Recreating Sexual Politics

Men, feminism and politics

Victor J. Seidler

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This thought-provoking book, first published in 1991, examines sexual politics in a world which is being radically changed by the challenges of feminism. Seidler explores how men have responded to feminism, and the contradictory feelings men have towards dominant forms of masculinity.

Seidler's stimulating and original analysis of social and political theory connects personally to everyday issues in people's lives. It reflects the growing importance of sexual and personal politics within contemporary politics and culture, and demonstrates clearly the challenge that feminism brings to our inherited forms of morality, politics and sexuality.

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

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Recreating sexual politics

As we confront the new social and political realities of the 1990s, we need to rediscover the meaning of politics, to bring the personal and the political together. Victor Seidler believes that we need to redefine the nature of freedom, equality, democracy and justice against a background of the challenges of feminism and sexual politics.

In *Recreating Sexual Politics,* Seidler explores how men have responded to feminism, and the contradictory feelings men have towards dominant forms of masculinity. Because masculinity has always been identified with *reason,* men have learnt to distrust their emotions, feelings and desires as sources of knowledge; because men have identified progress with the domination of nature, they have become blind to the need to live *with* nature rather than to exploit it. If politics is to be recreated, we have to come to terms with the insights of both feminism and ecology, and to investigate questions of identity, power, sexuality, reason and nature.

Seidler's stimulating and original analysis of social and political theory connects personally to everyday issues in people's lives. It reflects the growing importance of sexual and personal politics within contemporary politics and culture, and demonstrates clearly the challenge that feminism brings to our inherited forms of morality, politics and sexuality.

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Male orders

Edited by Victor J.Seidler
Goldsmiths' College, University of London

MALE ORDERS attempts to understand male forms of identity, practice and association in the modern world. The series explores how dominant forms of masculinity have helped shape prevailing forms of knowledge, culture and experience. Acknowledging the challenges of feminism and gay liberation, the series attempts a broad and critical exploration of men's lives as well as engaging constructively with malestream definitions of modernity and postmodernity.

Also in this series

The Achilles Heel Reader
Men, Sexual Politics and Socialism
Edited by Victor J.Seidler

Recreating sexual politics

Men, feminism and politics

Victor J.Seidler

London and New York

For Daniel and Lily

… the failure of Marx's vision has created the need for another sort of vision, not a rejection of all vision.

<div align="right">(Czeslaw Milosz, Granta 30 (1990))</div>

It's the heart afraid of breaking
that never learns to dance;
it's the dream afraid of waking that never takes a chance;
it's the one who won't be taken
who cannot seem to give,
and the soul afraid of dying
that never learns to live.

From The Rose' sung by Bette Midler

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Preface and acknowledgements

This book stretches over more than one political generation. Some of its original hopes and fears were set in 1968 at the horrendous moment when the young philosophy student Jan Palach burnt himself alive as a protest against the Russian tanks smashing the dreams for democracy that were set by the Prague Spring. It was a terrible moment. It was also an act of courage that nourished a resistance to stand firm against the lies that were to come to power in its wake. It is a moment that I shall never forget, for as a young graduate student in philosophy myself, it left its mark on both my personal and political life. In a harsh way it showed that the personal and the political are inseparable and that politics is not simply about power and interests, but also about our deepest beliefs and convictions. It is about who we are as human beings and how we can choose to live our lives with each other.

If some of this writing has its source in some of the events of 1968 it was brought to conclusion in the hopes that have been fired again by the revolutions in Eastern Europe in the closing moments of the 1980s. The people of Prague were to meet on the same spot where Palach gave his life, to remember and to celebrate. They could only live in truth if they honoured the past. The regime had lived a lie for over twenty years as it had failed to acknowledge the events of the Prague Spring for what they were. This had left a mark on each individual's soul as each person had grown accustomed to accept what they had known to be false. As Václav Havel (1987) recognises, people can live within a lie without really accepting it for 'it is enough for them to have accepted their life with it and in it'.

This is the way that each individual confirms an authoritarian system, for everyone 'in his or her own way is both a victim and a supporter of the system'. The difficulties of living in truth have a different resonance within capitalist democracies where we too become accustomed to the lie as almost second nature. As long as we can get away with it, it can seem preferable to lie, especially if we are not in fact breaking any law and if we can convince ourselves that to tell the truth could hurt someone. Within an Enlightenment heritage we are so used to separating the private from the public, the personal from the political, that lying easily becomes institutionalised. It is as if we do not expect the truth to be told to us for we know that politicians seem to have their interests well served by secrecy.

It has been a strength of feminist theory and practice to assert that 'the personal is political'. This is not simply a comment about the workings of power and subordination within our personal relations that have traditionally been taken as an arena of love and individual choice, but a radical challenge to the terms of a rationalist modernity that has insisted on separating private from public relations. In this sense, feminism provides an enduring challenge to our moral and political traditions that continue to be largely moulded within the terms set by the Enlightenment. This is not to reduce the importance of personal life and relationships, though a misplaced challenge to privacy was one of the false paths of a 1960s libertarian politics.

Rather it connects the personal to the rest of our lives so that a double standard should not apply that defends freedom and independence of men at the expense of women. As men

we were being challenged to take greater responsibility for our relationships and emotional lives. It was hard to learn to be more honest and truthful because we were not used to identifying our emotional needs and desires. We were so used to having our wishes met or telling others what they wanted to hear, that we had never really learnt to be truthful with ourselves. Within a rationalist culture of self-denial, masculinity had been identified with independence and self-sufficiency. As men we had learnt to live a lie, for we had learnt to deny our own needs. At best we could be shoulders to support others. In truth it was hard to support and nourish others if we had never learnt how to nourish or give to ourselves. The emergence of sexual politics opened up a way to begin to understand processes of diconnections in our relationships, and the ways that we need to develop more fruitful relationships with ourselves in order to relate more honestly to others.

Feminism had helped many women to become more honest with themselves. Consciousness-raising provided a context in which women could share their feelings of suffering, joy and oppression. It was a context in which you could learn the importance of being true to yourself, knowing that your experience would be validated. This challenged the pervasive Enlightenment distinction between reason and emotions as women learnt to trust their feelings rather than discounting them automatically because they did not fit the precepts of reason. In learning to recognise that their personal feelings were shared, women did not have to turn their feelings against themselves in guilt and shame but could learn how they are connected to structured relations of power and subordination.

As women learnt that they needed the strength and support of other women to transform these structures of domesticity, work and childcare, so feminism recovered a dialectical grasp of historical materialism, reworked within the visions of sexual politics, for personal change was inseparably connected to political change. They could not be ripped apart or placed in separate spheres as our inherited moral and political traditions would have us do. In this sense, feminism promised a renewal of socialism, for it connected it to the validity of people's everyday experience. It potentially helped both women and men to a trust in their own voices as they learnt to identify their own needs and fulfilment.

It went beyond a Marxist tradition that identified fulfilment with creative labour, for it acknowledged love and relationships as discrete areas of human needs and fulfilment. It set to heal the split between the public and the private, recognising them both as potential sources of value, meaning and fulfilment for men and women. Ecological politics has taken this further by questioning the Enlightenment vision of history and progress as identified with the control and domination of nature. It helps us rework our relationship with our natural selves and inner lives as well as to spiritual insights and needs that have been too easily discounted within narrow materialistic traditions.

If we take seriously the challenges which feminism and ecological politics make to our inherited moral and political traditions, we recognise the limitations of a political framework that would blindly set Soviet-styled communism against capitalism so that the revolutions in Eastern Europe can be interpreted exclusively as a victory for capitalism. It is important to recognise the integrity of different libertarian traditions of socialism, so that we refuse to think that freedom and liberty are possessions of conservative politics. It might seem to some that the language of socialism has been so degraded by the state bureaucracies in Eastern Europe that it might be preferable to forsake this language altogether. It might lake considerable time and effort to recover its meaningfulness for us again.

To the extent that political language has become empty and rhetorical, we should be wary of it. It is a strength of consciousnessraising continually to question gaps that arise between language, feelings and actions and so to ground our language in our experience. If this is a crucial insight in Wittgenstein's later philosophy, it was also given practical effect in a sexual politics that insisted on truth and honesty in the way that politics was to be lived in both our personal and political lives. In the struggle against rhetoric and moralism, it held important truths. It refused to deny a creative individuality in its challenge to possessive individualism that flourished within a capitalist ethic. It insisted that socialism should not set the society as a higher moral ideal against the needs and fulfilment of individuals.

If politics were to become a form of self-sacrifice and self-denial within the Left, it would soon lose its meaning, as it so often did in the radical politics of the 1960s and 1970s, when people lived for a future while losing a sense of what relationships and institutions they were struggling to create. As people lose a sense of their own individual needs and desires, it is hard to keep contact with what matters to others. But it is also crucial that needs and desires are not simply treated as given, as they are within a Fabian rationalist tradition which is largely set within utilitarian terms. Within an emerging sexual politics, people have to explore their own needs as they learn to recognise and validate what is important to them. This is not to discount consumer goods as able to meet real needs, but to recognise the ways they can also operate as substitutes within a capitalist consumer culture.

It has become common within post-structuralist theory to assume that identities are largely created out of available discourses and consumer goods. In the 1980s, style has assumed a new significance as the purveyor of identities. It has seemed that people can create their own identities out of what is culturally available. People do not have to accept the meanings that are already encoded, but can somehow subvert them to their own individual ends. In part this is a glorification of appearances and a validation of individuality and freedom as they can be expressed within a consumer culture. It insists that identities are no longer given and fixed and that we live in a culture of 'post-modernity' that has broken once and for all with the essences of a Cartesian ego.

So it is that nothing is fixed but everything is in flux, as we are constantly remaking and reconstituting our identities out of what has been made culturally available. This captures something of the broad social changes that have been wrought with technological change, but it can also blind us in its relativism and its incapacity to consider truth and morality. I want to address and insist on the importance of a social theory which can focus on the importance of relationship rather than merely the construction of identities. In a culture in which anything goes, it is hard to recognise the poverty of one's experience and relationships. As relationships crack, we fail to take responsibility for ourselves emotionally as we move on to the next event. We learn to conceal the hurt. We never learn from our experience, for it is a category that has been discounted within post-structuralist forms of social theory, taken as it is to be exclusively a construction of language or discourse.

In Eastern Europe, this deification of appearances and denial of essences has taken on a different, if no less brittle, form. In the denial of any distinctions between 'appearances' and 'essences' there is the denial of truth. It becomes an effect of power, as it unfortunately remains in so much of Foucault's writings. If it is important to learn to be more truthful with ourselves, then these traditions need to be questioned as we recognise that relativism

is not the only alternative to absolutist notions of truth. Václav Havel talks about how the post-totalitarian system 'defended the integrity of the world of appearances in order to defend itself, knowing that as long as it seals off the entire society, it appears to be made of stone.

> But the moment someone breaks through in one place, when one person cries out 'the Emperor is naked!'—when a single person breaks the rules of the game, thus exposing it as a game—everything suddenly appears in another light.

<div align="right">(Havel 1987)</div>

With the dominance of Thatcher and Reagan in the West, we have lived under the spell of the market as the source of all value. The poverty and suffering this is continually causing has fallen out of view as people have learnt to accept that people only have themselves to blame. The glitter of consumerism has produced powerful images that have served to silence and to banish those who are forced to live a different reality in such a class-divided society.

Without an alternative vision, the Left can only think of running capitalism more effectively. Socialism continues to be trapped by a Fabian rationalism that can only talk a language of priorities. We are left bereft of a moral vision as we are told that, without power, the Left cannot do anything. The public and the private remain resolutely separate. It is through reason alone that our goals and ends are to be discerned and it is then through reason that the most effective means are to be chosen. This turns politics into an instrumental affair that does not have to touch our lives. It becomes a job that is best left to the politicians. As the possessors of reason, they supposedly know best and can legislate for others.

At best this gives us a limited vision of democracy for it serves to discount the experience and expression of most people, especially women and ethnic minorities who have an ambiguous and qualified relationship to the public sphere. Traditionally, this is the sphere of men, and politics has been a conversation between men about a public world that is largely formed within the image of men. Feminism, ecology and sexual politics have challenged the terms of this tradition and recognised that needs and desires are not given as part of a utilitarian calculation but have to be carefully explored and discerned. It is essentially a democratic process for it is something that individuals have to do for themselves, both individually and collectively. It is not simply an issue of administration. In this crucial sense, politics remains inseparable from morality within a sexual politics that can extend and learn from the insights of ecology.

This can help account for a widespread distrust of politics and politicians. People have learnt not to trust what they hear. Too often, words have no weight. The restoration and validation of the personal within a recreated sexual politics gives a different hope to politics. For if people are talking for themselves out of their own experience, it can be easier to detect cant and hypocrisy. As people learn to share the contradictions of their own experience, say the difficulties of both working and developing close relationships as fathers to our children, we recognise that these contradictions cannot be resolved in our minds alone. They might mean working less, or working less responsibly for a while, for these are contradictions in the ways we live, not simply in the ways that we think.

If we lose a sense of the dialectical tension between language and experience, on the widespread rationalist assumption that experience is not 'real' in itself but is provided for by either reason or language, so we will also lose a grip on the contradictions of our experi-

ence. We will be tempted by a determinism that would discount individual experience as a function of social structure or language, rather than be able to validate the individuality of experience.

It is a strength of sexual politics to be able to *confirm* and *validate* experience while recognising that its meanings are to be investigated, as well as to recognise that as its social and historical sources are explored, it does not cease to be any the less individual. It is not a matter of shifting responsibility from individuals to society, thereby abandoning notions of individual responsibility. If anything, we have to learn to take greater responsibility for our emotional, sexual and work lives as the relationship between personal and political is reformulated.

Language is crucial in this process. As we learn to explore the contradictions of our everyday experience within a capitalist society, we learn to acknowledge our emotions and feelings, rather than discounting them because they do not fit the way we have learnt to think things should be. This is to recognise a relationship between masculinity and the spirit of capitalism. It is to connect self-denial to a Protestant ethic that has informed political traditions of both Left and Right. As Weber understood it, as money becomes an end in itself, our working lives become a means to ends that exist independently of us. Protestantism helps us to take for granted a vision of rationality that reverses the relationship between means and ends. This is an irrational form of rationality, as the meaning of our lives is situated in something external.

So it is that salvation as something external is replaced within a secular capitalist culture by individual achievement and success. Life becomes an endless struggle and we are denied any sense of intrinsic fulfilment and satisfaction. We are locked into competitive relationships with others and plagued by feelings that whatever we do is not good enough. So it is that the Protestant ethic legislates a particular relationship to emotionality, which in turn constrains political vision.

Politics becomes appropriated into a form of instrumentalism because it operates within the context of a structure of negation of emotionality which inevitably constitutes a blindness to reality itself. Politics is defined as a feature of the public realm alone—supposedly it is a matter of reason, power and interests. So it is that politics becomes a matter of achieving power to legislate for goals that have been set by reason alone. As power becomes an end in itself, we lose a sense of what we are struggling for, for politics has been separated from morality and emotional life, which have been relegated to the private and the individual. As socialism is recast in these terms, it loses its vision of a more equal and humane society.

Feminism and sexual politics potentially break through these Protestant assumptions which underpin Enlightenment modernity and social theory. What I present is not an instance of sexual politics but rather an argument that sexual politics is a mode of development of a dialectical politics which allows for a reformulation of historical materialism. Marx's vision was partly trapped by Enlightenment notions of reason and progress so that oppression and exploitation could only be recognised within the public sphere. It was only here that freedom and justice could flourish, for the private realm was not a concern of politics.

In challenging the relationship between the personal and the political, sexual politics awakens us to the contradictory nature of our experience and the crucial importance of truth and honesty in facing ourselves. In recognising the importance of our taking respon-

sibility for our emotional lives and personal relationships, it recognises the importance of both reason and emotions as the source of human values.

It is easy for us to betray the knowledge of what is important to us, thinking that we are thereby pleasing others. It is possible for people to lose touch with the sources of their own creativity and work. An orthodox Marxism too often abandoned the insights of the early Marx as it sought to explain the sources of change as essentially external. It lost a sense of the need for people to empower themselves as they learn to take control of their own lives. Learning to think for ourselves, as Simone Weil recognised, is a crucial aspect of this process.

In recognising that Enlightenment modernity has been largely formed as a secular form of Protestantism, I have sought to rethink the relationship of Marx to Weber, rather than seeing them as autonomous traditions. This fosters a reformulation of social and political theory in the sense that both liberalism and orthodox Marxism have been cast within a rationalistic vision that tended to reinforce the relation to self which Weber identifies as something that needs to be thought about critically. One theme is the particular relationship that men have with this structure of culture and the way that it constructs dominant masculinities in its own image.

But this is not all it does, for these processes of capitalist modernity presuppose and reinforce the subordination of the individual through its self-policing within this structure of relationship to emotions, feelings and desires. It leaves both men and women having constantly to struggle against feelings of being worthless and undeserving. This is why therapy, to the extent that it brings these assumptions and ways of relating into question, can be essentially radical, rather than simply another instance of the operation of the Protestant ethic itself. Similarly, ecological insight can be crucial in bringing into question the notion that progress lies in the domination of both inner and outer nature. So it is that the process of healing ourselves becomes inseparable from healing and repairing the damage that we have done to the planet. So it is that red and green have become inseparable, if politics is to be recreated.

If the recreation of sexual politics is to be part of such a larger process, then we need to recognise this does not just concern the oppression and subordination of women, gays and lesbians. It is because of the broader implications of sexual politics that it cannot be 'left to women', although the nature of men's contribution is clearly open to discussion. But sexual politics is also about men and the powers of masculinities. It is not enough for men to give support to women in their struggles for change. If men are to take the insights of feminism to heart, then sexual politics has to push beyond a realm exclusive to women, whilst taking care not to trivialise or marginalise the work of women, as happens all too often. It is also crucial, as I argue, for men to reconsider their inherited forms of masculinity and how to *change* themselves, both individually and collectively. If this is to happen, then men have to learn to trust and support each other in new ways. As the personal and the political are brought into new relationships with each other, so will our sense of the place and limits of politics in our lives be transformed. As we learn to trust more aspects of our experience, so we will become clearer about how we need others. As we learn to take greater responsibility for our lives, so the relationship between state and civil society will be set in different terms.

This writing has stretched over many years and many people have helped in the formulation of these ideas. Some of the early chapters had their origin in discussions in the editorial collective of *Achilles' Heel,* which at different times included amongst others Paul Atkinson, Mel Cairns, Tony Eardley, Steve Gould, Martin Humphries, Andy Metcalf, Paul Morrison, Andy Moye, Chris Nickolay, John Rowen, James Swinson, Steve Turner, Tom Weld, Ian Wolstenholme and Nick Zenau. Some of us had been involved in a period of intensive political activity in the early 1970s in the context of East London Big Flame, which slowly disintegrated with the economic crisis in 1976. Different people went their individual ways, but we all confronted the difficulties of recovering a sense of individual needs and direction after such a period of collective activity.

Some of these issues were articulated in the context of Red Therapy, as an attempt to develop self-help therapy in a way that was sensitive to issues of class, race and gender. These were exciting days, even if we still carry some of the scars. I learnt enormously from these experiences, though I also lost touch with different aspects of myself. It seemed crucial to grasp the ways that activist socialist politics seemed to produce its own culture of self-denial. Even though we continually talked of needs and desires, it proved difficult to sustain much connection with the reality of this vision. I wrote some of the early drafts for the chapters on morality and self-denial as a way of coming to terms with this experience. It was a way of grasping the ways that a Protestant ethic remained powerful within a secular culture, even one which took itself to be challenging its bourgeois foundations. It was all the more significant for being invisible and unnamed. It was taken for granted in a way that compromised the insight and vision of our challenge to capitalist social relations.

These chapters have been through different incarnations and I have tried to rework them in a way that resonates with the predicaments we face in the 1990s. Hopefully they help us grasp how issues relating to masculinity, Protestantism and modernity prepare important ground for a recreation of feminist, socialist and ecological politics that can also speak to the transformations of masculinity. If we turn aside from our histories and experience, rather than share them, we will surely repeat the same mistakes. This is a period for asking questions, for many of the old certainties have gone. It is also a time for raising new questions and concerns so that we can learn as much as we can from the experience of others in different traditions. We need to be wary of a moralism that has all too often blocked honesty and clear thinking.

As Václav Havel warns us in his essay 'An Anatomy of Reticence', we need to be wary of

> the moment when the artefact, the project for a better world, ceases to be an expression of man's responsible identity and begins, on the contrary, to expropriate his responsibility and identity…when the abstraction ceases to belong to him and he instead begins to belong to it.
>
> (1987:175)

If sexual politics teaches us to question the gender in which these sentiments are expressed, it can also help us to a broader analysis of a modernity that has made such blinding abstractions and a corresponding self-denial a pervasive temptation for us. If we are to live in truth, this has to start in relationship with ourselves and our partners, for unless we heal the wounds that have separated the personal from the political, it will be hard to trust what we have to say.

1
Introduction
Identity, politics and experience

POLITICS AND VISION

In the last twenty years there has been a growing sense of the importance of sexual and personal politics. These questions have become central within contemporary politics and culture. People have learnt to take up quite different and challenging positions but within a shared sense of the crucial importance of these issues themselves. This is equally true on the political Right where issues of family, sexuality and morality have become critical. It could be said that Thatcherism in England and Reaganism in the United States took the initiative in moral and political issues that the traditional Left had too long marginalised as unimportant. These concerns were to be articulated within a Right libertarian language of rights and choice that was to provide a challenge to the statist conceptions on the Left. There is a growing feeling that socialism has to be redefined if it is to be able to make its own a concern with freedom, equality and community. It is important to learn from how the language of freedom was appropriated.

For many, the ascendancy of the libertarian Right in British and American politics in the 1980s was in large part an understandable reaction to the excesses and permissiveness represented by the 1960s. People look back with cynicism or with nostalgia but there has been little attempt to share some of the insight, enthusiasm and understandings of that time. And yet we still live in a very different world, partly because of the impact of those times. The attempts to bring the personal and political together in contemporary feminist struggles, in local government politics and in the peace and ecology movements, all have their source in the 1960s. This is equally true of the growth of vegetarianism, animal rights movements and the growing interest in alternative medicines and health care. These concerns are no longer the exclusive concern of the libertarian Left but have become central issues for mainstream thought and politics.

I want to set up some of the guiding ideas of the 1960s so as to begin a fuller dialogue between the generations and a clearer evaluation of those times. Too often we take these times for granted as the shared experience of a political generation. It is long overdue for this discussion to be opened up so that people can engage with these ideas and concerns for themselves in the very different political climate we live in now. This is not simply of historical interest, for it helps reveal the source of tensions and concerns within contemporary culture and politics. This should be part of redefining the nature of freedom, democracy and justice in critical relationship to the challenges of feminism and sexual politics, rather than seeking for a renewal of socialist theory and politics in a return to a pre-1968 consensus.

In the 1990s, we need to think about politics again. We need to rediscover its meaning if socialism is to become a meaningful tradition. This means asking basic questions. It means

learning from the movements that have developed since the 1960s. This needs to be a collective project. It involves learning to share an experience so that different generations on the Left can begin to learn from each other. I want to show how this involves grasping the ambivalence of the politics of this period, seeing that whilst at one level it laid the foundations for the emergence of contemporary radical movements, at the same time it sustained a vision of politics grounded in will and determination. This vision was fed by a bourgeois inheritance and a particular form of masculine identity.

The year 1968 was a watershed. It released enormous energies and insight. I remember the excitement of the times. You could feel that the world was going to change. It became difficult to capture this feeling in the economic and social crisis of the 1970s and 1980s. Thatcherism gained an astounding victory. It was able to take an important moral and political initiative. It seemed to promise individual freedom and control. It grasped the deep disillusionment with socialism which had come to be identified with bureaucracy and red tape. The pragmatic politics of the Labour Party had simply served to dig its own grave. It had demanded the sacrifices of working-class people but could no longer promise to provide the economic and social benefits that had become an integral aspect of social democratic politics.[1]

In the 1980s we are confronting new social and political realities. The different movements such as feminism, the gay and lesbian movement, ecology and Green politics which have emerged since the 1960s have each, in their own way, reflected this new reality. They offer us new insights about the making of socialism. These have still to be integrated into our political understanding. In the mid-1970s there was a decisive turn against the hopes and aspirations of 1960s politics. This was understandable given all the dashed hopes and disappointments. We needed a broader historical and theoretical vision and understanding. Unfortunately, this turn to theory in terms of an interest in Althusser and structuralist Marxism, often meant that people had denied their own experience and understanding, even with the intensive community and industrial politics that had taken place in this time. Whatever understanding this rediscovery of theory brought, it did not make it easier to learn from the different movements which had emerged. In many ways it seemed to make this kind of learning more difficult.[2]

POLITICS AND UNREALITY

In 1968 I was a graduate student. I was frustrated with the abstractness of my thinking and feeling. The student movement offered me a different sense of involvement and participation. It gave me a sense of the meaningfulness of collective practice. We could get together and we could change things. We could *affect* the quality of our education through challenging the social relations of power we had taken for granted within education. I could change my relationship to the social world. I got a different sense of the relationship between theory and practice. I remember watching the events in Paris on the TV. They showed that modern capitalism was not the kind of stable castle that we were brought up to accept. A different reality could be brought into existence.

We were asking basic questions. Whose values? What was a relevant education? What was worth learning about? Knowledge could no longer simply be accepted as a commodity that we were accumulating. There was a different understanding in the air. Knowledge

was to be related to understanding. It was to help us grasp our experience within the social world we had been brought up to take very much for granted. This was not simply a question of what we learnt. It was also a matter of the relationships of teaching and learning. These could no longer be incidental.

There was a recognition of the difference between different kinds of learning. We wanted to learn for ourselves. We knew that this would make a difference to the kinds of lives we would live. In this way, learning became threatening. It challenged our sense of ourselves and our assumptions about the social world we lived in. It was because we could not believe what politicians and teachers were saying about the war in Vietnam that we had to learn for ourselves. We learnt that the forms of learning implicitly embodied and reproduced particular values. If we wanted to challenge these values, then we had to challenge these forms of learning. We had to discover different ways of learning, which meant challenging traditional styles of academic argument. It was not simply a matter of the confrontation of disembodied ideas.

Another aspect of this was the feeling that we only exist through others. We live in the image of others. There is the common experience of feeling that you are a different person with different people. Our individuality seems to lack a centre. We can easily experience ourselves as fragmented, as existing in separate pieces that seem to have very little relationship with each other. This was a reality that we seemed to be living with in bureaucratic capitalism. There was little that could help us understand this experience. Often these feelings had to be kept to ourselves since they did not fit with what was presented to us as the prevailing social reality. It was within the new movements that these experiences could be identified and named. In part this fragmentation accounted for Laing and Cooper's popularity, in that they seemed to be saying something important about the everyday reality of life in the society we lived in. They seemed to recognise a reality that conventional knowledge and understanding dismissed.[3]

We began to question competitiveness and individual ambition. It was felt that people could only prove themselves through putting other people down. The education system was organised in a way to foster these kinds of invidious comparisons and to make people feel worthless if they did not succeed. Against this there was a recognition of the importance of people's relationships with each other, as an area of life in which meaning was to be sought. We began to value our relationships with each other and to question a society which readily subordinated human relationships to the search for profit and individual ambition.

We began to recognise the ways in which competitiveness worked to undermine our relationships with others. We felt that more equal relationships would be meaningful because each of us would feel validated and confirmed in our own individual experience. Laing's work helped us to feel the *validity* of our individual experience. This helped us discern the ways in which we felt systematically undermined and invalidated through the social relations of capitalist society and led us to challenge competitive institutions because of the quality of human relationships they fostered. If there was a risk of becoming moralistic and even rhetorical, the emerging politics nevertheless held insights into the changing quality of relationships in the larger society.

There was a prevailing feeling, growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, of the 'unreality' of life. You would often hear people say 'I feel unreal', 'Nothing seems to be real to me.' This was related to the quality of individual lives within monopoly capitalism. Hard work and

effort had lost their meaning. They had been overtaken by the everyday reality of working in a bureaucratic organisation. Work had become simply a question of obeying the rules of the organisation. A tension emerged between the replaceability of people in the work process and people's sense of their own individuality. The social relations of bureaucratic life seemed to drain our lives of whatever meaning and significance they might otherwise have had.

POLITICS AND EXPERIENCE

Politics and experience were brought into relationship with each other as we learnt the value of individual experience. It was an axiom of the 1960s that we mattered equally. This was to go beyond the liberal idea of the equal respect that was owed to all. If it was sometimes confused with an unrealistic notion that we all have the same capacities and abilities and should all be able to learn different skills equally, the belief in the equal significance of people nevertheless helped to strengthen our confidence in ourselves. This was part of a challenge to the hierarchical division between mental and manual labour, and part of developing a fuller conception of human equality.

We realised that it was important to be able to develop both mental and manual skills. This was part of a developing sense of what it means to grow and develop as an individual, and is an example of how personal experience can be grasped as political. It was also a rejection of the workings of competitive institutions which made us feel that we should not attempt to learn to do something unless we were going to be good at it—better than others. This simply worked to undermine people's sense of themselves and made them feel incapable and worthless. We became aware of the workings of the Protestant ethic, not only within capitalism but within a socialist theory and practice that was often blind to its own cultural inheritance. This was not understood abstractly but in its bearings upon our everyday experience and relationships.

But this was also a challenge to liberal democratic political theory. It questioned the notion that competitiveness would bring out the best in individuals and help us develop our full capacities and abilities. There was a recognition of the ways hierarchical and competitive institutions threatened to undermine democracy and democratic institutions, as well as the hopes and aspirations of liberal political theory. Crucially, it did not help people believe in themselves; rather, it fostered, if unwittingly, the idea that some people are better, or more important, than others. It worked to make us feel inadequate and incompetent and so was at odds with, and even undermined, the democratic ideal of everyone having equal, if different, contributions to make. So we learnt that our conception of democracy had to go beyond formal conceptions of representative democracy and a language of individual rights, to be related to a sense of individual experience fostering a sense of individual validity and value.

The challenge to liberal theory also involved challenging the distinction between the public and the private. It could no longer be thought that the private realm could be loving and supportive while the public realm was competitive. We had to learn to think about the quality of people's experience, which involved thinking about *both* the public and the private and finding ways of relating them. It was recognised that the family could work as an oppressive institution, especially for women and children. Private and personal relationships were also relationships of power and subordination. They were not simply relation-

ships of love. Rather the quality and meaningfulness of these emotional relationships could only be fully grasped if we understood them also as relationships of power and dependency. This involved a recognition of the personal as political. It threatened our conception that politics was what happened in the public world. There was also a politics of everyday life and of personal relationships.[4]

Liberal theory had prevented us from thinking about this seriously. It encouraged us to think that our personal lives were 'free' because they were simply areas of individual decision and resolve, and that institutions of representative democracy gave people freedom and control over their public lives through the legal and political rights they are guaranteed as citizens. This vision was to be challenged.[5] We were forced to recognise a tension between formal and substantial conceptions of freedom and that, whatever the rhetoric, we did not have effective *control* over our lives. Just as workers did not have power over the organisation of their work, students had little control over the character and organisation of their education. The notion of 'control' became important as the desire to connect freedom to the control of different areas of our lives was conceived. This involved an implicit challenge to the moral and political theory of liberalism.

There was a developing understanding that personal change involved developing different kinds of relationships with others and so a challenge to prevailing liberal conceptions of individualism and individuality. There was a recogmtion of the importance of developing more egalitarian relations with others as part of the critique of personal relationships as 'possessive'. Different kinds of relationship between people were imagined in which people would be able to learn to relate to each other more equally. Distributive conceptions of justice were brought into question as we realised it was not simply a matter of making sure that people were earning the same. Rather, we needed more concern for the quality of human relationships. This was not something easily achieved, but had to be learnt through people being more open and honest in their feelings and responses to each other. In this way, it was grasped that personal change involved the support and criticism of others. We need others to change, and it is through developing different kinds of relations with others that change is made possible. So conceptions of personal change had to be firmly grounded in social relations.

As it turned out, we had a very optimistic–many would now say naïve – conception of personal change. We tended to think that it would follow more or less automatically, as long as we were open and honest. We tended to think that the mere fact of living collectively and so reorganising the social relations we lived in, would bring about important changes in the kind of persons we were, through giving us an experience of relating differently to others. But the experience of this period can still help us think more creatively about different conceptions of personal and social change that have often remained implicit within the socialist movement. At one level it can help us question the liberal idea that we can change through acts of will and determination alone. It also challenges an orthodox Marxism which would assume that once the economic organisation was transformed, other social and personal changes would follow more or less automatically.

THE PERSONAL AND THE POLITICAL

Within the Black movement and the student movement there was a language of power and liberation that went beyond liberal notions of guaranteeing certain legal and political

rights, however important these are. A different and challenging conception of the forms of politics was taking place in the 1960s, which still resonates in contemporary culture. This involved connecting the personal with the political, the everyday reality of our individual experience with the larger structures of power and subordination. It was a struggle to redefine our inherited liberal conceptions of freedom and equality as people sought to live a more human life within a society that was more clearly identified as oppressive and unjust. So, initially within the Black Power movement in the US, there was an awareness of the connection between one's identity and consciousness as a black person and one's oppression and powerlessness within the larger society.

Black people had to learn to *value* their experience, culture and history as black people. This was recognised as an aspect of the struggle against oppression and integral to defining the possibilities of freedom. This involved people both individually and collectively learning to redefine an experience and history that had so often been degraded and diminished within the larger society. It meant developing a different sense of self and involved a process of personal and individual change. Others could not go through these changes for you, however important they could be for you, which meant that individuality could never be subordinated to an abstract collectivity. In a very real sense, you had to make these connections for yourself; so a process of consciousnessraising became extremely important within the women's movement and gay liberation movement as well as within the movements for sexual politics more generally.

This redefinition of politics involved a new grasp of the relationship of individuals to the larger society, as it was built around an understanding of the conceptions of freedom and oppression. Capitalist society brings us up to think of ourselves as individuals with a unique set of qualities and abilities. It teaches us that we are responsible for the quality and meaningfulness of our individual lives and that, if we are unhappy or miserable, then we have only ourselves to blame.[6] If we do not like the kind of life we have, then we should have worked harder at school, or else we just do not have the abilities and capacities to achieve more in our lives. This is the way in which we come to validate our experience within a liberal moral culture.

We inherit a conception of freedom as non-interference by others and a vision of equality as the equal respect for others and the right to be treated as equal human beings. This is supposedly granted to us regardless of the relations of power and subordination which exist in the larger society. Rather we show our respect for others by being prepared to abstract from the everyday realities of social life. This makes it very difficult to understand how much of our lives and experiences are influenced through the social relations of power and subordination.[7] If anything, it can easily leave us feeling inadequate and worthless because of the workings of competitive and hierarchical institutions which remain largely unchallenged.

The Black movement, women's movement and gay movement which developed in the late 1960s and the early 1970s were important in the ways they challenged the moral psychology of liberalism. They also recognised the difficulties presented by the different levels of our experience of ourselves so often ignored within a liberal theory which assumes that our ends or goals are provided by reason alone. This renders invisible issues about *whose*

standards we are to judge ourselves by. So it was important for the Black movement to ask 'What does it mean to be black in this society?' 'How are blacks oppressed?' 'How is their experience to be validated?'[8] It is so easy for people to feel that they are not good enough, that they are lacking, and cannot live up to prevailing standards. Often these are standards that prevail in white male society. They are so often taken for granted as 'normal' that others find themselves 'lacking' or 'defective' when judging themselves according to these standards not of their own making.

This makes it very difficult in different ways for black people, Jews, women, gay men and lesbians to validate their experience. There is little toleration or understanding of difference, which within liberal theory is often only recognised as individual difference of purpose or preference. There is little grasp of the different experiences people live in society. In part this shows the depths of the Protestant tradition, and the ways its universalism has been given a secular form in liberal democratic societies. Often we do not need others to judge us because we are so hard and self-critical ourselves. Often we grow up feeling that we deserve very little for ourselves. It is not for the powerless and the oppressed to talk, simply to listen. It is as if, somewhat paradoxically within a liberal culture that prides itself in offering representation to all, people are left feeling that they do not deserve to have a voice of their own.

The Black movement and the women's and gay movements challenged accepted definitions of social reality. Both liberal individualism and prevailing conceptions of socialist morality had to be reassessed. A different sense of morality was emerging as it was recognised that different oppressed groups had to find their own voices which would grow out of their own history and culture. This challenged the assumed universalism and the singularity of the moral voice of reason.

Rather than learning to define experience against the prevailing standards of moral behaviour, these standards had themselves to be related to the power of white masculinity within the larger society. Just as black people had had to recover a sense of their own identity which meant rejecting the expectations of white society, so women and lesbians learnt to challenge the prevailing conceptions of femininity which dominant forms of masculinity had prepared for them. Women did not any longer simply want to live solely in relation to men and children. They were searching for their own voice, and seeking to define a different conception of identity and meaning in their lives. This involved a challenge to established relations of sexual power and subordination.

For men, the feminist challenge meant questioning assumed notions of masculinity. We had to recognise that as men we could no longer call on the automatic support of women, but had to find a way of relating more openly and emotionally to each other. We had to explore our own desires to control and dominate in relationships. Through coming to a deeper understanding of growing up as men, we could recognise the strength of sexual politics to render visible the structures that underlie the universal voice of reason which we easily appropriate as men before learning to speak for ourselves as gendered subjects. We could begin to explore different notions of masculinity. This was not an easy process.

As men, especially middle-class men, we found it easier to intellectualise our emotions and feelings rather than share them more openly. It was easy to respond with guilt to the challenges of the women's movement, thinking that all we could do as men would be to reject our masculinity, for this was directly expressive of a relationship of power. This