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# SEXUAL EQUALITY & SOCIALISM

**W**hat has socialism to do with sexual equality? At the most general level, we can say that equality is central to socialism, and that equality includes equality between women and men. But the meaning of equality has been widely contested, and this level of generality does not take us very far. Karl Marx was always rather sniffy about empty claims to equality, and his preferred objective—"from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs"—seems entirely compatible with a division of labor that allocates different responsibilities to women and men. Later socialists have been more willing to make equality a core value, but they have disagreed over the appropriate balance between equality of opportunity and equality of outcomes, and they have varied widely in their understanding of what it is that has to be equalized. The idea that domestic work, for example, should be distributed equally between women and men was a relatively late development even in feminist circles: as Ellen DuBois has noted in her discussion of nineteenth-century suffragists, "'sharing housework' may be a more uniquely twentieth-century feminist demand than 'smashing monogamy.'"<sup>1</sup>

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## The Socialist and Liberal Traditions

Equalizing either housework or child care certainly did not figure much in nineteenth-century socialist debate. The so-called utopian socialists tended to favor co-operative arrangements for domestic work or bringing up children. But this derived from their critique of the privatized (self-interested) family rather than from any preoccupation with redistributing work between women

and men. Later in the century, Marxists tended to regard women's confinement to the domestic sphere as the key factor in their subordination to men, and looked to the fuller participation of women in socialized production as the means to their emancipation. In Engels's over-optimistic extrapolation from the employment of women in the textile industry, this process was already well underway; in August Bebel's *Women and Socialism*, emancipation through work had to be combined with a program for socializing domestic labor. Instead of each woman being condemned to her own private oven and sink, there would be central kitchens and public laundries, centralized heating arrangements and centralized cleaning services. That the cooks and the cleaners might continue to be women was not, at this stage, considered an issue.

The alternative argument from the nineteenth century was that a genuinely unconfined free market should be enough to deliver sexual equality. This, largely, is what John Stuart Mill argued in his essay on *The Subjection of Women* (published in 1869), where he identified the subjection of women as the main surviving remnant of an earlier social order, and increasingly at odds with the defining principle of modern society. He took this to be the notion that competition and not birth should be what dictates a person's position in life: that instead of our life-chances being determined by the accidents of birth, what we do or become should be a matter that is decided by free competition. "Nobody," as Mill put it, "thinks it necessary to make a law that only a strong-armed man shall be a blacksmith. Freedom and competition suffice to make blacksmiths strong-armed men, because the weak-armed can earn

more by engaging in occupations for which they are more fit." What, then, was added by the plethora of nineteenth-century legislation that prohibited women from even entering the competitive arena? If the principle of freedom and competition is true, he argued, "we ought to act as if we believed it, and not to ordain that to be born a girl instead of a boy, any more than to be born black instead of white, or a commoner instead of a nobleman, shall decide the person's position through all life."

As is apparent from some of his other writings, Mill was not an unambiguous supporter of free competition. He was also very much taken with the case for cooperative ownership, and he sympathized with many of the socialist arguments of his contemporaries. As far as sexual equality was concerned, however, he did seem to think an unconfined free market—unconfined, that is, by legislation that dictated differential treatment for women and men—should be enough to deliver the desired result. Mill neither anticipated nor desired a world in which men and women would take on the same range of work or responsibilities; he did not expect men to take an equal share of domestic work or child care; and in common with many economists of his time (and later), he believed that too great an influx of women into the labor market would drag down wage levels and make everyone substantially worse off. What mattered was that women should be educated and enabled to support themselves, freed from the legal prohibitions that limited their educational and job opportunities, and released from the inequities in marriage law that made marriage a relationship between master and slave. But once marriage and motherhood had been transformed into a genuinely free choice and consensual arrangement, he expected the majority of women to opt gladly for their conventional role.

If we take these as exemplars of the more sexually egalitarian wings of the socialist and liberal traditions, it is evident that both traditions can generate a commitment to sexual equality. Whatever the historical errors or theoretical failings in Engels's *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (published in 1884), no one reading his analysis of male domination and female subjugation can doubt the importance he attached to achieving equal-

ity between women and men. And while the popularity of Bebel's *Women and Socialism* owed more to its much-needed vision of the future socialist society than to its specific arguments on women, the book did go through more than fifty editions by the time of his death in 1913 to become one of the most widely read texts in the German socialist movement. John Stuart Mill's writings on sexual equality attracted less contemporary attention than his other works on political theory or political economy, but his consistent backing for most of the central campaigns of nineteenth-century feminism helped secure a close relationship between liberalism and first wave feminism. Neither the socialist nor the liberal tradition has proved itself a strong or consistent supporter of sexual equality; but both can make some claim to being its "natural home."

**I**f there is any basis for feminism claiming a special affinity with socialism, it lies in the socialist critique of privacy, and the way this alerted socialists to the peculiar constraints of the domestic sphere. Liberals were far more likely to defend private spaces against public regulation, and much less likely to regard the household as a place of confinement. Even allowing for John Stuart Mill's strong condemnation of marital slavery, this view of privacy made liberals more inclined to accept some version of "separate spheres." Socialists, by contrast, tended to distrust privacy as inherently individualistic and limiting, and in their celebration of collective activity and socialized production, they were considerably more disparaging of domestic life. For many, this simply spilled over into a disdain for women. For the minority, however, who bothered to address the so-called "Woman Question," it generated more consistent support for women's entry into the labor market than yet figured in the liberal tradition, as well as more imaginative proposals for transforming the conditions under which domestic work was carried out. The difference between the two traditions has sometimes been theorized as a difference between pursuing equality of opportunities and achieving equality of outcomes: liberalism typically focusing on removing *legal* constraints to free up equality of opportunities; socialism typically addressing the

structural conditions that are necessary to substantial equality. But in its origins, at least, the difference stems as much from the liberal defense of private spaces and the socialist critique of private confinement.

Though the latter offered a basis for allying feminism to the socialist tradition, most of those active in the earlier feminist campaigns found a more congenial home within the liberal camp. Legal constraints and prohibitions were a particularly pressing concern through the late nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries; and while few liberals showed any great enthusiasm for women's emancipation, those who did gave active support to feminist campaigns. Socialists, meanwhile, tended to play the class card to trump any excessive preoccupation with sexual equality. When Selina Cooper, for example, argued the case for women's suffrage at the 1905 Labour Party Conference, Harry Quelch of the (Marxist) Social Democratic Federation announced that "Mrs. Cooper has placed sex first . . . we have to put Labour first in every case." In the hierarchy of socialist concerns, sexual equality usually came low on the list.

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### 'Second Wave' Feminism

A rather different pattern emerged in the early years of the contemporary women's movement, when feminists found themselves more closely attuned to the socialist than the liberal tradition. Debates through the 1970s were often ordered through a three-way split among liberal, socialist, and radical feminists and, in Britain, far more than in the United States, the overwhelming majority placed themselves in the second or third camp. Previous campaigns had removed many of the more overt legal inequalities, thereby reducing some of the attractions of liberal feminism. But the connections that were made with socialism were also specific to the historical moment, for they reflected a wider political context in which socialism had come to set the terms for radical social critique. Many of the early activists came from a prior involvement in left politics, and even in distancing themselves from socialism, feminists often reproduced its analytical traditions. One of the key texts in the development of a radical (that is, nonsocialist) feminism

was Shulamith Firestone's *Dialectic of Sex*, but Firestone employed a Marxist terminology to identify women as a distinct "sex-class."

Where there was a more substantial theoretical basis to the partnership of socialism with feminism, it lay in the socialist equation of domesticity with confinement. Few feminists went along with the idea that women's emancipation would occur simply through their entry into socialized production. But the notion that sexual inequality was rooted in women's confinement to the private household fitted well with the preoccupations of the 1950s and 1960s: the critique of housework, for example, as a thankless and repetitive cycle in which nothing new was ever created; or the critique of the nuclear family, as requiring women to sacrifice their integrity and personality to the nurture of husbands who would come to despise them, and children whose first task on reaching maturity would be to push their mothers aside. Feminists in the 1990s are far more likely to dwell on the double burden women experience in juggling the demands of paid employment with the care responsibilities that continue to fall almost exclusively on their shoulders. In the formative literature, by contrast, attention was more typically focused on the way that women were silenced, marginalized, turned in on themselves, encouraged to look to fulfillment through finding the "right man," discouraged from any more public activity. In principle, at least, the liberal language of individuality and freedom offered an equally powerful resource for addressing these issues. But liberalism was regarded as condoning a sharp separation between public and private spheres, and turning a blind eye to what went on in the household. This hardly tuned in with the aspirations of those who were experimenting with alternative forms of collective living and collective child care, nor did it have much to say to those who were developing an analysis of male violence. (Not that this last was a strong point among socialists either.)

The distance traveled since then is enormous. For feminists, the most important milestones have been the failure to establish sustainable alternatives to the nuclear family; the steady increase in women's paid employment, which has made the double burden so much more central to feminist analysis; and the disenchantment with that com-

bination of full-time employment for women and under-staffed and over-regulated nurseries for children, which characterized so many of the state socialist societies. In her outline of feminist approaches to motherhood, Ann Snitow<sup>2</sup> notes the self-questioning of motherhood that characterised so many of the key texts of the 1970s: the attempt to detach being a woman from the requirement to be a mother; but also the attempt to detach biological motherhood from the responsibilities of caring for children. This contrasts markedly with a subsequent celebration of motherhood as generating distinct values of nurturance and care.

**I**n this later phase, the quintessentially feminist program has been a reorganization of paid employment (more substantial parental leave, more part-time work for both women and men, more flexibility in employment patterns) so that both mothers *and* fathers can divide their time equitably between parenthood and work. The idea that parenting could be socialized, either through better social provision of child care services, or through collective living arrangements that draw both parents and nonparents into responsibilities for caring for children, has given way to a more privatized scenario, in which individual mothers and fathers will be enabled to reach a more egalitarian division of their domestic labor. Not that social provision has dropped out of the program: improving and expanding nursery provision, for example, remains a central feminist concern. But feminists are less inclined to view care work just as a “burden” to be lifted from their shoulders onto those of the state. They are also less prepared to view sexual equality as something that changes women’s lives without more substantially changing men’s.

Over the same period, socialists have also made their peace with privacy; it is no longer presumed that social ownership must be better than private; it is no longer presumed that collective arrangements must be better than individual ones; it is no longer presumed that people find their fulfillment in socialized production or are lessened by watching a video in the privacy of their home. Though the current flurry around community or communitarianism testifies to continuing anxieties about the scale of this shift, most

socialists have backed away from the critique of privacy that was so characteristic of the earlier tradition. Most, indeed, have refashioned their socialism to give more place to the individual, and the rights and freedoms of this individual are now regarded as suitable socialist concerns.

Where does this leave any special affinity between socialism and sexual equality? Oddly, it seems, much stronger. Today’s socialists are more consistently attuned to the requirements of sexual equality than their predecessors; and in Britain, as elsewhere in Europe, it has been parties on the left of the political spectrum that have been most willing to speed up the process of change. The Labour party is certainly more tuned in than it has been to the issues and problems that confront women, as evidenced in its commitment to recruiting more women as political representatives. But this growing affinity with sexual equality may owe more to the recent convergence between liberal and socialist values (and the associated downgrading of class) than to anything specific to the socialist tradition. What does socialism have to add to the project of sexual equality? Can sexual equality be achieved within a broadly liberal framework that recognizes the equal worth of all individuals, regardless of their sex? Or is socialism—and if so, what kind of socialism—a necessary condition for sexual equality?

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### Equality in Contemporary Socialist Thought

David Miller has argued that the attachment to (some kind of) equality does not uniquely distinguish socialists from their opponents.<sup>3</sup> We might equally well note that the attachment to (some kind of) liberty does not uniquely distinguish liberals from their opponents. Today’s socialists are very much preoccupied with the relationship between equality and freedom, and most would like to arrive at some trade-off between these two that weights them relatively evenly. One expression of this is the rather disparaging dismissal of strict equality (the “leveler’s strategy”); another is the recovery of equality of opportunities as a far more radical strategy than its critics used to admit.

Thus the Labour party’s Commission on Social Justice argues for what Stuart White describes as an “endowment egalitarianism” that

equalizes the initial distribution of capabilities and skills, primarily through education and training.<sup>4</sup> It presents this as an attractive alternative to the more conventional redistribution of income. If the alternative worked, it would short-circuit the equalization-after-the-event that characterizes policies of progressive taxation. Instead of waiting for the inequalities to emerge—and then taxing the rich to pay for the poor—it should be possible to intervene at an earlier stage to equalize life-chances and job opportunities. What makes this particularly attractive in the present political climate is that it promises to ease the tension between equality and freedom. Instead of relying on an interventionist state to deliver more substantial equality of income, people will be equalized to make their own choices, and make what they can of their lives.

Such a strategy is in many ways limited: it seems to accept the slots that are becoming available in an economy that divides jobs more starkly than before into full-time or part-time, high-paid or low-paid, relatively secure or inherently transient, but calls for a more radical understanding of social and job mobility that will empower individuals to move more freely and equally between these slots. That said, the equal opportunities that are implied in the strategy are considerably more substantial than the equal right to enter the competitive arena. They carry with them a strong commitment to eliminating the early patterns of disadvantage that wedge their way around children as they enter the educational system, and they anticipate extensive social intervention to equalize initial endowments. The Commission on Social Justice indeed goes further than this, for it construes equal opportunities as including a lifetime chance to regain ground that was lost at an earlier stage. The idea is not just to equalize our starting positions, and then condone whatever inequalities subsequently emerge. The emphasis on “lifelong learning” suggests that some of the subsequent inequalities must also be tackled—particularly those that relate to inequalities in education and skills.

This reassessment of equal opportunities as an alternative to “strict” equality is one important element in contemporary socialist thinking. It often combines with a further modification—itsself heavily influenced by developments in lib-

eral and libertarian theory—which says that inequalities are justified when they arise from individual choice or effort, but unjustified when they arise from “brute-luck.” This produces a peculiar amalgam of what used to be viewed as distinctively socialist and liberal traditions, for while the distinction potentially challenges *any* inequalities arising from inherited wealth (the brute-luck of being born to rich parents), it also condones what may be very substantial inequalities of income, so long as these derive from individual effort or choice. The emphasis, again, is on resolving tensions between equality and freedom. The inequalities that have prevented individuals from making their equal choices should be eliminated; but the inequalities that arise from the exercise of this personal choice need not.

**T**his is quite a startling modification of egalitarian ideals, but the standard examples offered in its defense are not particularly controversial. Most people will say it is fair enough for John to earn more than Bill if he has chosen to work longer hours; most people, indeed, will say it is fair enough that those who have chosen to sacrifice their early earning potential by staying on at school or university should later benefit from higher incomes. The problem, as David Miller has noted, is that it is hard to determine what counts as genuine choice, and he uses an example taken from the differences between women and men to illustrate some of the difficulties. We may all agree that John is entitled to more income than Bill if he has chosen to work more intensely and for longer hours, but do we really think John is entitled to more than Belinda, who chose part-time work in order to combine it with looking after her children? The woman who chooses to work part-time “chooses” not only a lower income overall, but very often a job that offers lower hourly pay and minimal job protection; she makes this choice, however, against a background of structural constraints that include her responsibilities to what are still considered “her” children. Virtually all of our choices are structured in some way by the society in which we live, and there may not be much left that is unambiguously chosen. Why should people be required to live with the consequences of their “choice” when they

had so little alternative? If inequalities are to be regarded as unjustified when they arise from circumstances beyond our control, does this not lead us back to notions of strict equality?

I shall return to this question later. For the moment, I just want to note that the renewed interest in equality of opportunities combines with the attempt to distinguish brute-luck from chosen inequalities to encourage a closer alliance between socialism and sexual equality. Establishing equal opportunities in education and employment has always figured as a major concern in the feminist project (and has often been downgraded by socialists because of its overtly individualistic basis). The renewed emphasis on equal opportunities then provides a strong link to issues of sexual equality. The brute-luck argument looks even more congenial, for any inequalities that can be attributed to the good luck of being born a boy or the bad luck of being born a girl fall self-evidently into the category of unjustified inequalities. So while the recent shifts in socialist thinking have moderated the stricter egalitarianism of an earlier period, they have also been peculiarly favorable to the arguments for equality between women and men. Much of this, of course, reflects the accommodation socialists have now made with key elements in the liberal tradition. This suggests that it is the marriage of socialism with liberalism that now offers the best hope for sexual equality.

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### Sexual Equality as Strict Equality

So far, so cozy. What I want to argue, however, is that sexual equality is one area where we continue to need strong notions of *strict equality*. None of the economic inequalities between women and men is particularly hard to explain, for whether we look at the sexual distribution of full-time and part-time employment or the disproportionate number of women in jobs that require minimal training or the difficulties women experience in reaching the higher levels on any career ladder, they all point to the unequal division of care work that requires so many women to interrupt their working lives or opt for part-time employment. There is also, of course, overt discrimination, but we do not have to resort to any great conspiracy theory to explain the wage

gap between the sexes. Underlying all the sexual inequalities in the labor market is the persistent association of women with care work, and I can see no way out of this short of equalizing this work between women and men. This is an argument for strict equality.

As long as boys and girls continue to grow up with such different expectations of the way they will balance out work and family, this will inevitably affect the choices they make in developing their "endowments." As long as women continue to find themselves with the primary responsibility for caring for the young, the sick, or the elderly, this will inevitably translate into systematic disadvantage on the labor market. If the postwar expansion of women's employment tells us anything, it is that the sexes cannot be equal in their job opportunities when they are so profoundly different in their domestic lives. Unless the responsibilities of care work are equalized between women and men (which depends not only on the level of social provision, but also on major restructuring of the hours and conditions of paid employment), women's income, position, and conditions will continue to reflect the bad luck of being born female.

The argument is most powerful as applied to sexual inequalities in the labor market, but it also extends to such matters as male violence against women. The association between masculinity and aggression—and the much higher incidence of male violence toward women than female violence toward men—can hardly be explained by the fact that men are, on average, bigger and stronger. If this were the explanation, we would be able to identify potential rapists simply by height and strength. The more probable explanation lies in the markedly different expectations our cultures lay on women and men, most of which relate to the sexual division of responsibilities for care. Requiring men to rock their babies to sleep or look after parents with Alzheimer's disease may not, of itself, reduce the incidence of rape. But it does not take great theoretical sophistication to perceive the connection between the sexual division of care work and the norms of masculine behavior.

I am not claiming that a more equitable distribution of care work between women and men

resolves all problems of sexual inequality, for although I do see the sexual division of labor as crucial in sustaining sexual hierarchies and oppressions, I would not want to present equality in employment and care work as the only feminist concern. Nor would I want to argue that a more equitable distribution between mothers and fathers resolves all problems of care work: I think there is a great deal still to be said about the closures of the nuclear family; and even if we set this to one side, a significant number of parents (overwhelmingly women) are bringing up children on their own, and depend crucially on social provision for child care and other services. The point I am stressing is that *any* inequality between women and men is unjustified. Whatever other conclusions we may reach about justified and unjustified inequalities of income or justified and unjustified inequalities of power, there can be no justification for a distribution of income or power that is skewed by sex, any more than for one that is skewed by race.

**S**imilar conclusions emerge if we switch from individual entitlement to consider the social distribution of incomes as a whole. In his discussion of comprehensive egalitarianism, David Miller shifts the basis of the argument away from what individuals might or might not be entitled to, and toward the degree of inequality that a society can accept as compatible with recognizing equality of status. What we may deserve then becomes of secondary importance. Whether the poor are “deserving” or not, there is a limit to how much a society premised on equal status can condone people living in abject poverty; whether the rich are “deserving” or not, there is a limit to the range of income differential that is compatible with an egalitarian society. There is, in Miller’s view, no requirement for strict equality, and he rules this out as incompatible with personal autonomy. Societies can and must live with a certain degree of income inequality, but it is impossible to regard all citizens as enjoying equal standing when the disparities become grotesque.

As applied to specifically sexual inequalities, however, this argument seems to confirm the case for strict equality. It certainly implies that the income differentials between women and

men should not be so large as to undermine any notion of equal standing between the sexes. But the notion of equal status would have to go considerably further, for any income differential that seemed to be tied to one’s sex or race would surely be incompatible with equality of status. An egalitarian society might be able to live with a one-to-four income differential, but could it live with the notion that being born female, or being born black, had condemned one to the lower half of that scale? And if it could not live with this, would this not imply that the sexes must be distributed in roughly equal proportions across the full range of income inequalities?

Though this all seems terribly obvious to me, I am aware that it is not so obvious to everyone else. For most people, I think, the argument carries more conviction when it is applied to the distribution of ethnic groups than when it is applied to the distribution of women and men. If it can be established that one’s chances in the labor market are related to the color of one’s skin, most people will see this as unjustified. (When people defend racial inequalities in employment, they tend to argue that what appears to be an effect of race is in reality an effect of class.) But if it can be established that one’s chances in the labor market are related to one’s sex, many people still view this with equanimity, for they see it as a “natural” enough consequence of women’s role as mothers, and the way this affects their patterns of employment. It may be unfortunate, but is not necessarily seen as unfair. Indeed, it is far more likely to be seen as a matter of the choices that women have made. It is not only men who will say this, for women do see themselves as having a choice in the matter, and many (very sensibly) opt for the pleasures of motherhood over the intensities of contemporary employment. The issue then comes back to what counts as genuine choice. Do we say this was not a genuine choice because it was made within certain constraints? Or is that setting such a high standard for choice that it renders the term virtually meaningless?

If we say that nothing counts as a choice unless it was made from a full range of options, we are, I think, emptying the word of its meaning. All the choices we make are made within certain constraints, but that does not mean they were not choices. I cannot choose to be an opera singer

because I do not have the necessary voice, but that does not stop me from feeling that I make genuine choices between the other options at my disposal. I cannot vote for my ideal party because that party does not exist, but that does not stop my feeling that I make genuine choices between the parties that contest an election. Neither of these restrictions, however, marks me out from anyone else. We all lack the necessary talents for something we would have liked to pursue; we all have political aspirations that no party has yet promised to meet. The point about sexual or racial inequality is that the range of choices has been restricted in a blanket fashion by the characteristics of sex or race: the accident of being born female or black, into a society where this still structures our lives.

I owe this formulation to John Stuart Mill—to the exemplar of the liberal rather than the socialist tradition—but in my view it leads to a much stricter equality than was ever envisaged by Mill. The accident of being born male or female no longer carries significant consequences in the field of legal entitlement, and has rapidly decreasing consequences in the field of education. It still has very significant effects, however, on the responsibilities the individual assumes for care work, and on the positions the individual occupies in employment or politics. Sex remains a major predictor of an individual's life chances, and wherever this is the case, there is a *prima facie* case for equalization. Any inequality that arises from being female should simply be ruled out of court.

To rephrase this, we might say that there is no significant space between equality of opportunities and equality of outcomes when it comes to sexual or racial equality. If the outcomes turn out to be statistically related to sex or race, then the opportunities were clearly not equal. If we assume that talents and predilections are roughly equally distributed among the sexes, then the only explanation for a disproportionate concentration of men in certain kinds of activities and a disproportionate concentration of women in others must be the social structures and conventions that constrain our development. The very fact that men and women end up occupying different positions in the distribution of work and influence and income is evidence enough of unjustified inequality. What else, short of some genetic imbalance,

could explain it? (I will not consider here the further questions that might arise if a future generation of psychologists managed to prove some genetic distinction, and whether that would then count as a justification for sexual inequality. I do not see that it would, but given the immense difficulties in separating out genetic from environmental factors, it is not a problem that is likely to face us.) Wherever there is a systematic differentiation between the sexes—in the distribution of jobs or care work or influence or incomes—this alerts us to unjustified inequality. The only inequalities we can possibly justify are those that relate to features other than sex or race.

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### Are Any Inequalities Justified?

Up to this point, I have reserved judgment on the wider issue. I have argued that, whatever distinction we may make between justified and unjustified inequalities, sexual and racial inequalities will always fall into the second camp. Let me now make some attempt at the wider issue. Should sex and race be regarded as exceptional? And if so, why? I suggested earlier that it was the blanket nature of sexual and racial inequalities that marked them out from other chance restrictions on our opportunities or outcomes: that we can accommodate inequalities that derive from *individual* variations (being tone deaf, being physically uncoordinated, being good or bad at math), but cannot accommodate those that derive from blanket injunctions. Yet in either case, we are dealing with the accidents of birth. All inequalities of power or income must arise either from an inequality in social conditions or else from an unequal inheritance of capacities and talents, among which we must surely include the capacity for hard work. From a socialist perspective, the first looks self-evidently unjust. The second also seems unfair, for these things are hardly under our control. The problem with the second, however, is that we cannot just legislate all these differences away, for if we did, we would end up eliminating much of what we value in life.

It is not really fair, for example, that those with a gift for language should be better placed to influence decisions than those who find it hard to articulate their opinions, and it is particularly unfair when the class bias in educational oppor-



tunities skews this in favor of certain social groups. But even if we managed to eliminate the class bias, there would still be differences of personality and ability that made some individuals more persuasive than others. The only way to eliminate this would be to end all political discussion, and we would hardly be happy with this. It may also seem unfair, to follow a line of argument much loved by Robert Nozick, that an individual born with a Grecian profile should have a better sex life than an individual born with a snub nose.<sup>4</sup> But if the only way to deal with this is to allocate sexual partners at random, thereby eliminating any element of personal choice, we would hardly be happy with this. We cannot legislate against all accidents of birth, and to this extent, we are stuck with some inevitable level of inequality. What we need is some way of distinguishing the inevitable *individual* variations (some people are just more lucky than others) from those associated with more blanket injunctions. From a socialist perspective, this second category would certainly include the disabilities that flow from one's class; it should also include the disabilities that flow from one's sex or the color of one's skin.

I do not pretend that this is an easy distinction, for all differences between individuals lend themselves to a group classification (the class of people who are tone deaf, for example, and by virtue of this group characteristic are denied the chance to work in the music business), and what one person defines as bad luck will be perceived by another as a blanket injunction. I also recognize that arguments for strict equality can be modified by pragmatic concerns. I would argue, for example, that inherited inequalities of wealth are always unjustified, but given the widespread desire to pass on to one's children the benefits built up through one's life, it may be impossible to get majority support for 100 percent tax on inheritance. In a similar vein, I would argue that sexual inequalities in power or income are always unjustified, but I would accept a strategy that started with some initial redistribution and worked up toward equal shares; or that started with increasing the proportion of women in male-dominated occupations and built up toward full gender parity. In this, as in any area of social policy, one cannot hope to do everything overnight. The final aim, however, must surely be to eliminate inequalities

associated with sex. I can see no normative basis for stopping short of full sexual equality.

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### Socialism as a Condition For Sexual Equality

It is at this point that the special affinity between socialism and sexual equality comes more sharply to the fore. Sexual equality, as I understand it, depends on a major restructuring of the relationship between paid and unpaid labor so as to detach this division from the distinction between women and men. Sexual equality cannot be achieved simply through socialized provision of services (more day care centers, more home aides and meals on wheels, more homes for the disabled or the mentally ill or the elderly), for while these can certainly help equalize conditions for women and men, they do so by shifting care responsibilities from women working in the privacy of their home to (usually) women employed by the state. There are necessary limits to this strategy, for none of us wants a world in which care work is entirely institutionalized. The strategy also leaves untouched the differential roles of women and men. It will still be women who do the work; it will still be women who depend on the services. When these are threatened or removed, it will still be women who have to carry the consequences. The longer term solution lies in combining socialized care provision with a new balance between paid and unpaid work. This ultimately depends on restructuring the hours and patterns of employment, for men as well as for women.

The kinds of policies necessary to achieve this range from what is already practiced in some social democracies (notably in Scandinavia) to what we can hardly begin to imagine. They would include substantial periods of paid parental leave that could be taken by either mothers or fathers; a requirement on employers to offer reduced working hours to any employees (male or female) who carry major responsibilities for caring for the young, sick, or old; additional rights to periods of unpaid leave that would allow people to break their employment without losing their right to their job; and, most important of all, a major reduction in the hours, and alteration in the shifts, of *male* employment, so that male workers are equally enabled to assume their caring responsibilities. To

put this more generally, the necessary changes would involve a final, much belated, recognition that the typical worker is no longer a man with a housewife in tow, and a reordering of the priorities of employment to recognize that all of us have a great deal to do outside the factory and office.

**L**eft to its own devices, an unregulated market economy can never deliver this. The market is no great respecter of sexual distinction when it comes to employment practices: there has been no wringing of hands over the decline of male employment in the old bases of manufacturing industry and the simultaneous increase in female employment; the market has not stepped in to restore masculine pride. But while we may well rely on the forces of free competition to equalize participation rates between women and men, we cannot rely on these forces to reshape the hours and conditions of work. It is, indeed, one of the appalling ironies of the present period that high levels of unemployment coincide with an extraordinary intensification of work for those lucky enough to find jobs, and that the very insecurities of the job market have exposed people to longer hours. The market will happily release a significant proportion of adults from the constraints of paid employment, but it does this only to doom others to workaholic excess, and we cannot realistically rely on this market to establish sensible divisions between paid employment, care work, and leisure. Only a direct political initiative, underpinned by a strong commitment to sexual equality, could put the necessary changes in place.

Having said that, the kind of socialism required to achieve this may not be particularly radical. When Karl Marx examined the struggles in nineteenth-century Britain to reduce the length of the working day, he argued that when the restrictions were imposed, they ultimately turned out to capital's advantage. Employers were forced

to abandon the rather primitive approach to profits that depended on lengthening the working day, and turn their attention to raising the productivity of labor. The result was further and often spectacular improvements in profitability—but left to their own devices, the employers would never have agreed to shortening the working day. It took a major political initiative (and as it happened, one that particularly restricted the employment of women workers) to force them into a new round of economic development. Reshaping employment patterns so that they fit with the new realities of the labor market might well have similar effects; the kind of sexual equality I am describing might then turn out to be compatible with a capitalist economy. It is not compatible, however, with a hands-off noninterventionism that allows the immediate requirements of employers to dictate the hours and patterns of work.

What I am describing here is probably more accurately described as social democracy than socialism, but it does imply a radically different scale of values in which production is tailored to social need, and caring for people takes equal priority alongside producing marketable goods and services. Socialism in this (rather attenuated) sense is a precondition for sexual equality, for freeing up the opportunities for girls in education or women in employment does not provide the necessary structural changes that can deliver life-long equality, and we need a more decisive challenge to market principles. It is impossible to eliminate all inequalities between people; it is undesirable to eliminate all differences. But both differences and inequalities have to be detached from the accident of being born male or female, so that the choices we make and the inequalities we condone reflect individual, rather than sexual, variation. It was the liberal tradition that first gave voice to this ideal, but it is socialism that could make it reality. □

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ellen DuBois, "The Radicalism of the Woman Suffrage Movement: Notes Toward the Reconstruction of Nineteenth-Century Feminism," *Feminist Studies* 3, 1/2 (1975) p. 66.

<sup>2</sup> Ann Snitow, "Feminism and Motherhood: An American

Reading," *Feminist Review* 40 (1992)

<sup>3</sup> David Miller, "What Kind of Equality Should the Left Pursue?" in Franklin (ed.), *Equality*.

<sup>4</sup> Stuart White, "What Do Egalitarians Want?" in Franklin (ed.), *Equality*.