Sheila Rowbotham: Hiding From History

Rowbotham, Sheila.
Hidden From History: Rediscovering Women in History From the 17th Century to the Present.
New York: Pantheon Books, 1971

Sheila Rowbotham's latest book, *Hidden from History*, is a collection of historical sketches dealing with English women from the time of the Puritan revolution in the mid-17th century to the 1930's. As the title implies and the text confirms, Rowbotham holds the idealist position that women have played as important a role as men in history, but that we do not know about them because male historians have not written about them much. While it is certainly true that the history of women, as of other oppressed sectors of society, has often been neglected or distorted by historians, to argue that women's oppression can be significantly alleviated by "writing women back into history" actually denies the reality of that oppression because it denies that it had any real *effect* on women's abilities to develop their potential and function effectively in the world.

The book attempts to be not merely a historical narrative, but one which "traces the historical origins of the critical problems with which the women's movement is grappling." While neither Rowbotham nor the social-democratic British group, International Socialists, which she supports, would *dream* of imposing their views on women in the form, say, of an unambiguous political program which could provide *solutions* to their problems, a careful reading of the book does turn up a number of hints which, when carefully collected, do begin to assume a programmatic shape. As in her earlier books, Rowbotham advances a program of feminism, reformism and anti-Marxism.

Rowbotham: Another "Socialist"-Feminist

At the beginning of her "Introduction to the American Edition" Rowbotham writes: "I hope this will be helpful to anyone concerned with developing a marxist [sic] feminist view of history...." She thus helps to perpetuate the deception that Marxism, the essence of which is class struggle, and feminism, the essence of which is class collaboration ("*all* women are sisters," remember?) are in any way compatible.

Like the Socialist Workers Party's Mary-Alice Waters, whom she cites uncritically, Rowbotham seeks to cover this contradiction by defining feminism as simply "the assertion of the need to improve the position of women." But despite this apparently artless explanation, the book makes it clear that Rowbotham's feminism is more than just an unfortunate misuse of language.

Carried to its logical extreme, the feminist counterposition to Marxism is that of sex war to class war. While Rowbotham does not extend her program to a call for total sexual segregation—as the most consistent feminists do (see "The C.L.I.T. Papers—Feminism Ad Absurdum," *Women and Revolution* No. 7, Autumn 1974)—she shares the New Left polyvanguardist notion that only women can liberate women, and she is more than sympathetic to the exclusion of men from organizations fighting for women's liberation. Thus she is critical of the position of Thomas Shaw, a weaver, who said at Ruskin College in 1916:

> "I think there is a danger that existed even before the war of a feeling growing up amongst the women that unless they are organised, officered and managed separately their interests cannot be attended to.... I deprecate the tendency of so many people to think that unless a woman represents a woman the woman worker cannot get representation at all."

Rowbotham comments:

> "He completely by-passed the problem of women's interests sometimes being different from men's and the difficulty of women organising within the male-dominated union for their special point of view."

It is the spectre of male domination rather than that of bourgeois oppression which haunts this "socialist"-feminist. In her discussion of the suffragist Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) which was active in the period preceding World War I, for example, she says that women were forced, through their participation in illegal activities, to see through the myth of the impartiality of the law because they were "tried and judged by men." It is only as an afterthought that she adds: "The state and the laws were not only controlled and created by men in their own interest: they also represented the coercive power of the class." *Also!* Marxists understand that all laws and the state agencies which enforce them are above all else the apparatus which the ruling class uses to maintain its domination and to suppress other social classes. At the same time, class rule is constantly reinforced through the news media, the educational system, the church and other cultural institutions. But this most elementary Marxist premise has escaped Rowbotham, for whom the fundamental social distinction is that of sex rather than class. "It is evident," she writes, "that the rediscovery of our history is an essential aspect of the creation of a feminist critique of *male culture*" (our emphasis).

The Origins of the Conflict

In her efforts to blur the overriding contradiction between socialism and feminism, Rowbotham advances the fabrication that "there was a close connection between feminism and socialism in the early years of this century and the divorce between the two was long, painful and protracted." In reality, the emergence of Marxism and the

recognition that an egalitarian society can emerge only out of the rule of the working class clarified the irreconcilable differences between the two tendencies at an early date (see "Feminism vs. Marxism: Origins of the Conflict," *Women and Revolution* No. 5, Spring 1974).

By the turn of the century there had been no question of a "close connection" between feminism and socialism for decades. On the contrary, both in terms of its social composition, which was overwhelmingly bourgeois and petty-bourgeois, and its individualistic, reformist and class-collaborationist ideology, feminism had demonstrated itself to be outside and often hostile to the working-class movement, a fact which is borne out in the 1904 pamphlet of "socialist feminist" Isabella Ford whom Rowbotham quotes approvingly (p. 93). Ford, who was arguing that the emancipation of women and of labor were "different aspects of the same great force," nevertheless noted that feminists and socialists seemed unconscious of their "kinship":

> "In the Labour Party a prejudice one finds exists against the women's party because it owes its origin and its growth to middle class women mostly, if not entirely. On that account it is branded by many as a middle class affair, possessing no fundamental connection with the Labour movement...."

This situation grieved Ford, who complained of the socialists' "anti-socialistic" attitude toward the feminists and explained that middle-class suffragists were determined not to gain political emancipation only for "middle class purposes." But socialists know better than to rely on such promises.

Class composition is not, of course, in itself a guarantee of correct political program, but it is certainly one important factor. While Rowbotham pretends that the class composition of the suffrage movement "remains unclear" and hypothesizes that "very probably many suffragette supporters came from the same social strata as many of the members of the Fabian Society," she does admit that "the movement for the vote was undoubtedly mainly middle class." She then proceeds to explain this not in terms of political program but in terms of personal *inconvenience*: "It must have been difficult for most working-class women to travel around on delegations or go to meetings."

While it is undoubtedly true that middle-class women were more mobile than working women, this is hardly an adequate explanation. Far more significant was the fact that organizations like the WSPU—despite Isabella Ford's protestations to the contrary—were clearly fighting in the interests of bourgeois women and had little to offer working women. The true class character of the WSPU was conclusively exposed in 1915 when it changed the name of its newspaper from *The Suffragette* to *Britannia*, abandoned all suffrage activities for the duration of the war and turned instead to handing out "white feathers of cowardice" to male civilians on the street. An even more striking confirmation of its subservience to capitalism—which Rowbotham, who has written extensively on Russia in the revolutionary period, does not even mention—was the journey of WSPU leader Emmeline Pankhurst to Russia in the spring of 1917 in order to campaign among women there for support to the Kerensky government and in opposition to the Bolsheviks.

Hidden From Feminism

Rowbotham spends a great deal of time attempting to prove that orthodox Marxism (as opposed to New Left reformism) is an outdated product of nineteenth century capitalism which has been insensitive to the needs of women. Her major complaint appears to be that Marx devoted more time to the study of wage labor and commodity production than to sexuality, maternity, production and reproduction in the household and the family. This criticism is hardly surprising in view of her demonstrated failure to grasp the primacy of the class struggle in history, but it creates an overwhelming contradiction which—conveniently enough—makes militant action in *any* direction impossible. On the one hand, as a nominal socialist, she is forced to concede that "feminism alone is not enough to encompass theoretically the forms of oppression women have shared with men." On the other hand, having defined the Marxist movement as a product of 19th century, bourgeois male consciousness with an overemphasis on the class struggle, she places herself outside it.

What, then is the path to the emancipation of women? Sheila Rowbotham does not say. And while she and other "socialist"-feminists pursue their futile quest for a mythical missing link between feminism and revolutionary socialism, the women who look to them for leadership are left to grapple ineffectively with the same problems which beset them a hundred years ago. Nothing has been learned.

It is not only the achievements of women which have been hidden from history, but also the program and strategy for the emancipation of women. They do not come to light in this book. ■