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# LIBERTARIAN FEMINISM IN BRITAIN, 1860-1910

STEPHEN DAVIES

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## CONTENTS

### Preface

by Chris R. Tame and Johanna Faust

### Libertarian Feminism in Britain, 1860-1910

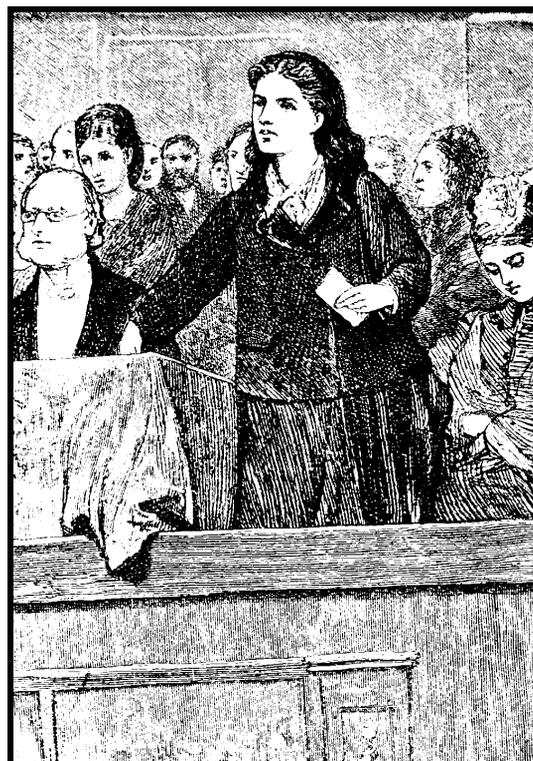
by Dr. Stephen Davies

- I The Origins
- II Organisational Origins
- III Some Publications
- IV The Suffrage Issue
- V The Female Employment Issue
- VI The Education Issue
- VII The Contagious Diseases Act
- VIII The Married Womens' Property Act
- IX Other Involvements
- X The Ideological Character of Libertarian Feminism
- XI Critique of Society
- XII Historical Theory
- XIII Practical Proposals
- XIV The Historiography of Libertarian Feminism
- XV A Methodological Error
- XVI What Happened?
- XVII Conclusions

A Selective Bibliography

### Some Comments on Stephen Davies' Paper

by Johanna Faust



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The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the British Association of Libertarian Feminists or the Libertarian Alliance.

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BRITISH ASSOCIATION OF  
LIBERTARIAN FEMINISTS

# PREFACE

by Chris R. Tame and Johanna Faust

When the formation of the British Association of Libertarian Feminists was first announced it was greeted with incredulity by the “left”.

Commenting on British Association of Libertarian Feminists’ rejection of the current equation of feminism with socialism Pauline Willis declared in *The Guardian* “how could it be otherwise?”<sup>1</sup>

In fact the arrogantly invincible ignorance of such hacks of the gutter socialist press has not been shared by other socialist feminist scholars. Some of course, like the Marxist Judith Walkowitz refer in passing to “militant bourgeois feminists” and pass on as quickly as possible in order not to corrupt their readers with any exposure to the ideas and activities of such scoundrels.<sup>2</sup> However, others, in spite of their own sexual and economic collectivism, have not been able to write libertarians entirely out of feminist history. For example, Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley, in their anthology *The Rights and Wrongs of Women*,<sup>3</sup> admit of the existence of “different strands of thought within feminism” and of what they term “bourgeois feminists”,<sup>4</sup> as do various contributors to the volume. Thus, Margaret Walters writes of the “bourgeois feminist tradition” and of Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Women* as “certainly the first great feminist statement in English”.<sup>5</sup> Mitchell herself, a Marxist, admits that “Feminism as a conscious, that is self-conscious, protest movement, arose as part of a revolutionary bourgeois tradition that had equality of mankind as its highest ground.”<sup>6</sup> She correctly recognizes that the “liberal universalistic concept of equality” is one vital connection between “the rise of feminism and the ideology of capitalism”.<sup>7</sup> Even more surprisingly she argues that “If we look at the moment in which they [i.e., the “bourgeois feminists”] first formulate it I suggest that even the most ardent socialist feminist will have nothing to be ashamed of in her origins.”<sup>8</sup>

Although we would claim some slight historical precedence to liberal individualists to the designation of “feminist” we would certainly not wish to deny that socialist feminists also appeared quite soon after. This is not surprising since systematic liberalism and systematic socialism were both born at roughly the same time. We would claim, of course, that socialist feminism (and more recently the “separatist” and “political lesbian” forms) offers proposals that cannot liberate women and have now become ideologies of the most extreme forms of collectivist hatred, oppression, violence, inhumanity, and irrationalism. Such modern “feminisms” have nothing in common with those thinkers who were sincerely concerned with improving the lot of both women in particular and humanity in general.

## The American Connection

Stephen Davies ends his treatment of British libertarian feminism at the date of 1910. From that time on libertarian feminism suffered the same decline as libertarianism and classical liberalism in general - until their contemporary rebirth. A few figures, male and female, did continue the tradition: Dora Marsden,<sup>9</sup> the individualist anarchist writing in the early part of the 20th century is worthy of note, as is John Mackinnon Robertson.<sup>10</sup> But the movement could certainly no longer be termed dynamic.

In America, however, the picture was considerably different. A number of women libertarians constituted some of the principal intellectuals and activists of the 20th century libertarian movement.

Suzanne La Follette was the key link between 19th century and 20th century libertarian feminism in America. Her noted work *Concerning Women*<sup>11</sup> was published in 1926, and she helped Albert Jay Nock establish *The Freeman*, a leading political and liter-

ary journal of the time.<sup>12</sup> Later, after World War Two, she was also involved with the founding of William Buckley’s *National Review* (which, alas, turned into a primarily conservative rather than libertarian journal).

However, even more notable were Isabel Paterson, Rose Wilder Lane, and Ayn Rand. As John Chamberlain makes clear in his autobiography, *A Life With The Printed Word*, it was during the 1940s that these “three women ... who, with scornful side glances at the male business community, had decided to rekindle a faith in an older American philosophy” - that of classical liberalism.<sup>13</sup> Paterson’s *The God of the Machine* (1943) and Rose Wilder Lane’s *Give Me Liberty* (1936) and *The Discovery of Freedom* (1943) were original penetrating statements of libertarianism without many of the weaknesses of earlier forms. It was Ayn Rand’s work, though, that provided the most radical statement of ethical egoism and individualism.<sup>14</sup>

Part of the work of the British Association of Libertarian Feminists will be the reclamation of the rich heritage of Anglo-American libertarian feminism, an ideology as revolutionary and as relevant now as when first enunciated in the 18th century. We are proud to start this work of reclamation with this paper by Dr. Stephen Davies.

**Johanna Faust, Secretary, British Association of Libertarian Feminists**

**Chris R. Tame, Secretary, The Libertarian Alliance**

## Notes

1. Pauline Willis, “Bulletin” (Womens Page), *The Guardian*, 25 August, 1986.
2. Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State*, Cambridge University Press, 1980, p.146. And not all conventional historians have ignored or misunderstood the radically individualist nature of 19th century feminism. Paul McHugh gives a perceptive account of the individualism of Josephine Butler and the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts in his *Prostitution and Victorian Social Reform*, Croom Helm, London, 1980.
3. Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley, *The Rights and Wrongs of Women*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1976.
4. “Introduction”, *Ibid.*, p. 8.
5. Margaret Walters, “The Rights and Wrongs of Women: Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Martineau, Simone de Beauvoir”, *Ibid.*, p. 304.
6. Juliet Mitchell, “Women and Equality”, *Ibid.*, p. 387
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 384, 381.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 381.
9. Dora Marsden had been imprisoned for her militant suffragette activities. She founded a number of libertarian publications, *The Freewoman* (1912), *The New Freewoman* (1913), and *The Egoist* (1914-1919). Between 1912 and 1914 she was influenced by Max Stirner’s version of individualist anarchism. She later abandoned libertarianism and died in 1960. Some extracts from her writings can be found in *Minus One* (London), No. 33, 1974.
10. Robertson was a great, but neglected figure of late 19th and 20th century liberalism. For an account of his views on womens’ rights see the section “Individualism Versus Collectivism” in Chris R. Tame, “J. M. Robertson: Critical Liberal”, in G. A. Wells, ed., *J. M. Robertson (1856-1933): Liberal, Rationalist, and Scholar*, Pemberton Press, London, forthcoming (1987).
11. *Concerning Women* (1926), Arno Press, New York, 1972.
12. See Elizabeth Ditz, “Suzanne La Follette and Feminism’s Roots”, *New York Tribune*, June 27, 1983, and Susan J. Turner, *A History of ‘The Freeman’*, *Literary Landmark of the Early Twenties*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1963, pp. 38-39. On American libertarian feminism in general see Wendy McElroy, “Introduction: The Roots of Indi-

dividualist Feminism in 19th-Century America" in her *Freedom, Feminism, and the State*, Cato Institute, Washington, D.C., 1982, a useful anthology of both historical and contemporary material.

13. John Chamberlain, *A Life With the Printed Word*, Regnery Gateway, Chicago, 1987, p. 136.
14. The latest editions of their works are as follows: Rose Wilder Lane, *The Discovery of Freedom*, Arno Press/New York Times, New York, 1972; also worth consulting is Roger Lea MacBride, *The Lady and the Tycoon*, Caxton Printers, Caldwell, Idaho, 1973; Isabel Paterson, *The God of the Machine*, Caxton Printers, Caldwell, Idaho, 1964. On the relationships between Lane, Paterson and Rand see Barbara Branden, *The Passion of Ayn Rand*, Doubleday, New York, 1986, *passim*.  
Rand, never referred to herself as a "feminist", any more than she

called herself an "atheist". Both positions were simply the inescapable consequences of rational thought. The view that women possessed a fundamentally different nature from men or that they should sacrifice themselves for the good of men, society or the state, were simply variants of the fundamental evil of collectivism, socialism and irrationalism. The "feminine mystique", as Rand's colleague Edith Efron put it, was just another of those doctrines "which deny mind, independence and individuality". (See Edith Efron, Review of 'The Feminine Mystique', *The Objectivist Newsletter*, Vol. 2, No. 7, July 1963, p. 27.) Rand warmly welcomed probably the first major work of the post-war feminist revival, Betty Freidan's *The Feminine Mystique*, when it appeared in 1963. She vigorously denounced later "feminism" when it had become a mask for socialism, anti-sexuality, man hating, and primitivist mysticism.

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## LIBERTARIAN FEMINISM IN BRITAIN, 1860-1910

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Today feminism is automatically associated in most peoples' minds with socialism and 'the left'. The two ideologies are seen by many as inextricably intertwined - even though many feminists are aware that this is not inevitable. In practical terms it is a hard fact that most feminists are also socialists, although the extent to which the two ideologies are integrated varies considerably between individuals. This present state of affairs is misleading and anomalous. The current association of feminists and socialism is not inevitable but contingent, the product of particular historical circumstances. In the past things have been very different. In the nineteenth century, in particular, most feminists were radical individualists and libertarians - in fact the most consistent and 'hard line' classical liberals were feminist women. Many of the leading male libertarians were also advocates of womens liberation, most notably Wordsworth Donisthorpe and Auberon Herbert. Between the end of the 18th century and the first World War there was a self-aware tradition of individualist feminism in Britain which created a truly libertarian form of feminism.

### I The Origins

The roots of individualist feminism are found in the later 18th century. There were 'proto-feminists' before then but they were faced with the problem of arguing with a traditional Christian world view, and it was very difficult to find ways around Genesis Chapters 1 and 2 and the Pauline epistles. Recognisable feminist analysis and argument only really became possible with the Enlightenment. The advent of feminism is usually dated to 1792 and the publication of Mary Wolstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women*. While this is justified one should not overlook the other feminist writers of the time such as Mary Hays, the author of the monumental *Female Biography* of 1803 and the *Appeal To The Men Of Great Britain On Behalf Of Women* of 1799. All of these women were individualists in that they defined the oppression of women in individual terms, as the denial of self realisation and self ownership to individual women, the individual human person being ontologically primary.

By contrast, radical feminists define female oppression in collective terms as the oppression of women as a group through patriarchy, while for socialist feminists, oppression of women is an inevitable part of the system of capitalism and the replacement of that system is a necessary condition of its removal.

The later 18th century also saw several women who were leading advocates of liberal ideas, notably Anna Barbauld, Catherine Macaulay and Jane Marcet. The last named was the author in 1816 of *Conversations on Political Economy*, praised by Jean Baptiste

Say, the leading 19th century economist, as the best work on political economy that he had ever read.

Jane Marcet became in later life the close friend of Harriet Martineau and it was the latter who integrated liberalism and individualist feminism. Harriet Martineau was a major figure in the spread of liberal ideas in 19th century Britain, despite severe personal handicaps: she was profoundly deaf from an early age. Her output was enormous and in much of it she developed a radical critique of the position of women, derived from a general philosophy of intransigent individualism. One particular work which was to have a dramatic impact was her article in the *Edinburgh Review* of 1859 on the subject of *'The Industrial Position of Women in England'*. A contemporary of Martineau's who played a major part in transmitting these ideas was Harriet Grote, a leading political figure of the 1830's; both Cobden and Place considered that she should have been the leader of the radical party in Parliament. Later, she became involved in the organised feminist movement of the 1850's and 1860's. Her philosophy, which was strictly individualist (unlike her husband's) and can best be appreciated in her *Collected Papers* (1862).

### II Organisational Origins

The emergence of an organised libertarian feminist movement can be dated quite specifically to 1857-1859. Those three years saw the appearance of the two central institutions of the movement, The Society For Promoting The Employment of Women and *'The Englishwomans Review'*. Both were based at 19 Langham Place in Regent Street, London, which became the effective 'headquarters' of the movement. Those years also saw the coming together of the leading figures of the movement, Lydia Becker, Helen Blackburn, Barbara Bodichon, Jessie Boucheret, Emily Faithfull, Bessie Parkes and Emily Davies. Other important individuals who came later were Sophie Bryant, Millicent Garrett Fawcett, Josephine Butler, and the two sisters Emily Shirreff and Maria Grey.

Barbara Bodichon was the most important influence at the centre of a network of contacts and friendships. Born Barbara Leigh-Smith in 1827 in Norwich, she came from a background of radical nonconformity, and received an unusually wide ranging education for a woman at that time. In 1854 she published her first major work, *A Brief Summary In Plain Language of the Most Important Laws Concerning Women*, followed in 1857 by *Women and Work*. During this period she also founded the *Englishwomans Journal*.

In 1859 Jessie Boucheret, living in Lincolnshire, was introduced to the ideas of individualist feminism through a chance contact with the *Englishwomans Journal* and reading the article by Harriet Martineau mentioned earlier. On coming to London she, along

with Helen Blackburn and Emily Davies, two other new arrivals in the metropolis, met Bodichon and became involved with the *Englishwomans Journal*. In the same year all four of them, together with Adelaide Anne Proctor and Emily Faithfull, founded the Society For Promoting the Employment of Women. In 1866 the *Englishwomans Journal* was relaunched as the *Englishwomans Review* and in the same year the National Womens Suffrage Committee was founded to co-ordinate the campaign for the vote. This saw the arrival of Lydia Becker on the national scene. By then a network of co-operation and friendship had developed and, at the personal and organisational level, a true movement had appeared.

The leading figures of this movement, although all concerned with all of its activities, tended each to specialise one area of interest. Thus Emily Davies, Sophie Bryant, Emily Shirreff and Maria Grey all concentrated on the issue of womens' education, while Helen Blackburn, Millicent Fawcett and Lydia Becker were all active in the suffrage campaign. Barbara Bodichon and Jessie Boucheret were identified mainly with the question of female employment. Emily Faithfull was the organisational force. In 1860 she set up The Victoria Press which later printed the *Englishwomans Review* as well as publishing several other journals and, in 1861, *The Victoria Regia*, a collection of writings by various leading authors. She also set up a range of practical organisations, including the Victoria Discussion Society, an all-woman discussion group, concentrating on womens' issues. Behind this division of labour, however, the main figures all assisted each other and shared numerous interests, concerns and beliefs. There was clearly a movement in the sense of a self-aware group fighting on several fronts towards shared goals and co-operating in a range of complementary organisations.

### III Some Publications

The movement was very active and productive in terms of literary output. As well as publishing books on a wide range of topics they contributed a stream of articles to the many periodical journals of the time, including the *Contemporary Review*, *Quarterly Review*, *Macmillans Magazine* and the *Edinburgh Review*.

No less significant were the many self-help activities and organisations which they established. All of this intellectual and practical activity can be roughly grouped and classified under a number of general headings.

### IV The Suffrage Issue

This was pressed for through all the traditional methods of pressure group agitation, petitions, meetings, pamphleteering and the presentation of Bills in Parliament. The arguments used are worth commenting on because they are often overlooked and reveal much about the philosophy of the movement. Firstly, it was argued that to assume a woman's interests were subsumed in those of her husband or father was to deny her full personhood and to violate her personal individual sovereignty. In a very real sense she was enslaved, as she was in law; subjected to a rule and authority to which she had not consented as a sovereign individual. Secondly, they argued that to deny women the vote was to assert in effect that they were not of equal worth to men. The classic counter argument of 'separate spheres' (private and domestic of women, public and political for men) was strongly rebutted.

### V The Female Employment Issue

This was a vital issue for most of the feminists. Activities in this area were of several types. There was vigorous opposition to all legislative restrictions on womens' employment, particularly the Factory Acts. They argued against attitudes and beliefs which restricted female employment, especially the twin ideas of domesticity and helpless, irresponsible femininity. There were campaigns for free entry by women to various professions and employments, including medicine and the law. In practical terms The Society For Promoting The Employment Of Women ran a range of self-help activities for women, providing training, work-finding

services and information. The libertarian feminists saw productive work as essential for the growth of a complete, independent and self-directed identity for women. This did not always mean that they supported existing patterns of work; for several of them, notably Jessie Boucheret and Helen Blackburn, shared the general hostility of the late 19th century libertarians to wage labour. In 1889 Blackburn and Boucheret, by then leading members of the Liberty And Property Defence League, formed The Freedom Of Labour Defence League, which argued, amongst other things, for a movement towards a system of self-employed labour.

### VI The Education Issue

Here, as well as fighting against legal restrictions and prejudice, activists like Emily Davies and the Shirreff sisters, Emily and Maria, were responsible for the creation of institutions such as Girton College, the Womens' Educational Union and the North London Collegiate School. Organisation of self-help was, again, of great importance. Education was seen as particularly important because the existing practice of girls' education both reflected and sustained the dominant idea of helpless femininity, and thereby hampered and restricted the personal development of women as individuals.

### VII The Contagious Diseases Acts

These were essentially a system of licensing prostitutes, arising out of concern for the fighting efficiency of the armed forces. The police had extensive powers under the Acts to arrest any woman found alone in a public place and to subject her to an intimate medical examination which it was a criminal offence to resist. Clearly, this amounted to a quite extraordinary infringement of the individual liberty of women, and insupportable in a civilised society.

### VIII The Married Womens' Property Acts

The most fundamental restriction on the liberties of women were the laws which denied married women all rights to hold property, vesting all property on marriage in the husband. Even her earnings during the marriage were the husband's property. These laws were based on the idea that husband and wife were the same person, a complete denial of the individual autonomy of the wife.

Whilst the rich were able to safeguard their daughters' property from profligate husbands within trust funds, these legal stratagems were not available to middle and working class women, and were not intended to protect earnings during the marriage but to protect already accumulated capital. It was clearly an appalling abuse of any concept of natural equity that a profligate husband, could, quite legally, spend all his wife's money and leave her penniless. Married womens' lack of property rights made them ciphers in economic and social terms, entirely subservient to their husbands' will.

This may now seem so obvious that it is not necessary to delineate the issues at such length, but it is important to underline that the 19th century feminists' concern with establishing property rights for women arose out of their libertarian view of individual rights as necessarily dependent upon the existence of property rights.

It is worth noting, just in passing, that the only survivals of the archaic doctrine that husband and wife are legally one person are in Inland Revenue practice and DHSS regulations.

### IX Other Involvements

Several of the leading feminist figures were active in wider political controversies, bringing to them a distinct feminist input. Sophie Bryant was an important advocate of Irish Home Rule, her most important work being the posthumous *Liberty, Order And Law Under Native Irish Rule* (1923), the classic account of the system of Brehon law, Europe's most outstanding example of a legal system run without the sponsorship or backing of the state.

Jessie Boucheret and Helen Blackburn were founder members of the Liberty And Property Defence League. Another member of the movement, Elizabeth Ellis, was active in the Legitimation League, an organisation set up by the leading libertarian Wordsworth Donisthorpe to seek the abolition of bastardy and the repeal of the marriage laws, in favour of voluntary marriage contracts.

## X The Ideological Character of Libertarian Feminism

From all this campaigning and writing we can clearly discern the main ideas and philosophy of the movement, a consistent and radical individualism. Their fundamental belief, as with all forms of feminism, was that of the basic and natural equality of worth of men and women. This may seem unexceptional but is actually profoundly subversive in its implications for most social institutions. In most historical societies women are not seen as complete persons in their own right. A woman is some man's daughter, another man's wife, another man's mother; rarely an individual in her own right.

What the libertarian feminists did was to take classical liberal ideas about the nature of the self to their logical and subversive conclusion. With the obvious and notable exception of John Stuart Mill most liberal philosophers failed to do this, with the result that their arguments were, in crucial respects, defective. In the liberal argument, each individual human being is a separate person with their own unique and particular identity. The actual identity or selfhood of the individual is indeed social insofar as it is formed in and by interaction in society with other selves, but it is ultimately self-determined. The distinctive features of the human individual are will or desire; and intellect; and judgement. The exercise of these leads to choices and it is the process of choice which is crucial in the formation of the individual's identity. If choice is hindered or made impossible then the self cannot develop fully. The main aim of social existence is thus self-realisation, which can only be achieved if the individual is both free and autonomous. Limits on the autonomy of particular groups or persons not only restrict their freedom directly; they also restrict the full freedom of others because social interactions and possible choices are thereby limited. Thus Mill argued that the oppression of women, while directly injuring them, indirectly injured men. In this way of thinking each self is of equal value to every other, insofar as they all share the basic qualities of will, intellect and judgement, and possess certain rights which are common to all human beings, whether recognised or not. When in the course of human interaction these individuals' rights and desires clash, a mechanism is needed to ensure that the rights of one do not infringe the rights of another; in liberal thinking this is provided by laws which to have that effect, must be neutral as between different groups and individuals. Any restriction of individual action must apply to all equally.

The 19th century feminists were able early to demonstrate that this argument implied that women should have an equality of rights and responsibilities with men; and further, that for relations between particular men and women to conform to these principles there would have to be an equality of choice and action between the two. The only consistent argument which could be put up against women was that they were, indeed, not full persons because they lacked will, judgement and the capacity to make free choices. In this argument (which was often put) their personhood was inevitably incomplete as compared to that of men; hence they could not have the same rights or freedoms. Hence the repeated argument that women were akin to children and the importance of arguments as to their capacity to experience desire, particularly sexual desire.

From their position of philosophical individualism the libertarian feminists were able to draw conclusions as to the kind of social and political order in which women should live if they were to be truly free and autonomous. It would have to be one in which there was the maximum possible freedom of choice and self-determination. It would have to be one consisting of free individuals associating in contracts freely and equally entered into than

through relations of status, subordination and power. This all implied the maximum possible contraction of the role of the state, and an economic system based upon complete freedom of contract. It could also be said to imply the absence of marked disparities of wealth; several of the people in the movement did indeed take this view, most notably Frances Power Cobbe and Helen Taylor, the daughter of Harriet Taylor. However this did not lead them to an advocacy of an active role for the state; instead they argued that disparities of wealth reflected the use of power by the rich and would be minimised in a free market economy.

## XI Critique of Society

This goal led to a polemical and critical view of the actual position of women in 19th century Britain. In their writings in *The Englishwoman's Review* and elsewhere, the feminists were quite clear that women were oppressed, meaning that their autonomy and freedom as individuals was limited because they were women. They were oppressed politically by the denial of the vote and the right to stand for certain offices of state. Their rights were denied by laws, particularly those governing married women's property. The feminists also argued that laws and the power of the state were being used by men to protect their own privileged position.

This was held to be especially true of economic regulations such as the Factory Acts, seen as an attempt by men to use economic regulation to protect themselves from female competition.

Perhaps most important was the way they saw women as being restricted by more general social structures and patterns of personal relationships, especially family ones. This covered what would now be called 'gender' but was then usually called 'expectations', i.e. sex-roles and the notion of femininity, as well as the patterns of work organisation and the limitation of expression or lifestyle. In other words the problem was not just the obvious one of repressive laws but also the more subtle one of hidden or covert power relationships.

## XII Historical Theory

Some of the libertarian feminists, particularly Helen Blackburn, also produced an outline of a historical theory of women's position. According to this, women were not equally unfree at all times and places, or always restricted in the same way. The crucial variables were the role and extent of the market and the nature and extent of property rights. Blackburn and others adapted Herbert Spencer's idea of a distinction between 'military' and 'commercial' society and Henry Maine's notion of the move from status to contract.

In the 'military' society power relations were dominant and the normal relationship between two human beings was one of status, wherein the two parties were not regarded as even belonging to the same species. As society became pervaded by the market so there was a move to a freer pattern of voluntary relations, based upon contract. This could only be complete if property rights were fully enforced for both women and men. The more commercial and contractual a social order, the higher the position of women.

Blackburn argued that in Anglo-Saxon England women had enjoyed full property rights which had been eroded after the Norman conquest and the imposition of the 'military' social order of feudalism. As British society became more commercial in the 18th and early 19th centuries, so women's position had revived. Men reacted to this development by creating a convenient ideology, supported by law, which sought to exclude women from the process of social development. Latterly Blackburn and others, like Boucheret, saw this as the first part of a general attempt to reverse the rise of commercial society and revert to a 'military' social order.

### XIII Practical Proposals

The writings of the movement contain a wealth of practical proposals, programmes for action, including political change, suffrage being the main element, abolition of a whole range of restrictive laws and regulations, and advocacy of changes which would make it possible for all women to be able to work as they chose, and have property. As a means to this end they advocated a completely free economy and society, with the greatest possible scope for personal action, individual responsibility and self realisation.

However, as many of the articles, books and pamphlets demonstrate, these changes were not sufficient, although necessary. There had to be change as well in the area of attitudes and culture, leading to changes in personal and family relations. This last was frequently not spelt out in detail because of the risk of alienating moderate opinion, but as time went on, some became bolder. The most prominent advocate of changes in family organisation and marriage law was Wordsworth Donisthorpe, who argued, in several works, for the complete abolition of the marriage laws in favour of private agreements between the parties involved.

Last, but by no means least, the feminists argued the case for female self-help through the creation of a whole array of institutions, from womens' schools and discussion societies, to womens' friendly societies, cooperatives and business ventures. Indeed much of the activity of the Society For The Promotion of the Employment of Women and the *English Woman's Review* was self-help of precisely this kind. This was intended to help the process of self-discovery among women by giving them experience and responsibility. In hard practical terms they would acquire skills and self assurance, without their organisations being taken over by men.

### XIV Historiography of Libertarian Feminism

What of the treatment of these women by historians? Until very recently most had simply ignored them in a scandalous way. Whole books have been written about the 1830s and 1840s and liberal ideas, which scarcely mention Harriet Martineau, despite her central role in the political debate of those years, and the dissemination of liberal ideas. General histories of social life and thought manage to get by without even mentioning important figures such as Barbara Bodichon or Millicent Garrett Fawcett. Even worse is the patronising line that is taken in older works, generally along the lines that "my, didn't she do well".

In more recent years womens' history has grown at a truly explosive rate with a constant stream of books and articles. Several of the leading figures in the libertarian feminist movement have now been the subject of scholarly biographies while older works such as Ray Strachey's *The Cause* are back in print. However, the coverage is still inadequate - there is still no comprehensive account of the life of either Lydia Becker or Helen Blackburn, for example.

More seriously, the work that has been done misrepresents the majority of 19th century feminist thought in a fundamental way. Those elements that are 'progressive' in modern terms are highlighted whilst the supposedly reactionary ones such as the commitment to laissez faire, are played down or ignored. Even worse, their advocacy of market principles are sometimes explained away as the unfortunate consequence of the class background of the feminists and not therefore a central or important part of their beliefs.

The intimate and fundamental connection between the feminists' radical ideas about personal freedom and womanhood and their 'conservative' ones about economics is just not grasped, much less brought out.

In histories of particular campaigns, the philosophy and ideals which lay behind the struggle are ignored. The classic case of this is Josephine Butler and the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts. In all the vast amount that has been written about this there is almost nothing about the social and political philosophy

which lay behind Butler's life long struggle, one of uncompromising individualism and laissez faire. Consequently the end and purpose of the campaign is often misunderstood.

### XV A Methodological Error

The ultimate problem here is one of methodology and incorrect assumptions about the nature and place of political philosophies. It is taken for granted that advocacy of a market society is 'right wing' or conservative. To discover a body of people putting forward radical ideas about womens' status on the basis of such a 'right wing' philosophy causes confusion.

Moreover, the dominant methodology of much history of ideas is faulty. A 'whiggish' model is used wherein ideas move through time from moderate beginnings to a more radical conclusion; it is assumed that the only proper and progressive movement of ideas is in the direction of socialism. By analogy, this theory sees the development of ideas as being like a process of distillation or refinement whereby 'reactionary' elements are slowly strained out having the pure distillate of socialist radicalism. Ideologies and systems of thought do not develop in this way and cannot be abstracted from the persons and relations involved in their formation. What matters is the continuity of a tradition of thought handed down through personal contact, and, very often, a particular genre of political theory and writing. The picture implied by the 'distillation' approach of a liberal feminism leading into a socialist feminism is simply historically wrong. Throughout the 19th century there were two parallel feminist movements, the dominant one individualist, the other broadly socialist, containing figures such as Margaret Macdonald, Clementina Black, Fanny Wright and Anna Wheeler.

### XVI What Happened?

What did happen to the libertarian feminist movement? Briefly, it simply faded away, between about 1900 and 1920. There were several reasons for this; exhaustion after the often violent suffrage campaign before World War One; the general decline of classical liberalism at that time; and the dramatic decline in all forms of feminist activism after 1918 after the vote had been achieved. The two main reasons were probably the general collapse of all forms of voluntary action during the 1920s, which the socialist feminists were better able to survive, because of the continued activity of the labour movement, and the breakup of the network of contacts and friendships which had formed the heart of the movement.

### XVII Conclusions

What general conclusions can be drawn? Primarily, that far from being incompatible or antipathetic, liberalism and individualism must lead to a feminist position and a critique of much of contemporary society. The political and social theory of libertarianism provides both a model of the free society and an account of personal liberation. More significant is the strength provided by the feminist perspective for libertarianism in general. Feminist analysis points up the widespread and pervasive nature of power relations in society, as for example in many marriages, and the need for a cultural politics which addresses issues outside the narrowly economic. Much contemporary feminism has libertarian implications in its concern with such issues as self-ownership and self-realisation, the nature and location of power and the overriding need for personal autonomy. The debate between much feminism and libertarianism is about means, not ends; the issue is how far, if at all, we should use the state as an instrument of liberation. The connection of feminism to socialism may appear inevitable; history has shown that this is not the case.

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## SOME COMMENTS ON STEPHEN DAVIES' PAPER

by Johanna Faust

The 19th century feminists stressed the need - then - for all kinds of separate womens' institutions and groups. I believe it is of vital importance to distinguish between their practical concern to provide women with some experience of running things on their own, in the then social climate where women very rarely otherwise had the opportunity to gain any practical experience of responsibility, and the rabid and absurd attitudes exhibited by many contemporary collectivist or separatist feminists, who call for the exclusion of men from feminist discussions. At the extreme, these feminists seem to want an all-female utopia, featuring, for instance, artificial childbirth, lesbian 'social units' in substitution for the hated family, portrayed in hostile terms as nothing but an instrument of male domination and a Bad Thing.

The 19th century feminists were faced with a real danger that their nascent associations would be swamped by men, if only because so many more men than women had the actual independence to allow them to take part actively in politics. My personal belief, for what it is worth, is that this danger is far more remote now than it was then; there is now no real distinction between the education available to men and women, and virtually all jobs and professions are open to women. The 19th century feminists' fear of male dominance was a justified, but temporary, reaction to their particular historical condition.

In parenthesis, I should say that the libertarian view of homosexual relationships - and homosexual parenting - is by no means hostile; such matters are entirely a matter for individual choice, as a direct consequence of the fundamental libertarian principle that

all should have the maximum personal liberty, subject only to the avoidance of harm to others. Our critique of the separatist feminists is that it is a *collective* response, mistakenly seeing womens' rights as collectively defined - and they rarely explain what is supposed to happen to all the men, in the achievement of their all-female utopias. Will they be allowed to live out their days on reservations or be herded into extermination camps?

Steve Davies touches upon the question of where power really lies in society - it scarcely needs to be said that power, economic, social, political, in 19th century society was almost completely a male preserve.

Libertarians believe that power in society (at least, in a free society) is, by nature, diverse and widespread, and exists in a multiplicity of forms. Individuals derive economic power from earnings (capital represents accumulated earnings), political power from participation in the political process, pressure groups, and so on.

To make the same historical point again, in a different form, women are increasingly developing their own sources of power - economic, social, political - beyond the traditional role.

As 'power in society' is diverse, it follows that there is no one location where it is found. There are powers, not power, in society. As women come to exert more, different, public roles, I believe that great areas of society become less and less 'male dominated' as time goes on - and that this is more due to market forces than state intervention.