to the construction of gender roles, was a crucial contribution of Marx and Engels, even though the concrete conclusion regarding matriarchy was incorrect. The latter was a 'limit of the time', so to speak.

In terms of the second part of your question, feminism does enrich Marxism by analysing oppression in the realm of subjectivity. In the 1970s the feminists said that 'the personal is political' and this means that social oppression passes through a number of psychological and unconscious habits, reactions and attitudes that are very deeply anchored in the consciousness of every individual. Once this is recognised then it clearly rules out the kind of economistic or mechanical Marxism that states once economic oppression is abolished then women are liberated. Unfortunately, it is much more complicated than that and feminism provides some tools to dig into the interpersonal, psychological, unconscious and symbolic facets of social oppression.

LC: Moving on how to a feminist movement can be constructed that challenges these multiple forms that

women's oppression is actualised, what are the consequences - e.g. in terms of autonomy and self organisation - for how the movements and revolutionary organisation should be developed and built?

NDM: Consider how Marx said that the 'liberation of the working class has to be the act of the working class itself'. This can be generalised across all oppressed groups. It doesn't mean that you don't need to make alliances, but the principle of self-organisation is rooted in the idea that those who are most able, and most concerned by the liberation on a specific issue are those who are living it directly. They have the force and the notions, and the knowledge, to be, potentially, the main actors of their liberation. This makes self-organisation so important. There is also the democratic character, the empowering consequences of oppressed people breaking their chains.

The first step in organising this is self-consciousness, unveiling what the oppression actually consists in, struggling against that and finding the tools and the language to develop a fightback. This is the first step, I think, for all types of oppression: LGBT, racism, anything. But it is only the first step. If it stays there then what emerges is a kind of 'involution' that can be damaging. After that our job as socialist-feminists, Marxists, and ecologists, and anti-racists, and so on, is to widen the discourse of oppression and establish parallels and intersections with class oppression, race oppression, etc. So we can find common goals and meeting points. It might not always be possible, but we must look for these meeting points to empower each movement. The role of a political group, a party, etc., is to enhance this encounter.

LC: You mention the role of the political group. At this week's camp, I have been impressed by how seriously the FI take the question of feminism, autonomy and women's oppression - the 'pay off' can be seen in the number of young women activists in attendance here. What are the origins of the FI engagement with feminist theory and practice?

NDM: In the 1970s many of our sections and women comrades were also leaders of the autonomous feminist movement, and also the gay liberation movement. As the Fourth International we had a political discussion that went very deep [into our theory and practice], and produced one of the main documents in our tradition from 1978 or 1979, 'No feminism with socialism, no socialism without feminism' which influenced all our organisations. It was still a moment of major growth and success of the women's liberation movement, which reinforced this turn by winning gains in society.

This tradition has gone on in the Fourth International since and it has especially, I must say, been carried through all the youth camps. These began in 1984 and so now is the 30th youth camp. Even in some countries, in some years, when the engagement with feminism in the national sections may have been uneven, there has always been the autonomous feminist space at the youth camp to keep the tradition strong.

LC: When you spoke today at the youth camp, there was a lively discussion about the role of symbolism and female leadership in society in advancing the struggle for the liberation of women. Could you tell us where you stand on that?

NDM: Yes, well this is a controversial question, because people immediately think of the worst possible examples, 'Thatcher', 'Marine le Pen' in France and so on. My point is that you cannot measure conquests of women's rights in society only in terms of direct material advantages or 'class struggle' in the narrow economic sense. If there is a woman that conquers an important space in society, as a writer, as an intellectual, as an artist, as a sports woman, and, yes, also a political space, then this is a dimension to be considered by itself, in its own terms, as a gain of women. Because it breaks with the dominant idea - that is partly unconscious and un-theorised, etc - that women are second-class citizens and always have been in history. This has to be immediately combined in the analysis with their political and class position, if this is not only a symbolic gain, and the effect that the individual's position has on the social and economic position of women. But the only measure cannot be the economic and social position of

women, which would be far too restrictive. The role of symbolism has to be recognised in our account of women's social position. I hope that's clear.

LC: Yes, that makes perfect sense. So to develop a bit further, when you talk about the development of a feminist movement what role do you think that class plays in how the movement should be constructed? To give you a concrete example, I was present at the Istanbul European Social Forum in 2010 where a feminist activist argued that 'if Lehman Brothers had been Lehman Sisters, then there would be no financial crisis'. I know this is an argument you would strongly reject but it poses a question around the relationship between, if you like, 'bourgeois' and 'socialist' feminism in the autonomous women's movement.

NDM: Yes, of course. As a feminist-socialist part of the feminist movement then we have to focus on those women that suffer a 'double oppression' as working class women and as an oppressed social group. This in particular means those who are unemployed, have precarious jobs, young women, immigrants, etc. We focus on that. This does not mean we do not seek alliances as broad as possible with the wider women's movement. We try to formulate political demands that are measured on the needs of these women suffering double exploitation but can address as wide a part of society as possible. Then we try to take into account how the position of women is different not only on a class level, but also involves other oppressions such as race. Consider the oppression of migrant women, the question of the veil [or hijab], the issue of the exclusion of them from the public space. We need to be clear that sexism or male chauvinism 'has no passport' and recognise that feminism has been mobilised to oppress the migrant population, as if there were determinate peoples or layers of society that are more violent against women, that are more chauvinist and so on. We say 'no' violence against women is everywhere, male chauvinism is everywhere. Starting with their needs - e.g., migrant women - we wish to enlarge their struggle.

LC: You mentioned the veil or hijab and your argument seems to have particular implications in relation to this question. This has been one of the most contentious issues on the European left in recent years, particularly thinking in relation to France and moves to ban it from public space. What position do you think the radical left should take in relation to this question?

NDM: Yes, I know, and I recognise that this is still a hotly debated question in France and I should say I am not expressing a formal position of the Fourth International, I'm expressing my own. But, saying that, I think we do agree on this in many countries.

It's very complicated, but, put simply, the veil in itself cannot be seen as a unique 'symbol' of anything, it is a piece of garment that can symbolise many different things to different people. To exclude a woman because she is wearing a hijab as if this is an expression of her being more than other women is wrong, is an error, on many counts. The symbol can mean many different things in different contexts. It is not the same in Tunisia today as it is in Italy, and so on. In any case, exclusion is no way to promote women's liberation - the way to promote women's liberation is through dialogue. Indeed, I would say generally that commitment to religion or, to put it better a faith or belief, cannot be grounds for exclusion from Marxist parties. You can have this faith and still agree with radical leftist politics. But it has to be analysed concretely in every concrete situation.

LC: A concept that has been used in relation to how to connect different liberation struggles, possibly more in the English-speaking world, has been the concept of intersectionality. Do you find this idea useful?

NDM: It has been used more in academic discourse, but, yes, it can be formulated in that way. There is no single priority or one identity that prevails on others in the same person. If you are a black woman in London, in Italy, and so on, you cannot say which is the primary oppression, it depends. You cannot from the outside say that this is your primary oppression, and instruct people to act a certain way.

LC: Finally, what are the major issues confronting the feminist movement in Italy that you have been involved in mobilising around?

NDM: A big question is the issue of violence against women. It is not clear whether it is increasing or the public denunciations of it are increasing, but, regardless, it's a very important mobilising point for the movement. And, as I mentioned to you, its crucial to ensure that this new public climate will not be used by the extreme right against migrant communities. Another big mobilising point is that we have always had an incomplete welfare state in Italy but now it is being dismantled completely. Social services that women use more, etc, etc, are threatened. And the third point is the image of women in the mass media and politics in Italy which is linked to our ex-premier Berlusconi, and raises issues of sex, money and politics. This has spread an image of women in Italy that absolutely does not correspond to their presence in society. This shocking discrepancy between the representation of women by the media and the actual position of women in Italy has created anger and protest.

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